

fireside chat

THE HONORABLE ZELJKA CVIJANOVIC

President of the Republic of Srpska

“Be a good citizen in the country where you live, but never forget your origin.”

by Milos Rastovic

The Serbian-American Leadership Conference (SALC) sponsored a fireside chat with the Honorable Zeljka Cvijanovic, President of the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on April 28, 2020. The event was held with representatives of Serbian-American organizations, societies, distinguished individuals, guests from all over the United States, and other participants. Milos Rastovic participated on behalf of the Serb National Federation.

President Cvijanovic was born on March 4, 1967, in Teslić, where she completed elementary and secondary school. She started her higher education at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo, then continued at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Banja Luka and the Faculty of Law at the University of Banja Luka. She also obtained a Master's degree in diplomatic and consular law, on the topic “The International and Legal Position of the European Union.

During her career, she worked as a teacher and professor of English, and later as a Senior Interpreter and Assistant to the European Union Monitoring Mission in BiH. In February 2006, she was appointed Advisor to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Srpska for European Integration and Cooperation with International Organisations. Later, she advanced and eventually won the general election as President. She is married and the mother of two children.

SALC President Aleksandar Djuricic spoke during the Fireside Chat, saying that he is from the village Strmedja in Croatia, near Donja Gradina and Jasenovac, and that he regularly goes to the Republic of Srpska, particularly Kostajnica and Bosanska Dubica. “Both lands [the Republic of Srpska and Republic of Serbia] are homelands and equally vital to the Serbian people and Serbian culture.” Branko Mikasinovic, former journalist of the Voice of America, Slavist, and moderator of the event, asked President Cvijanovic the following questions:

Q - Can you tell something more about yourself and your journey to get to the position of the President of the Republic of Srpska? Was it your dream as a young girl to become a president one day?

“Thank you very much for these nice words and great introduction. It is a great opportunity for me and a pleasure to speak. In regard to my dream to be a president, I can say that I have never had that kind of ambition, plans, or dreams. What I can say about myself is that I have always been interested in pol-

itics, especially after the Bosnian War. I thought that it would be good, especially for young people as many as possible, to be included in a political process in our country. That was the reason why I also consider myself someone who can contribute to what we need to do. My access to politics was not direct. First, I started to work with the European Union Monetary Mission, which acted in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I worked as local staff. That was a great opportunity for me to deal with some concrete and intangible issues such as postwar recovery, political, humanitarian, economic, and other social processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I stayed there for eleven years. Then, in 2006, when Mr. Milorad Dodik became Prime Minister of the Republic of Srpska for the second time, I was offered to join his team, which I gladly accepted. In the beginning, I worked there as an advisor for International Cooperation for the European Integration. After some time, I was promoted to the position of Chief of Staff in Dodik's Cabinet in the Government of the Republic of Srpska. After several years, I became Minister for Economic Relations and Regional Cooperation. I held this position for two years. After that, I was appointed as Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Srpska for almost six years. In 2018, we had a general election, and I ran for president. I won the election. It is where I am now. I am very proud of this position. I know how important it is for our people and for our Republic, to have all these institutions acting correctly. I am trying to make my contribution to the efforts and activities of the Government and National Assembly. I am trying to help in every possible way, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss such important issues for the Republic of Srpska as well as for people who live in the U.S. I have been trying for so many years to have links with the Diaspora and to keep really good contact there. As a result of that, I can say that we established many institutional bridges between our governments and our people abroad.”

Q - What is the current situation in the Republic of Srpska regarding the coronavirus crisis? What measures has the Government taken to address this issue?

“We are struggling like all other countries at this moment. I would say that we managed to keep things under control. It has been eight weeks from when we detected the first case of infection. There are many activities of our health system, institutions, and our government. I am happy with the effect our government's measures have taken in these past weeks, or two or three months. We can still say that we kept things under control. That is one aspect of this tragic story. It is about protecting human lives, dealing with serious patients, and managing the health system. The other part of the

story is what the government can do in saving the economy and what activities are important to keep the economy running. This is a battle which we keep on different fronts as is the case with other countries. In comparison to some other countries, I have to say that I am proud that the Republic of Srpska was the first in the region to introduce very serious and strict measures. Thanks to the discipline of our people and the readiness of our health system, we can be happy with what we have now. We are hoping that it will not become worse.”

Q - How would you estimate the economic situation during the Covid-19 crisis, and what would be an enduring effect?

“Our economic growth was 3.7%, and we had good prospects for the future. Then this happened, and it will have a lot of consequences and bad impact on our economy. This will not disappear overnight, but it has to be healed and cured in the coming months or maybe in the coming years. But, I am very proud of the measures that our government introduced to help our economic sector. Believe it or not, we are also the first in the region to start to implement these measures. One of the first measures was to establish three months moratorium on loan payments. It is an agreement that our government made with the banks. The government decided to cover salaries with minimum wages and contributions for pensions for our workers in the private sector to help employers keep business operations and jobs. We postponed the deadline for tax season. There are also other activities which the government did to show that they count on our government and that we are together in this evil and tragic situation. The situation was okay before that. We are hoping to continue and reach better results... Many businesses are completely closed down, and we are trying to revive them through government measures.”

Q - How do both entities the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina cooperate in matters deliberate in joint institutions?

“There is a level of cooperation between the two entities, the Republic of Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We introduced similar measures, but these measures are not identical. We recently had some complaints about their decision to lift some restrictions pretty soon. We expect to cooperate and harmonize some of these activities with the Republic of Srpska. We are afraid that it will have bad consequences in the future. In regards to Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions, there is a coordination body, but mainly they are dealing with humanitarian aid which we receive from abroad. These two entities are responsible for the health system, civil protection, and many other activities that



are now implemented in the Republic of Srpska. The two entities operate in a way together through some coordination, but in essence, we are doing this alone.”

Q - What is the role of the Republic of Srpska Office for Cooperation, Trade, and Investment in Washington, D.C.?

“We have around ten Representation Offices of the Republic of Srpska abroad. One of them is our office in Washington, D.C. I am happy that we have it there. The main purpose of these Representation Offices is to promote the Republic of Srpska's interest to help us to establish economically with the countries where these offices operate. One of the main important roles is to provide an institutional link between the Government of the Republic of Srpska and the Diaspora, our people who live abroad. Our office in Washington, D.C., is very successful in this. We very much rely on the support from the church abroad. Many activities channeled through this joint engagement with our offices, churches, and the Government of the Republic of Srpska.”

Q - What is the relationship between the Government of the Republic of Srpska and Serbian-American Diaspora in the United States? What are the goals for the future?

“We are trying to reach our Diaspora, and our Office in Washington, D.C. is very helpful. This is how we can communicate, provide an institutional link, and convince them that we need to act in many respects. My political approach is that every person abroad is part of our community, and we need to know how we can help each other. That's why it is important that they are interested in a political and economic process in the Republic of Srpska and the whole region here. They can be engaged in different ways. For instance, in terms of the political process, they can help us to establish better links with communities in countries where they live. In terms of economy, they can start some businesses in the Republic of Srpska or promote some of our business opportunities in the countries where they live. There are many ways how we can communicate, be to-

gether, and act together.”

Q - Recently, we commemorated 75 years of escape from the Jasenovac concentration camp. This part of history was not spoken enough in our past. You talked about the importance of commemorating Donja Gradina and Jasenovac concentration camps. Why does the Government of the Republic of Srpska see this as a critical tragedy to commemorate, and why is it important to commemorate along with Serbia?

“Our commemoration in Donja Gradina is a very important event, and it always takes place on the Sunday following Serbian Orthodox Easter. It is an opportunity to pay respect to all these innocent victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp. We are talking about 700,000 thousand victims there. Serbian victims were about 500,000, and they deserve this attention. The Government of the Republic of Srpska and the Government of Serbia established a calendar of important days in our history, which we need to mark together. Jasenovac is one of these days, and that is why we organize together. Very often, we have our friends from Jewish and Roman communities. In regular times, but not COVID-19 like this year, we usually have friends from Israel and the American-Jewish community who come to respect victims. It is the ceremony and commemoration which show that we need to stick together; that we have to not only pay respect for victims but also that something like that should never happen on this planet. Our people need to understand that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia commemorate these events together because we have the same history, we are the same people, and we share the same values. If we stick together, we are stronger. This tragic place deserves much more international attention... That is why we have such close cooperation with our people and friends from the state of Israel and the American-Jewish community. We try to show that we are together. By being together, we can put this on the international map as an important event. We are managing this now. Remember that we were in the communist era, and this and many other places were not given enough attention at that time. Probably because of the way we organized our lives at that time. That is such a big tragedy with so many lost lives and the way they were killed and tortured there. All these bad things that happened there deserve international attention. I think that we are in good part achieving it.”

Q - Can you tell us more about the Government of the Republic of Srpska plan to build a Memorial Center in Donja Gradina? How are the Republic of Srpska and Serbia helping to raise

global awareness of Jasenovac concentration camps?

“There is an idea to build a big Memorial Center there. It was announced as a joint idea of the Republic of Srpska and Serbia. We hope that this idea will materialize in years to come. It is going to be important. When you deal with something so important, and with so many symbols, you have to be careful and cautious to approach such an important issue. That is why we are still thinking about how it's going to look, how it is going to be constructed, and all these technical aspects. You have to put together so many pieces that you send a good message across that everybody understands what it stands for, the size of the tragedy there, and the ideology that was behind people there. It is a very sensitive issue, but I am happy to know that there is this idea and that both governments will work together to materialize this idea.”

Q - The other tragedy was the expulsion of 250,000 Serbs from Croatia during the 1990s. The Governments of the Republic of Srpska and Serbia are raising global awareness of commemorating “Operation Storm.” Is the idea of commemorating the “Operation Storm” similar to the idea behind the concept of commemorating Jasenovac concentration camps?

“Yes, but you also remember that President Milorad Dodik of Republic of Srpska and President Vucic of Serbia decided that we have this calendar of important days of our history several years ago. The ethnic cleansing that happened in Croatia, so many Serbs that they are expelled from there, and so many Serbs found their new home in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are something to keep us together. We decided to mark this day and to pay respect for all who were killed in this terrible military operation. We also want to show that we are together with people who came from Croatia, who live in the Republic of Srpska or Serbia, and that we represent one body, one mind, that we are together and we are going to stay together. Many messages were sent in previous years about this unity and how important it is to take care of each other, rely on each other, live together in the future, and put such a bad history behind us. I am very proud of these activities and initiatives of Presidents Vucic and Dodik at that time. It shows that we can act together, that we can be together in good and bad times. This is something that is a great value for every nation.”

Q - The Republic of Srpska and Serbia have the best relationship in their history. Is this a matter of geopolitics, a matter of people that are there, or

something that has changed in the Serbian mindset identity?

“Our awareness that we need each other is crucial in this. But also, when you have bigger ideas, it is always up to the people. You have to have personalities who recognize the importance and promote something. That we need each other, we rely on each other, and that we belong to each other is a great feeling. It is something that people in the Republic of Srpska and Serbia feel. There are so many events that keep us together. There are so many activities of our governments that I implemented together. There is a feeling of belonging to each other, which is very important. It can be an engine for any other process. Our relations are the best in terms of political understanding, economic cooperation, and the support that we receive from Serbia. The government of Serbia invested much money in trying to help and implement important projects in our municipalities and local communities. All these are signs of this feeling that we belong to each other, that we want to take care of each other, that we want to be together in good and bad times.”

Q - What would be the future relationship between the Republic of Srpska and Serbia in terms of plans, economic, and joint commemoration?

“We do not have specific plans. We plan to achieve as much integration as possible. What we are doing in economic terms is something that would help our economies be complementary to each other. We can always rely on Serbia, and that is a very good feeling. People in the Republic of Srpska need to know that whatever the crisis is...whatever the problem is, there is Serbia to help. People like to receive this support. They like to know there is someone who thinks about us. They like this feeling of unity. It has been dominant in recent years.”

Q - What are the steps that American companies have to do to open their offices, hire professionals, etc. in the Republic of Srpska to facilitate economic progress and prosperity?

“There is a very simple procedure. The Republic of Srpska was a leader in establishing a good methodology for new companies. When it comes to business registration, it is enough to spend three days. There is a specific place-one stock shop. You can also register the company on-line, and pay about 150 convertible marks (75 euros). It is very inexpensive compare to previous times. After three days, you will receive your certificate of registration, and you can start your business. When you compare business conditions in the Republic of Srpska,

you will see that it is very competitive compare to many other places. Every person who starts a business here will be pleased with what he/she can see here. We have a big American company NCR, which operates in Banja Luka and Serbia. They told me that they are pleased how they are accepted here, in a professional way how they are treated here. They received some subsidies from the Government because they initiated some programs that fall under the subsidies. I would encourage our people to start some business operations here because it is favorable. I know that theoretically speaking, we are far away, but mentally or any other respects, we are very close. I encourage our people to do that, to be a part of our political and economic processes, to understand that we need every single person who is in the U.S. or any European country.”

Q - What kind of cooperation and relations do you hope to facilitate between the Republic of Srpska, Serbia, the U.S. and Serbian-Americans?

“It is important to have such an organization as SALC in that you can help us to develop an understanding between the Republic of Srpska and Serbia on one side and the U.S. on the other side. Sadly, but truly, our political understanding is not on a high level. Our people who live there, who are organized in different organizations, who have access to institutions and various initiatives, they can help us in promoting and upgrading our cooperation, and showing that we have the same goals in many aspects and that we can much better cooperate than it was the case before. The Serbian organizations should be a bridge between the U.S. Administration and us. It is crucial for us to know that you exist and that you are willing to help, that you are knowledgeable and active... Sometimes it is difficult for the Government to send some messages and to manage... Quite often, we are misinterpreted, or we are painted as not acceptable in the newspapers. There is great potential in such organizations and activism in helping us to say who we are, what we stand for, and what we want to achieve...how to promote business opportunities. It is crucial to keep this link and that we know that we can rely on you.”

At the conclusion, the Hon. Zeljka Cvijanovic said, “Be a good citizen in the country where you live, but never forget your origin. Whenever possible, try to improve the relations between the Republic of Srpska and Serbia on one side and the country of your residence. Help us dispel the stereotype and misinterpretations (and) help us to promote a real picture of us and to explain what we stand for.”

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