

US Ambassador to Serbia meets Representatives of Serbian-American Diaspora

by Milos Rastovic

The Serbian-American Leadership Conference (SALC) sponsored an on-line briefing and discussion with the His Excellency Anthony F. Godfrey, the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Serbia, on April 8. The event included representatives of Serbian-American organizations, societies, distinguished individuals, guests from throughout the United States, London, the U.K., and others. Participants included Aleksandar Djuricic, President of SALC, Neno Djordjevic, moderator of the event, and His Grace Bishop IRINEJ, Eastern American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as my representation of the Serb National Federation.

Aleksandar Djuricic thanked all participants, especially His Grace Bishop IRINEJ, whom he called an “inspiration for the SALC and this meeting.” Djuricic gave a brief description of the SALC and its mission. The SALC intends to inspire the next generations of Serbian-Americans to identify, organize, and bring them together in the United States. The SALC wants to motivate and generate Serbian-American community to make it more cohesive and unite so that they can build relationships with the U.S. State Department, U.S. Congress, and do the work that other ethnic organizations are doing. He explained which officials they reached recently as well as ethnic organizations such as Greek, Armenian, Polish, and others—organized sports events and discussed religious freedom law in Montenegro. The mission of the SALC is to reignite the relationships between the United States and Serbia. Djuricic pointed out that “Serbian values are lined up with American values, and that is why we can be a critical part of the United States and part of your ambassador’s mission. We support freedom, the rule of law, civil laws, and promote them. The United States and Serbia are inseparable allies now and in the future.”

His Grace Bishop IRINEJ is the spiritual patron of the SALC, and expressed thanks to the Honorable Anthony F. Godfrey and all participants. He said that he is proud of the reconstitution

of the SALC because it was something that was accepted by opening the Office of External Affairs of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Washington, D.C. in the past. According to the Bishop, the Serbian Orthodox Church is recognized as a “state creating church” in the Serbian Constitution. He addressed Ambassador Godfrey with the following words: “You know what it is to be an Orthodox Christian, and we are proud of that. We are looking forward to your particular respect for the Orthodox Church which gives us great hope for the right cooperation with you, leading to a brighter future of working together for the common good with Serbian-Americans.” He also said, “When political solutions fail, the church has to know when and how to step up, and to assume a leadership role for its faithful and by default for the nation in which they live. The church has to be equally wise to know when to step back...We are all victims of this pandemic which is raging all over the world. All of us are affected in one way or another, and our life will not be the same.” His Grace offered prayers for all.

The Ambassador said that he appreciated the invitation and stressed that he admires the work of the SALC. “I could not agree more with the goals of the SALC that Aleksandar Djuricic lays out.” He also said that he is grateful for His Grace Bishop IRINEJ’s “blessing and to our Lord to protect our human rights in this difficult time... the U.S. and Serbia’s relationship is strong and it is going stronger. We now face an unprecedented challenge. The good news is that we are facing it together. In the long run, I think that this relationship will emerge from this crisis even stronger.” He emphasized two subjects for the conversation: how the United States and Serbia are facing COVID-19, and a broader perspective of the relationship between the two countries.

“Before the pandemic, the U.S. and Serbia actively worked together to improve their relations. That is my goal. I think that we made progress and that we will continue to do that when this crisis passes. We are on the job in Belgrade. Our top priority is the safety



of the American people in Serbia. To protect our staff, the majority are teleworking, including myself sometimes. When the Serbian Government closed its airport, we worked together to secure seats on two special Air Serbia flights to return the U.S. citizens and permanent residents who wished to depart from Belgrade.

“This morning (March 8), we launched almost 200 hundred people from the Nikola Tesla airport in Belgrade to get home. The Government of Serbia supported us, and it is a mark of a good relationship that Serbia wanted to contribute to in a very concrete way. The Government of Serbia is taking this challenge [pandemic] seriously, and they are doing a good job. They are enforcing social distancing by law. The daily average percent of growing new cases is below 20 percent. Everybody here in the Embassy follows the Government protocol and restrictions. That is very important. Later this week, the U.S., together with the World Health Organization (WHO), will contribute 6,000 test kits for COVID-19, which will be part of our effort. The good thing is that Serbia came to this crisis in a strong economic and fiscal position. They are doing a good job by managing the dinar [Serbian currency] and a growing economy. Compared to other countries in the region, Serbia will be in a good place. Most of Serbian trade and investment is linked to the E.U., espe-

cially to Germany and Italy. Serbia’s recovery depends on those countries.

“This is a big hit and it will take a long time to recover. Mike Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of State, announced that the U.S. global contribution of \$274 million of emergency health and assistance will be provided to multilateral organizations. Serbia will get a portion of that amount. In regards to economic recovery, the media here are talking about assistance from China and Russia. The U.S. is focusing on energy, which is recovering in the United States. I think that our Serbian friends understand that... After this crisis, we will resume our active work by improving our bilateral relationships. Our strategic priority remains to support the Serbian goal, and that is EU integration. This is our primary goal, and we want to help Serbia to achieve this goal... We want to change the way Serbia perceives the United States and its goals for Serbia. We want to be engaged and develop security, stability, and prosperity in the Western Balkans because it is an American interest. That is my message that I would like to pass to our friends in the U.S. Congress. American interest is to support Serbia’s EU path by respecting our values, which we share.”

continued on page 12

US Ambassador to Serbia meets Representatives of Serbian-American Diaspora

continued from page 1

Moderator Neno Djordjevic then asked Ambassador Godfrey questions from the participants at the meeting.

How do you believe this pandemic will change Serbian relations with the U.S., China, Russia, and other countries?

"I work together on those things with my colleagues in the European Union (EU), and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic. President Vucic says that 'China was the most helpful to Serbia in the time of crisis,' but he pointed out that 'Serbia's goal remains the EU.' That is good for the U.S.A. I think when more pragmatic people look at where most of Serbia's ties lie, cultural ties, they would admit that is in Europe. It will manage the partnership to their best advantage with China and Russia, but its future is in Europe. That is in American interest because stable, prosperous, democratic Serbia and peace with its neighbors is good for the United States. That is what we are trying to achieve. The things will change largely in the economy. We will need a lot of time to get out of this crisis. Serbia is in a better place than other countries in the Western Balkans to recover from this pandemic, and it will take steady commitment, many resources, and attention."

What aid did China provide to Serbia?

"It is frustrating for the friends in the EU who are paying the cost of assistance because the EU or Government of Serbia is buying something from China. China is taking credit for selling the equipment to Serbia. That is frustrating. But, we have to acknowledge that the Government of China has been generous, and it did get here when Serbia needed it. The U.S. was not able to step up because the U.S. needs equipment for its own needs. China has more capability to share with Serbia. There is no question about that. We are a Serbian partner for the long term, and share long-term goals. We acknowledged that China could offer Serbia assistance in the short term, but in the long term, Serbia will see a partnership with the EU and the U.S. and the West in general."

What can you tell us about Ambassador Richard Grenell's approach to the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina?

"Richard Grenell has a lot of energy and brings a lot of political horsepower to the White House to move relations forward between Belgrade and Pristina. Grenell wants to make the incentives clear for the people in both Belgrade and Pristina to understand where they stand in normalizing relationships. He is not focused on political issues; he is not interested in picking the Government or a coalition in Kosovo.

Businesses and all domestic policy in Kosovo do not have anything to do with what Grenell or I have been doing. What he has done is to make power expectations on tariffs. They should be lifted without reciprocal measures. That is expected from any Kosovo Government, and we are sharing with our European Union partners. I am expecting that he will continue to be tough on that... He spent a lot of energy with President Trump and National Security Advisers to move forward, for instance, flights, rail and road connections, and real commitments. His direct engagement and all of our work together are to encourage new Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to make significant commitments from both sides to move forward with this. We are very proud that the DFC selected the Balkans as a region of strategic focus. I think that we will make significant progress on this."

The Freedom of House claims that Serbia is no longer considered a free country. Some journalists and analysts connect this with the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Is there any situation that the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has a higher priority than electoral concerns or freedom of the press?

"My argument goes back to when Nixon went to China and his agreement. If we make clear to Serbian leaders that an agreement is in their interest, it does not matter who will be the leader, and he/she will be supported. If we make clearer that it is their development, and financial interest that will come to normalization, we will make more progress. I also understand the argument that President Vucic makes steps engaging with Pristina, he is criticized from the more extreme body of Serbian politics. On those parts, he counts on politically... It has to be a benefit of both parties reached by people in the region, but it cannot be imposed from the outside. Otherwise, it will not last. It has to be something that both sides agree to. In terms of whether the U.S. and the E.U. are willing to sacrifice our ideals to reach this particular goal, my answer is no... You can count on the U.S. Mission together with our European colleagues to hold the Government of Serbia to a commitment to agree to OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe) and aspiring members of the EU. We will insist that Serbia respect this guise. We do share concerns of many that particularly the press in Serbia becomes restricted. Journalists are still intimidated. We want freedom of the press, but right now our focus has to be together with all world leaders on fighting COVID-19..."

Every year, the Halyard Mission Foundation memorializes heroic endeavor and historical fit, which is very important to Serbian-Americans, especially whose predecessors were part of the movement of Gener-

al Draza Mihailovic. Do you plan to continue the Halyard Mission event and preserve its memory as previous Ambassador Kyle Scott did?

"Absolutely. It is pride and immense gratitude that the U.S. has always had for the people of Serbia who risked everything to save Americans and the Allies and get them back, to fight and to contribute more to the ultimate victory against fascism. That will always be important to the U.S. I will be there, I guarantee you. President Vucic and I already talked about it. It was he who raised the next commemoration of the Halyard Mission when we were at the Pentagon, where he talked about his high hopes for the improvement of the U.S. and Serbia's military relationships. I will continue to work on that as well."

Obviously, you came to this position well prepared and with a lot of experience in Belgrade. What surprised you when you came to Belgrade? For what were you not prepared?

"The warmth of the people and the welcome, and genuine desire to improve relations with the U.S. has just been terrific. I cannot wait to make more progress on it, get COVID-19 behind all of us, and get back to work. We made the most progress on changing how Serbs perceive what the U.S.A. is in our relationship. I am personally engaging and persuading Serbs that the U.S. is interested in helping Serbia. I am making good friends in Serbia. The warmth that Serbs have for the United States of America is also great. We were together in two World Wars in most of our country's history, and we were close allies. The Serbian flag flew over the White House. I will focus on the future. Thank you for all of you."

Biography of the Honorable Anthony F. Godfrey, U.S. Ambassador to Serbia



As U.S. Ambassador, Anthony F. Godfrey leads the U.S. Government's efforts to advance its partnership with Serbia, expand economic prosperity, and assist Serbia's efforts for European integration. It is in the strategic in-

terest of the United States that Serbia develops as a modern, democratic, and prosperous European nation that is at peace with its neighbors and demonstrates full respect for the rule of law and rights of its citizens. Helping our Serbian partners to strengthen their democratic institutions, protect the rights of members of minority communities, combat corruption, and improve media freedom are key areas for Ambassador Godfrey and his team. Supporting Serbia's goal of E.U. membership and regional stability by promoting the normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade is a top priority for Ambassador Godfrey.

Ambassador Godfrey, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of Minister-Counselor, arrived in Serbia on October 23. He served from 2015 to 2019 as Political Minister-Counselor, and then Deputy Chief of Mission at U.S. Embassy Moscow, Russia. He was Director of Iraq Affairs in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the Department of State 2013-2015, and Political Minister Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad 2012-2013. During almost 40 years of service in the U.S. Navy and the Foreign Service, Ambassador Godfrey has become an expert in central and southern European affairs.

Ambassador Godfrey was Director for Turkey and Eurasian Energy at the National Security Council, 2011-2012, and Political-Military Affairs Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, 2008-2011. He was Deputy Chief of Mission at U.S. Embassy Yerevan, Armenia, 2004-2007, and Political Officer at U.S. Embassy Zagreb, Croatia, 2001-2004. He was an International Affairs Officer in the Office of Russian Affairs, Bureau of European and Eurasian affairs, 1998-2000, and Deputy Head of Group, OSCE Assistance Group, in Chechnya, Grozny, Russia, 1996-1997. His U.S. Navy service, 1980-1992, included tours in Turkey and Japan, and he studied Russian at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. His final military assignment was four years with the On-Site Inspection Agency, working to verify Soviet implementation of arms control agreements.

Ambassador Godfrey earned a B.A. with Highest Honors at the University of California at Davis. His numerous awards include the 2018 James A. Baker III DCM of the Year Award. He speaks Russian, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish.

Mr. Godfrey is married to the former Anne O'Toole, whom he met while posted in Dublin. They have three children, ages 27, 19, and 18. (The biography of the Honorable Anthony F. Godfrey was taken from the website of the United State Embassy to Serbia: <https://rs.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/our-ambassador/>).