



SERBIA

Serbian President Sends Lieutenant To Washington As Belgrade Seeks Tighter U.S. Relations

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By Todd Prince

WASHINGTON -- The massive new residence of the Serbian ambassador in the Embassy Row area of Washington is more than an upgrade for its young inhabitant and his family.

Ambassador Marko Djuric says the nearly 100-year-old, Georgian-style brick home is also a symbol of the investment the Balkan nation is making in its relationship with the United States, an important regional peace arbitrator.

A key aspect of that investment includes plans to open a trade office with consular services on the West Coast as Belgrade seeks to deepen ties with the U.S. tech industry.

Djuric told RFE/RL that Serbia will also open another consulate in a yet-to-be-determined American city -- adding to the ones it already has in Chicago and New York -- as part of a renewed outreach to its diaspora.

The ambassador will be helped in his government, business, and cultural outreach by a staff that has grown by 50 percent in the past few months.

"We came with a very ambitious agenda to increase the level of exchange between our two countries and increase the level of trust," he told RFE/RL on January 22 at the new residence, which he will use to host officials and events.

One day earlier, Washington penned an agreement with Belgrade to launch the Serbian operations of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, a state-run institution that invests in private companies operating in critical sectors of the economy and offers political-risk insurance to encourage investment.

"I'm convinced that we'll have a more solid base for closer political ties the closer we get in economic terms," Djuric said. "And this is what we want to achieve. This is the strategy."

The Serbian Chamber of Commerce, which is partnering with the embassy to open a West Coast trade office, has already taken steps to make that happen with several trade missions to the United States since 2019, including meeting officials on Capitol Hill to promote business ties. Two years ago, the chamber hired the D.C.-based lobby firm Yorktown Solutions as part of its U.S. outreach effort.

Military Cooperation

Djuric is also hoping to increase military cooperation, including Serbian companies supplying U.S. arms manufacturers with components or weapons.

Serbia inherited a strong military-industrial complex from the former Yugoslavia and sells rifles and ammunition in the U.S. retail market. The U.S. Army announced in December it had requested that a Serbian-made, wheeled howitzer **participate in an international competition** scheduled for early this year.

"When you're a small country it's not easy to be in the same pond with global players who are all competing for their share of this market. This is one reason why Serbia's defense industry is looking for ways to partner with the U.S. defense industry, so that we can maybe jointly engage in certain projects," said Djuric, adding he had met with officials from the Defense Department.

A potential impediment to further military cooperation between Belgrade and Washington could be notorious Serbian arms dealer Slobodan Tesic, who is believed to be involved in many of Serbia's armaments and munitions companies and has been accused of involvement in many illicit international arms deals.

Tesic -- considered one of the biggest arms dealers in the Balkans -- was blacklisted by the United States in 2017 and nine of his associates were **hit with sanctions** in 2019 for doing Tesic's bidding in running his material support network. Tesic has been on the United Nations travel ban for nearly a decade for his role in selling arms to Liberia.

Tesic either continues to own or control the Serbian arms companies Partizan Tech, Technoglobal, Grawit Limited, and Charso Limited, the U.S. Treasury Department said.

Working With Biden's Administration

Djuric will have his work cut out for him especially after Democrat Joe Biden, a Western Balkan hand, was elected president, analysts say.

U.S.-Serbian relations were severely strained after the breakup of Yugoslavia three decades ago, though ties have gradually improved.

The United States led a NATO air campaign against Serbian forces in 1999 to stop a deadly

crackdown on its ethnic Albanian population in Kosovo. Washington then led an international campaign to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008.

Serbia's refusal to recognize its former southern region as an independent country lies at the heart of its problems with the United States and the European Union.

Belgrade's tight relations with Moscow, its growing business ties to China, the modernization of its military, and what critics say is a rolling back of democratic practices are other contentious issues in bilateral relations.

Washington and Brussels are dangling membership in international organizations, such as the EU, to entice Belgrade to change its stance on the recognition of Kosovo.

Close Confidant

Djuric, 37, took up his job in Washington in December and is one of the youngest foreign envoys to the United States. It is also his first foreign posting.

Despite his lack of a formal foreign-service experience, analysts say his appointment -- much like his new residence -- is a sign of Belgrade's desire to enhance ties with Washington.

Djuric is a close confidant of populist Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who was elected in 2017 after serving as prime minister for several years.

Djuric was one of the first to join Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in 2008 and currently serves as one of its vice presidents. Vucic tapped him several years ago to lead Serbian negotiations over Kosovo, putting him at times at the table with U.S. officials. He was also an informal SNS liaison to the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, the Chinese Communist Party, and Israel's ruling Likud party, analysts say.

"He is a guy who has Vucic's ear, knows him well, and I think that's a strength for any ambassador," Kyle Scott, the U.S. ambassador to Serbia from 2016 to 2019, told RFE/RL. "I can see that Vucic would want to have somebody who he has total confidence in here in Washington."

Djuric, Scott said, is very experienced in dealing with Americans.

Vuk Vuksanovic, an analyst at the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, told RFE/RL that the appointment of Djuric is "Vucic's way of sending a message to Washington that 'I am very interested in forming closer ties.'"

His appointment was followed a month later by Vucic's dismissal of two ministers with close ties to Russia, which some viewed as a doubling down on efforts to sway Western perceptions of Belgrade.

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Djuric was appointed as Serbian ambassador to Washington in October, a month before the U.S. presidential election that pitted Donald Trump against Biden.

Trump was viewed in Belgrade as someone who could deliver Serbia a better deal on Kosovo than Biden, and Vucic expressed his preference for the incumbent. He also offered ample praise to the Trump administration for its efforts, led by envoy Richard Grenell, to secure the Kosovo and Serbia economic normalization agreement, which Vucic signed at the White House in September.

"Had President Trump been reelected, mending Serbia's relationship with the U.S. would have been possible without many strings attached regarding Serbia's record on democracy and human rights, its relationship to the Kremlin, or its treatment of transitional justice and war crimes committed by its government in the 1990s," Majda Ruge, a Balkan expert and senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told RFE/RL.

"This sort of carte blanche on many policy issues will not be available under Biden's team. Therefore, the success of Mr. Djuric's mission will depend on Serbia's willingness to tackle some of these big topics and Mr. Djuric's ability to convincingly communicate Serbia's willingness to do so," she said.

Economic Progress?

Djuric downplayed the importance of the U.S. election result on the Serbian-U.S. relationship and expressed optimism that the two countries could still make progress on bilateral ties, especially in the economic sphere.

He pointed out that Vucic met Biden twice -- in 2009 and 2016 -- when he served as vice president in Barack Obama's administration and that Serbian officials are familiar with key members of his administration.

Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic said Vucic and Biden could meet later this year, though did not say where.

"We should try to isolate the differences as much as possible and simply bypass things that we cannot agree on now. And look at the bigger picture," said Djuric, who was one of about 1,000 people that attended Biden's inauguration on January 20.

While Kosovo is the dominant issue, Scott said Belgrade should not underestimate the importance of domestic reforms if it wants to improve relations with Washington.

Critics have accused Vucic of tightening his grip on the country, including restricting press freedoms. Biden ran on a platform of strengthening democracy around the world and highlighted his concern about a rollback in the freedoms of some European countries.

"I don't feel that [Serbia] has taken them as seriously as they could have over the last few years. They are now making a better game of talking about it, but they have got to stop talking about it and actually start doing things," Scott said.

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