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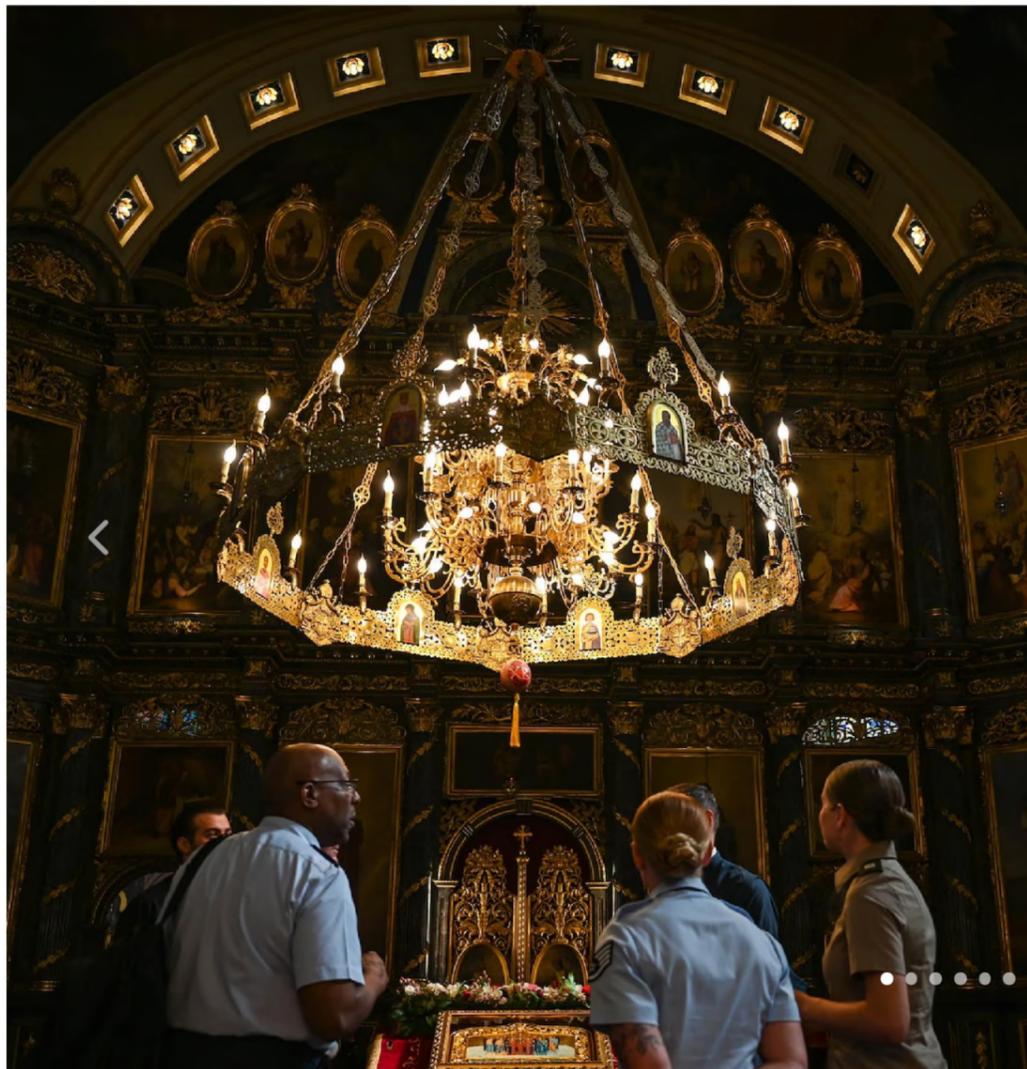


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Ohio National Guard and Serbian Armed Forces chaplains gather in the Cathedral Church of Saint Michael the Archangel in Belgrade, Serbia, Sept. 12, 2024. The Ohio National Guard chaplains attended the Serbian religious events which promotes learning from one another on how to best take care of their service members, mentally and spiritually. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Josh Kaeser)

Ohio National Guard chaplains build relations with Serbian Armed Forces



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By Airman 1st Class Josh Kaeser

BELGRADE, Serbia -- Three chaplains and a religious affairs specialist from the Ohio National Guard visited Serbia as a part of the State Partnership Program between chaplaincy programs. The week-long visitation was intended to strengthen relationships that enhance global security, understanding and cooperation between the two partners.

In 1993 the United States began the state partnership program. The new initiative aimed to build relationships with former states of the Soviet Union. The SPP now involves 106 nations creating 96 partnerships with 54 U.S. states and territories.

In 2005 the Ohio National Guard began its relationship with Serbia. In 2013 the Serbian Armed Forces began their chaplain ministry again, after over 70 years of not having one. The former Yugoslavian communist government heavily opposed religion in the military.

"Ohio has had the opportunity to help Serbia develop their chaplaincy over the last 10 years, and they now have nearly 40 chaplains serving in their military," said U.S. Army Col. Daniel Burris, the state chaplain of Ohio.

The Serbian Chaplaincy has adopted many of the American customs to the unit ministry team or the religious support team that serves their service members, said Burris.

"The Serbian people believe spirituality is important, and that it is the foundation to a soldier's life," said Burris. "So we as chaplains help our soldier's build their spiritual foundation, so they are strong soldiers and strong individuals."

The Serbian Chaplaincy visited Ohio in 2019, visiting Notre Dame College just outside Cleveland, Ohio. The city of Cleveland and Kraljevo, Serbia participate in a sister city program together, and the Serbian Chaplaincy attended liturgies at the St. Sava Serbian Eastern Orthodox church of Cleveland.

The SPP is able to promote not only social and cultural relationships but also spiritual ones between nations and people of different militaries.

"One of the most exciting things about the experience is the nature of the welcoming environment," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Joseph Branch, chaplain of the 178th Wing. "Our Serbian counterparts welcomed us with open arms and likewise we have done the same."

In Serbia, the Ohio National Guard chaplains were given tours of numerous museums that told the history of Serbia. Moreover, the Ohio Chaplains were shown Serbian mosques, Orthodox churches, Catholic churches and synagogues that the Serbian Armed Forces chaplains operate inside of. The Serbian Chaplains work inside civilian churches while also providing their soldiers with the religious support and guidance that they need.

"This is my second trip, and each time we have come back we have learned more about their history and who they are," said Branch. "It shows how much we are alike. We are both trying to serve our military members and give them the opportunity to know who they are, and how important they are in this whole picture of military life."

The Ohio National Guard chaplains attended a liturgy Sunday, Sept. 15, 2024, at the St. Alexander Nevsky Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade. The Guardmen were special guests of the Church, in which two Skip to main content (Press Enter).



liturgy. "We have good cooperation, and we visit each other to improve how we can be closer to the soldiers in order to achieve our main role, to be spiritual leaders."

Allowing both nations to attend the other's religious events promoted learning from one another on how to best take care of their forces, mentally and spiritually.

Every chaplain either American or Serbian, is assigned an assistant or religious affairs specialist to make them more effective. They assist in planning and synchronizing religious support operations and coordinating the circulation of the unit ministry team to ensure the service members' spiritual readiness.

"During our time in Serbia I have noticed that the chaplains and their religious affairs assistants share very similar styles as the Ohio National Guard," U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Laken Rohrer, religious affairs airman assigned to the 178th Wing. "We work with our chaplains, one-on-one. The only difference is, their religious affairs assistants have to practice the same faith background as their chaplain, and in the U.S. we do not."

The relationships between Ohio and Serbia promote cultural understanding beyond the battlefield and bring benefit to civilian communities in both countries. These cross-cultural events allowed the Ohio National Guard to learn from Serbia and build lasting relationships that will develop and strengthen both nations' armed forces.

"Being a part of this experience has made me realize that regardless of: who you are; where you come from; if you are an airman or soldier; American or Serbian all of us are more similar than we may realize," said U.S. Army Capt. Kelsee Jordan, Battalion Chaplain for the 134th Field Artillery Regiment.

The experience has formed not only military partnerships, but friends. Upon departure, numerous chaplains could be seen hugging and wishing the other countries' chaplains good fortune. There were many looking forward to the next meeting between the two members of the SPP.

"All of us are fighting for something that is not uncommon between us. At the end of the day, all of us are searching for peace and we can come together hand-in-hand in ways we might not have expected before," said Jordan.