



A commemoration for Sladjana Stankovic and Jovica Stepic, the two officers of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia who tragically died in Libya, was held today at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The commemoration was attended by Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic and First Deputy Prime Minister/Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic, the families of the dead officers, friends and by colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Minister Dacic paid his last respects to the tragically killed colleagues, expressing deepest condolences to their families, emphasizing that he was grateful for the contribution they made to their country working in Libya.

"Dear members of Sladjana Stankovic's and Jovica Stepic's families,

Dear colleagues,

Dear representatives of the media,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am not going to say that it is my duty or an obligation, on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to pay last respects to Sladjana Stankovic and Jovica Stepic, the officers of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Tripoli who tragically died in Sabratha, Libya. To address Sladjana's and Jovica's families and friends here today, I consider a debt and a humble expression of gratitude that all of us and our country owe to them for what they gave to their country, and unfortunately eventually for losing their lives.

Out of respect for them and for members of their families I will not speak about them as persons, parents and friends. I have never had a chance to meet them in person.

But after two years as Minister of Foreign Affairs and my direct engagement in the efforts the Ministries and the State invested aiming for their release, following the kidnapping of 8 November 2015, it became evident to me that Sladjana Stankovic, through her work and thorough her death, was and remains a symbol of many employees of this Ministry. Of those who remain unseen. Of those asking no remuneration for their patriotism. Of those whose

families suffer and whose children bear the cross of growing up in ways and places they have to. Of those everyone in Serbia would trade places with until a Sabratha happens. Of those without whom neither high politics nor elite diplomacy would be able to function, yet who remain completely invisible. Sladjana epitomized this very category of the Ministry's employees. The ten years she spent in Libya and everything that country went through in this period make her engagement equal to the hardest jobs in the world. They say she accepted it all with a smile. For that I am thankful to her.

Though Jovica Stepic was not an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at this moment in time, based on the years he worked with the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Tripoli, he has the right to be considered, and we have an obligation to treat him as a real diplomatic representative of our country because he was an Embassy staff member in Tripoli for so long. With the lapse of time, ambassadors and diplomats of the Embassy changed – some in normal procedure, some were prematurely recalled, others were deported, while Jovica stayed on and lasted. He ensured continuity of the staff; some say because he was wiser, more modest and patient than any of his superiors. A true Serb. It is said that there is no one in the Serbian diaspora in Tripoli, and other Libyan towns, who did not know Jovica and his wife Jelica.

I would like to ask the families of Sladjana and Jovica to accept the condolences of the entire staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On the personal level, I particularly wish to thank them – at this difficult juncture, for their understanding and cooperation with state authorities from the moment they were kidnapped.

State authorities are doing their job and their families and the Serbian public will be informed about the truth of their tragedy. Unfortunately, the only full truth for Sladjana and Jovica, their families and all of us, is that they are no longer with us. It will be established if they were the target, collateral damage or victims of a failure to act and a mistake made. Whatever turns out to be true in this case, it seems that, more than anything else, they were the victims of the times we live in, when it is no longer safe to walk the streets of Paris, Istanbul, Jakarta and other cities across the world due to the growing threat posed by the scourge of terrorism.

The Republic of Serbia will endeavor to provide appropriate assistance to the children of Sladjana Stankovic and Jovica Stepic, in the period to come.

Serbia has done its best to prevent this tragic outcome and will make a maximum effort to reveal the full truth about and the reason for their tragic deaths.

We bid farewell to Sladjana and Jovica.

Be glory to them."