

Relations with the diaspora and Serbs in the region are based on Article 13 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia according to which our country protects the rights and interests of its citizens abroad and develops and promotes the relations of the Serbs living abroad with the kin state.

The Republic of Serbia attaches particular importance to relations with the Diaspora and Serbs of the region, as best reflected in the *Declaration of the Government of the Republic of Serbia proclaiming the relations between the home country and the Diaspora the relations of the greatest state and national interest* (RS Official Gazette, No. 86/06), *the Law on the Diaspora and Serbs of the Region* (RS Official Gazette, No. 88/09) and in the *Strategy of preserving and strengthening relations between the mother country and Diaspora and between the mother country and Serbs of the region* (RS Official Gazette, No. 4/11).

According to the Law on Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, the term "diaspora" stands for **the citizens of the Republic of Serbia living abroad and members of the Serbian people – emigrants from the territory of the Republic of Serbia and from the region and their descendants.**

The term "Serbs in the region" in line with the above Law denotes the members of Serbian people living in the Republic of Slovenia, Republic of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Republic of Albania and Republic of Hungary.

On the one hand, the notion of diaspora, as defined under the Law, points out the respect for the multi-ethnic principle in working with the diaspora, given that the diaspora includes all citizens of the Republic of Serbia living abroad. On the other hand, the Law introduces the term "Serbs in the region" to reflect the commitment of the mother country to promote the position and rights of the Serbian people living beyond the borders of the Republic of Serbia. Taking into account the above, there is no official information as to the total number of Serbian people abroad and those in the region, while some earlier estimates indicate a figure of over five million.

The interest of the Republic of Serbia as a home state is to ensure that its citizens and persons belonging to the Serbian community abroad enjoy all individual and collective rights guaranteed under international conventions and bilateral international agreements. The promotion of the rights of persons belonging to the Serbian community in the countries of the region is an important segment in the process of strengthening the bilateral dialogue with these countries, and concerns the use of Serbian language and script, fostering of culture, national history and remembrance culture, preservation and protection of Serbian cultural and historical heritage, access to information in the Serbian language and their adequate political representation and organization in the countries of the region.

The Republic of Serbia strives to help the diaspora and Serbs in the region to successfully

integrate in their countries of residence, building on the idea that only a well-integrated community can contribute to the promotion of bilateral relations.

However, the integration process carries the risk of assimilation. In this regard, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is making every effort to meet the needs of its citizens and immigrants of Serbian descent in foreign countries and provide assistance in safeguarding their national and cultural identity. It is estimated that there are more than 1,300 organizations and associations, including various other forms of association in cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which primarily focus their activity on the preservation of national and cultural identity of the Serbian people abroad.

The field of cooperation with the diaspora and Serbs in the region comprises two main programming activities: preserving and strengthening their national and cultural identity and protecting the rights and interests of the diaspora and Serbs in the region. The Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, a body within the Foreign Ministry, performs public administration and professional activities set forth by the Law on Ministries, such as:

- monitoring the position of Serbian citizens living outside the Republic of Serbia
- supporting the process of improving conditions for Serbian citizens living abroad to exercise their voting rights
- supporting the preservation and development of the spiritual, national and cultural identity of Serbs outside the Republic of Serbia; improving ties between emigrants, Serbian citizens living abroad and their organizations with the Republic of Serbia
- keeping emigrants, Serbian citizens living abroad informed about the policies of the Republic of Serbia
- supporting the process of inclusion of emigrants, people of Serbian origin, people originating from Serbia and Serbian citizens living abroad into the political, economic and cultural life of the Republic of Serbia and their return to the Republic of Serbia; as well as other activities set forth by the law

The network of diplomatic and consular missions is of invaluable importance for the members of the diaspora and Serbs in the region. In this context, as it continues to strengthen its network, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs devotes special attention to the needs of the diaspora and Serbs in the region, full-aware of the fact that the diplomatic and consular network and its staff are their first point of contact with the mother country.

In the field of cooperation with the diaspora and Serbs in the region, the diplomatic and consular missions primarily focus on the following tasks:

- to effectively render consular services for which they are authorized
 - to visit the Serbian diaspora in more distant parts of the country (holding of consular days), hold discussions with and provide the Serbian citizens with necessary information
 - to cooperate with all Serbian associations, organizations, clubs and other associations for the purpose of consolidating their internal ties and uniting the diaspora
 - to make an effort to expand and improve education in the Serbian language at all levels of education in the receiving state and, to that end, to cooperate with the relevant institutions of the host country;
 - to assist in organizing and setting up supplementary education in the Serbian language
 - to help maintain the ties of the second, third and every other generation of the diaspora with the mother country by fostering the Serbian language and culture
 - to commit themselves to the organization and staging of cultural, sporting and all other events within the Serbian diaspora
 - to take care of cultural-historical monuments and Serbian military memorials and war cemeteries from World War I and World War II, and from all other periods of Serbian plight
- to cooperate with the Serbian Orthodox Church and its bishoprics abroad
- to direct the professional and financial potential of the diaspora and Serbs in the region, based on the partnership of the diaspora and Serbs in the region with the mother country for the purpose of the scientific and economic development of the Republic of Serbia.
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