



First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic participated today in an online conference entitled "Serbian-American relations facing the Covid-19 challenges", organized by Serbian-American Friendship Congress.

FDPM/MFA Ivica Dacic addressed the participants on this occasion, while other panelists included U.S. Congressman and Co-Chair of the Serbian Congressional Caucus Steve Stevers, Serbian National Assembly Deputy Speaker Vladimir Marinkovic, U.S. Ambassador to Serbia Anthony Godfrey, President of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) Derek Mitchell, Director of the USAID Office of Democratic Governance and Economic Growth Shanley Pinchotti and regional Director of International Republican Institute programme for Serbia Paul Prosocki.

Participants of the conference had the opportunity to get acquainted in more detail with the current situation and respective measures introduced by the Republic of Serbia and the United States of America in combating the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. The speakers addressed key challenges faced by the two countries while presenting their views on the possible development of the situation in terms of economy and politics, in the period to ensue once the ongoing pandemic has ended. Serbia-U.S. relations were also discussed, particularly focusing on the cooperation maintained and solidarity shown thus far in combating the spread of COVID-19 infectious disease. The Republic of Serbia was extended special gratitude for having organized repatriation flights, returning to the United States of America over 200 U.S. citizens. The panelists also presented their perspectives on the further promotion of bilateral relations.

Read the full statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic below:

Serbia has been striving to contribute to the global fight against COVID-19 pandemic with its approach, measures undertaken and solidarity being demonstrated.

In the last month and a half, the Government of the Republic of Serbia has imposed measures to flatten the curve and prevent exponential growth of the infection, thus enabling the health care system to provide proper care to those affected by the disease. In order to reduce the spread of the virus we were forced to introduce social distancing measures, but also those

limiting movement, i.e., the number of people who can gather in public as well as curfews on business days and full lockdown over the weekends. In order to lessen the strain on hospital complexes, we have established temporary COVID hospitals, outpatient clinics and centers for recovery of persons with mild symptoms.

After six weeks of fighting the epidemic, according to the data as of 30 minutes ago, the pandemic has taken a toll on over 100 lives in Serbia.

In addition to endangering our lives, significantly changing our daily routines, putting the health care system and our response capacities to the test, the pandemic has also affected the economic situation of every individual, companies of all sizes and of the state as a whole. This is why the country has adopted an economic measures package amounting to EUR 5.1 billion (approximately 11% of the GDP), aimed at protecting the most vulnerable citizens and lowest income groups as well as mitigating any turbulence in terms of saving jobs and business activity carried out by small and medium-sized enterprises in particular. Our goal is to fend off the strongest crisis wave first and, as soon as possible thereafter, embark on the economic growth phase.

The Ministry I am heading in such an extremely difficult and peculiar situation has been guided by imperatives of helping our citizens return to Serbia safely and assisting the national medical care institutions, i.e., state authorities in the procurement and shipping of medical equipment being obtained worldwide. As of 20 March, the Republic of Serbia has arranged 29 humanitarian flights and this figure keeps changing. At the moment, over 8000 persons have returned to Serbia either by plane or road vehicles. It is important to emphasize that there are no more Serbian citizens stranded at airports at the moment. Foreign citizens were provided an opportunity to board these flights departing from Serbia, via their diplomatic and consular mission, and evacuate from Serbia free of charge. This way, around 230 U.S. citizens were transferred to the United States as well as ten or so Canadian citizens.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for the assistance supplied by the United States, namely 6000 coronavirus test kits. We are most appreciative of this kind of aid, well-aware that the United States has also been dealt a severe blow by the COVID-19 epidemic. The pandemic has put on hold the majority of foreign policy issues, still I would like to take this opportunity to underline that relations with the United States remain one of the priorities of the Republic of Serbia.

We are ready to continue strengthening our cooperation with the States in all areas. We stand ready to work to accomplish the common strategic goal shared by Serbia and the USA, that our region becomes a stable part, in terms of both security and economy as well as democratic values, we hope, of the united European community of states. In the international arena, the Republic of Serbia has endeavored to prove to be an active, responsible and reliable partner, while at the same time being at the forefront of regional stability.

We hope to intensify our political dialogue, having so far demonstrated a positive dynamic, and I reiterate the invitation for a top-level visit. It has been a long time since the last U.S. President to visit Serbia, President Jimmy Carter, stayed here in 1980.

We are grateful for the support shown to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. At the same time, our wish is to increase U.S. investments here. I recall that U.S. companies' market share in Serbia so far amounted to nearly one quarter million USD in investment, both direct or carried out via their daughter firms in Europe. Furthermore, there are over 600 active companies in Serbia with majority U.S. ownership.

Largest U.S. investments in Serbia include those made by Philip Morris, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Cooper Tire, Ball Packaging, to name but a few companies.

When it comes to the IT sector, I wish to underline that companies such as Oracle and EMS have expanded their capacities in Serbia, that NCR has this year begun construction of its only Centre of Excellence outside U.S. soil here in Serbia, while Microsoft has been developing one of its regional centers in Belgrade for years now.

The presence of many companies but also those of high profile, gives us hope that we have a good foundation for the strengthening of relations, once the ongoing crisis has ended. Our trade in goods with the United States in the recent years has recorded a rise, but this is yet another matter that requires active efforts in the future, given that the U.S. is not among the top ten trading partners of Serbia, but there is still a trend of rise.

All of the above is but one part of the activities to embark on once the crisis has ceased. Fields such as IT sector, energy, mining and agriculture have so far shown significant growth potential.

Finally, I would like to bring up some other forms of cooperation. Cooperation between Serbia and Ohio has been expanded in the framework of the state partnership, often described as one of the most substantive segments of our relations, which has all but gone beyond the military to the civilian sphere.

Examples such as sister cities, cooperation, tourism, connectivity between small and medium-sized enterprises and chambers of commerce, etc., can all serve as signposts for the preservation and strengthening of our relations after the pandemic, not only politically and economically, but also through the solidification of scientific, cultural and all other ties to bring our states and peoples closer together.

Yesterday I said that according to U.S. statistics, there were a little less than 200,000 U.S. citizens of Serbian origin in the United States. But, there is no doubt that this figure is in fact bigger and that there are more of us in the United States America. We consider Chicago to be a city of Serbs. According to our estimates, there are between half a million and one million U.S. citizens of Serbian descent. We should to seek to identify positive examples of cooperation, and this is why conferences like this one today are important.