

# H.E. MARINA JOVIĆEVIĆ AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



## FOR DIPLOMATIC WORLD

I was appointed the ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to the Kingdom of Belgium in late August 2017. For Serbia, Belgium is one of the very important countries – it is one of the founders of the European Union, and seat of European Union and NATO, as well as to other international organizations. Due to its institutional setting, and its regional and European experience and role, Belgium is also very interesting country from which we can learn a lot, primarily how to make compromises and base our solutions upon the dialogue and reconciliation, with mutual respect. For the region I come from, it is essential and Serbia is investing huge efforts to work jointly on better future and not to focus our discussions on the past.

Bilateral relations with the Kingdom of Belgium are very historic and two countries have long and rich ties. They were first established in 1879, and in 1886 further, during the Kingdom of Serbia, when we had a diplomatic envoy to Brussels. Also, Belgian investors were active in Serbia in the 19th century, in mining. And in fact the first railway in Serbia, in Negotinska Krajina, was built on Belgian concession.

Further on, the first privileged National bank of Serbia, back in 1884, was developed with the support of skilled staff from the Belgian national bank, and the first Serbian bank notes were even printed in Belgium. The appropriate exhibition was prepared some years ago to mark the fruitful cooperation among two national institutions, lasting over 100 years.

Last but not least, I should mention that the first democratic constitution in Serbia – Sretenje Constitution, from 1835 was made following, among others, the Belgian constitutional model from 1831.

It is interesting to know that two countries collaborated in the First World War, and were among the countries that

suffered the most. On Cemetery of Robermont in Liège among the others, there are Serbian graves of victims and the Serbian flag is raised with the flags of other countries, as we commemorate together the Armistice Day. Having in mind that the year of 2018 is devoted to the commemoration of the end of the First World War, I most certainly hope that our two countries will organize a joint event – both here, but also in Serbia.

Bilateral cooperation and high-level dialogue are also much intensified. Just recently the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Belgium, Mr. Charles Michel has visited the Republic of Serbia and had very useful and fruitful talks with Serbian President, Mr. Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Prime Minister, Ms. Ana Brnabić on various topics. It was the first visit of Belgian Prime Minister after more than 8 years,



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*Belgrade, Serbia. Kalemegdan Fortress in the night, ancient Singidunum.*

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and I was truly pleased that we managed to realize it within rather short period of my stay here as the ambassador. Parliamentary cooperation has also been intensified, and in December 2017 we organized the visit of the members of Friendship group with the Kingdom of Belgium from Serbian National Assembly, who came here and met with chairpersons from Belgian and Flemish Parliaments, and the chair of IPU for Serbia. I hope that by end of this year, we will see more visits at the ministerial level – primarily in areas where dialogue is very intensive – such as foreign affairs and security and internal affairs.

Serbia is a host to a number of the investors from different parts of Belgium, and at the moment over 50 Belgian companies have successful businesses in Serbia. Having in mind Serbian potentials as the investment destination (favorable business climate, good geographic position, diversified and high qualified labor market, low wages, subsidies given to the investors, free zones, and wide scope of free trade agreements giving an access to the market of 1.3 billion population) I truly believe that during my mandate the other Belgian companies will establish their businesses in Serbia. In the last year, foreign trade exchange was over half billion euro. A total of 26 agreements in

different areas have been signed between the two countries. One area where I see a lot of potential is tourism. In 2017 we have evidenced an increase of 38% in the number of tourists from Belgium visiting Serbia, but we need to work harder to attract Belgian people to come and meet Serbia and our people.

As you are most certainly aware, Serbia is negotiating with the European Union on the accession since January 2014 and so far we managed to open 12 negotiating chapters, to close provisionally 2, and to have 5 negotiating positions for chapters technically ready for opening but waiting political and technical consent from EU member states. We certainly hope that in June, during the Bulgarian EU Presidency we will open at least 3-4 negotiating chapters. Our aim is to try to reach the indicative date – 2025 that was given in “A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans”, presented on February 6, 2018. However, having in mind not very favorable situation in the EU when it comes to the perception to the enlargement, I truly believe that more people-to-people contacts would contribute to the better understanding and to the perception that the European Union is where we belong.

Serbia has always been a part of Europe, and with European Union we share not only geographic, historical or cultural space, but first and foremost, we share the values and principles. The best illustration might be our acting during the migration crisis, when Serbia has significantly contributed to the management of migratory movements via the Western Balkan route, proving to be a credible and responsible partner to the EU despite the huge migratory pressure it has been exposed to.

Although Serbia has for centuries been the scene of frequent wars, devastation, fires and mass-migrations, as it was positioned on the turbulent roads connecting East and West, our rich cultural and historical legacy and diversity, as well as sites of natural beauty, make Serbia a country of great interest for tourism. We can say that this multicultural melting pot has led to a wonderful array of historical sites, attractions, cuisines, and traditions. Serbia is frequently considered to be the Europe's best kept secret, but in the last years it is more and more discovered by a hundreds thousands of tourists.

Testaments to prehistoric life in our part of the region are the numerous archaeological sites, such as Lepenski Vir or Vinča that are globally known. There are also the important remains of Roman roads and towns which today bear witness to six centuries of the presence of the Roman Empire on the territory of Serbia, or the very many

evidences of the Ottoman Empire that could attest to the several centuries' long influence. One of the most important are the Christian cultural monuments – Serbian Orthodox monasteries, built between the 12th to 15th century, as for example, the Stari Ras and Sopoćani, Studenica monastery, as well as Visoki Dečani, together with the Patriarchate of Peć, Gračanica and the Our Lady of Ljeviš church in Prizren in Kosovo and Metohija that are listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Besides, Slava – celebration of the family saint patron day and Kolo, Serbian traditional folk dance were inscribed to the UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. Recently, during the Balkan trafik festival, Serbian kolo was presented in the Grand Place in Brussels.

It is important to know that all those historic periods left certain characteristic marks on our history and that no monument is identical, each has its own peculiarities, which is unique in Europe since they all have their own specific traits because the East was connecting with the West in our region, and there were also influences coming from the North and the South. This is also true of our customs and our cultural regions. Moreover, the Yugoslav socialist experiences in the fields of architecture and memorials are being researched in detail globally today and the Museum of Modern Art in New York will dedicate a big exhibition to this during the current year.



Majestic look to the River in eastern Serbia.

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Beautiful view of the historic center of Belgrade on the banks of the Sava River, Serbia

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The EU has made 2018 the European Year of Cultural Heritage to highlight the diversity, shared history and rich cultures that make Europe today. Serbian cultural institutions are participating in the Europeana project and almost a million exhibits of Serbian cultural heritage are available on this European digital platform.

I would like also to point out that Novi Sad that is the administrative, economic, cultural, scientific and touristic centre of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, a multicultural region with 26 ethnic groups and six official languages, is the first non-EU city that will be the European Capital of Culture in 2021 and European Youth Capital in 2019.

Serbia is also a country that has given some of the world's greatest minds whose work has significantly changed the world we live in today. Everybody knows that the Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla was the "father of electricity". Thanks to another famous Serbian scientist, Milutin Milanković, today we know that the Earth's climate is predominantly influenced by the factors coming from space, especially the Sun, and that this allows us to predict the changes and the arrival of the next ice age with great certainty. Serbian scientist Mihajlo Pupin participated in the very founding of NASA, he won the Pulitzer Prize as the first Serb who was awarded with this prestigious award. He is most famous

for inventing the "Pupin coils" that perfected the phone and allowed us to talk across large distances, and hear each other clearly while enjoying the connection without noise. At the very end, I would like to mention the Serbian Nobel Prize laureate for literature in 1961 – Ivo Andrić. He was not only regional but truly European figure since he was educated, worked and lived in many European cities and was coherent with the value of over-national and over-confessional identity. He was even posted as Yugoslav diplomat here, in Brussels, in 1929, and we decided to present his work primarily to students, such as those in Slavistic department in the University in Ghent, where there is a lector for Serbian language, but also to others in the European College in Bruges and in the University of Antwerp.

If you would allow me, I would like to finish this interview with one of the messages given by HR EU Ms. Federica Mogherini, in her address before the Serbian Parliament in 2017: "I believe our Union will not be complete as long as Serbia, and all the Western Balkans, will not join our family. This country and this region lie at the very heart of Europe. The history of Europe was written in these lands, throughout the centuries...it's a history that needs to be honoured through a joint celebration of our European identity; it's a history of arts, literature, of rights and liberties."