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## FIVE POINTS FOR BUILDING NEW SERBIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

### Abstract

Relations between Serbia and the United States have a long history, marked by ups and downs, with extremes ranging from the most intense friendship and brotherhood to armed conflict. Both countries have shown an interest in improving their relations and overcoming the historically low point of the last three decades, which is a necessary assumption to discuss ways in which this should be achieved. The potential for improving Serbia-US relations is objectively limited by a group of factors, some of which (geographical distance, vast disparity in power and potential) are inherent in many other countries in the world, but there is also an exclusively bilateral disruptive factor, and these are relations from the recent past. In our view, two states and two nations must find areas where progress will lead to a long-lasting strengthening of overall relations, which will not be affected by occasional differing views in the political and economic spheres, which will certainly happen, and which is not uncommon in contemporary international relations. These areas are technology, security, culture, personal connections and historical connections. Both states and their people, their economic and cultural communities, can make use of the vast space and upgrade existing links in these areas, with the two state administrations encouraged to foster this connection.

Keywords: Serbia, USA, relations, cooperation, security, culture, technology, diaspora, tourism, history, trade, partnership.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"You Serbs started the last century with wars, you ended it with wars ... What nice things are you preparing for us in this century?"<sup>1</sup> - this question was asked by Henry Kissinger to Živorad Kovačević in the early 2000s, when two old friends, great diplomats, met in America, where they were introduced many years earlier - one as head of the State Department and the other as a young ambassador for socialist Yugoslavia. Indeed, what do Serbia and the United States have to offer each other, in order to thoroughly redefine their relations the remaining four-fifths of the 21st Century, and advance them to the level they have had in the period from the beginning of Henry Kissinger's question?

In pursuit of this answer, we will not primarily address the advancement of political, diplomatic and economic relations, because their constant upward dynamics simply has to be implied, given the position of the two countries in the international environment - the US is the global leader in political and economic integration, and Serbia is strategically seeking to join the European Union, as one of the closest political and economic partners of the United States. We see the political and economic relations of the US and Serbia, that is, the relations of the two governments and the directions in which they will lead inter-state relations in the future, as a permanent and basic support for strengthening the overall relations, such as the two countries once cultivated, and which have withstood the test of occasional political changes and economic orientations.

## 2. LIMITATIONS

Here we will offer five answers to the question asked, five fields on which Serbia, and the US, their governments, organizations and people should work, in order to obtain long-lasting and close relations based on ties that can easily withstand the test of possible political, diplomatic disagreements, which will inevitably occur from time to time. In trying to formulate these answers, we will start with several factors that make it difficult to establish (renew) stronger bonds, but which we cannot change. Those are:

- A. Geography
- B. Huge disparity in size
- C. Close historical heritage

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<sup>1</sup> A. Mijalković: The Man with Two Lives, interview with Živorad Kovačević, Politika 2009

Serbia and the United States are geographically distant. This circumstance will always be a limiting factor when it comes to trade and personal contacts, despite the steadily declining cost of transporting goods and the ever increasing availability of air travel.

By all parameters, human, economic, security, political...the US is many times larger than Serbia. The individual economies of Manhattan or California are larger than the economies of the whole of Russia. This large disparity naturally limits many potentials for cooperation, because size naturally, determines the priorities, including the interests and ambitions of each state. While the United States has long played a dominant role on the global scale, and it is likely that it will continue to do so in the future, Serbia, in line with its dimensions, wants to pursue its interests primarily through integration with others, which is primarily the European Union.

While the previous two factors are applicable to the relations of a large number of countries with the USA, the third factor of "alienation" of Serbia and the USA is exclusively theirs, bilateral. It is a difficult historical legacy, only three decades old. Although brief in historical terms, this burden on relations between the two states is characterized by its strong intensity and negative effects on relations between the two states and the two nations. Relations have deteriorated sharply since the beginning of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, culminating with the NATO bombing of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in 1999. During that period, relations between the two countries went from disagreements in attitudes, then cooling down, followed by termination of diplomatic relations, to open armed conflict and the destruction of the US Embassy in Belgrade. Although diplomatic, political, economic and cultural relations were restored within a very short period of time, on the relations between the two countries remained a deep mark, which continues to burden them, primarily through perception in the Serbian public.

What needs to be done, what can be done to make relations between Serbia and the US get a new dimension of cooperation, partnership and mutual respect, and for the rest of the 21st century to remain a period of steady rise in Serbian-American relations? First of all, do the two countries have any interest in improving their relations at all?

### 3. INTERESTS

Serbia's interest in this direction is indisputable. It should not be measured by the usual benchmarks, such as the growth of trade, since trade between the two countries is rather scarce, amounting to just over \$ 400 million in both directions<sup>2</sup>, despite the fact that Serbian products are duty-free again from last year in the USA. Serbia and the US will never be major trading partners, and the first two previously mentioned geographic factors are most responsible for this. The Serbian economy is tied to the European Union market and it is the only possible space in which it can achieve qualitative and quantitative growth. Two thirds of exports (67%) Serbia markets to the EU countries, while as many as 60% of total imports to Serbia come from these countries.<sup>3</sup>

Serbia's interest in better relations with the US is to develop a strong and comprehensive partnership with it, because the realization of all direct and concrete priority interests of Serbia are derived from this fact - whether Serbia is a US partner (in all fields) or not. It also depends on how Serbia will be treated by the European Union, and Serbia's eventual progress towards EU membership, relations with its closest neighbors, place and influence in all multilateral fora, as well as some specific, extremely important internal interests, which is primarily Kosovo issue, and relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina/Republika Srpska.

The United States has no apparent interest in developing close relations with Serbia in particular and invest time, political and economic influence in them. Serbia is economically irrelevant to the United States, and the region to which Serbia belongs has already fully realized strategic partnership with the United States through EU membership (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia), or through NATO membership (all countries in the region except Serbia and B&H). However, the interest of the United States in improving relations with Serbia exists, and it is not small. The United States is one of the largest investors in Serbia, with a volume of about US \$ 1.7 billion.<sup>4</sup>

Otherwise, Serbia considers itself to be the number one country in the Western Balkans, and at the very top in Southeastern Europe, in terms of geographic,

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, bilateral relations with foreign countries ([www.mfa.rs](http://www.mfa.rs))

<sup>3</sup> Benefits of Serbia's trade with the EU, Delegation of the European Commission to the Republic of Serbia (2018)

<sup>4</sup> State Department: US relations with Serbia, Bilateral economic relations (2018)

human and economic resources, and especially potentials. Its position in the security architecture of Europe is especially important in the fight against extremism, Islamic terrorism, arms trafficking and narcotics... Having Serbia as a partner in this field alone is an important interest of the United States. The interest of the USA in better relations with Serbia is particularly expressed from the perspective, assuming that the transition to Serbia's EU membership will be successful and relatively quick. With a place in the EU, and advanced democratic institutions, which in turn leads to strong economic growth, Serbia in a short time becomes an even more important factor in Southeast Europe and a country with which the US must have close and partnership relations.

#### 4. FIVE POINTS FOR BUILDING NEW SERBIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Given that both countries really have enough reason to commit to improving their relations, we will try to locate specific areas whose promotion would make the content of this partnership permanently enriched and mutual relations vaccinated against the harmful effects of occasional disagreements, which in today's international relations are impossible to avoid when it comes to any two states on the planet. In our opinion, these are the following five areas:

##### 4.1. Technology

In the context of modern globalization, the one that followed the global financial crisis of 2008 and often referred to as "Globalization 4.0" with a clear association with the fourth industrial revolution, technology is the factor that most strongly compensates developmental and geographical differences between economic entities. With advances in technology, Serbia and the United States would greatly reduce, if not completely cancel out, the handicap of geographical distance (disruptive factor No. 1) affecting mutual economic relations. The main capacity and resource for advancing technological cooperation is undoubtedly on the US side, as a global technological superpower, one of the five most innovative countries in the world and an unrivaled global champion in education and research. Most importantly, the US is home to the largest technology companies, which will, in their current or different form, retain long-term primacy for companies in general. The impetus for technological transfer from the USA is of great interest to Serbia, but these are also programs of study, improvement, joint projects and other forms of scientific and technical cooperation. In developing

this aspect of cooperation, Serbia can offer, above all, its potentially and relatively strong sector in the field of IT, but also the research potential of its universities and institutes, especially in the fields of electronics, agriculture, basic sciences (physics, chemistry, mathematics...), and medicine. The technological, organizational, and process "attachment" of some large systems in Serbia to similar American systems can be a field of return and long-lasting strengthening of the ties between two states and two nations. What also connects us are decades of experience and the departure of our experts to the United States, where they work in the education, science or business sectors, and cooperation programs such as Fulbright, which has connected in this regard several of our generations, both for the United States and the former Yugoslavia. Let's just mention an example in the field of medicine - the Institute for Mother and Child "Vukan Čupić" in Novi Beograd, which gained the reputation of a top institution just by applying and nurturing knowledge and practices from similar institutions in the United States.

#### 4.2. Security

Although not a member of NATO, unlike all its neighbors (except B&H and for some time Northern Macedonia), Serbia and the United States have a strong mutual interest in developing security cooperation. This cooperation is still at a rather enviable level, given the constant joint activities, either bilaterally or at NATO level, but also through the cooperation of police and investigative services, as well as the cooperation of the Serbian Armed Forces with the Ohio State Guard. It is this program that has been rated by the United States as one of the most successful programs implemented by more than 60 countries worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Still, the space to build a full partnership here is still huge. The United States is by far the largest global security actor, but at the same time its field of interest in security matters is global, including Serbia and the Balkans. To protect their national interests, the United States pays some attention to security cooperation with Serbia, bearing in mind, above all, several challenges - international terrorism and extremism, illegal migration, arms smuggling and narcotics. On all these issues, Serbia is an extremely important country, primarily as an area of transit from Asia and from the Middle East to Western Europe. Serbia, for

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<sup>5</sup> Serbian Army: Serbia-Ohio State Partnership Program, [www.vs.rs](http://www.vs.rs)

example, remains at the center of Afghanistan's largest heroin smuggling route (accounting for 85% of world production)<sup>6</sup> to Western Europe, which accounts for a quarter of the world's drug market. In 2015, almost one million of the total 1.5 million refugees (migrants) from the Middle East to Western Europe crossed the territory of Serbia. These and similar challenges place Serbia high on the list of countries with which the US should have a strong security partnership, because managing these risks is vital to US interests in Europe, above all. So far, Serbia has shown extremely high performance in meeting these security challenges, but given its economic resources, its security capabilities are below what they deserve to be, given the seriousness of the challenges it faces, especially in the technological context.

### 4.3. Culture

We will understand culture here in its broader sense, not just as so-called "elite", but also in its pop-cultural, sports and even sub-cultural aspect. The redefinition of US-Serbian relations probably has the greatest potential in this area, and at the same time the greatest chance of contributing to the strengthening of relations in all other fields by strengthening cultural ties. Connecting nations and identifying one with the other is the most challenging, but also most effective, precisely through strengthening cultural ties. There is no doubt that, as a part of what was once Yugoslavia, Serbia has been emphatically pro-American from the cultural point of view since the 1950s. This was also reflected in cultural creativity, and especially since the late 1960s and during the 1970s, especially in the world of theater, film, literature and popular culture (music, fashion, design...). It was precisely the period of the most precious achievements in Serbian and Yugoslav literature, theater, film, the visual arts and music, coinciding with the period of strong American influences and general positive attitude towards the USA in Serbian and Yugoslav society, from the mid-1950s to the beginning of the seventies when we began to feel the crisis with the certainty of the breakup of the Yugoslav federation.

The vast majority of Serbian citizens share the cultural patterns of the American people, which is only increasing with the development of communication technologies and the availability of cultural content. The cultural influence of the

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<sup>6</sup> UNODOC: World Drug Report (2010)

United States globally is undeniable and elusive, but Serbia, though a small country, has its “trump cards” to offer to the American audience. These are already world-famous sports stars - Novak Đoković and basketball players, for example; or young fashion designers (Roksanda Ilinčić), artists (Isidora Žebeljan, Vladimir Pištalo...). Promoting cultural connections has particular potential in the film industry, that is, in strengthening Belgrade and Serbia as destinations for film-making, including the engagement of Serbian film professionals. The promotion of stars originating from Serbia in America has a tremendous impact on perception of Serbia with US citizens, and such positive perception inevitably spills over into Serbia itself, whose public is glad to receive the news that in "great America" they have paid respect and admiration to athlete/artist from Serbia.

#### 4.4. Personal connections

Relatively few citizens of Serbia, and even fewer Americans have personal experience with another country or its citizens. Considering that the strength and scope of personal relationships is one of the most important features of relations between the states, Serbia and the USA would have a lot to do in this field if they are interested in improving their overall relations. Here we will point out only two aspects of personal relationships that deserve promotion, which could significantly improve the overall relations between the two countries. One aspect is the Serbian diaspora in the US and the other - US tourists in Serbia.

The Serbian diaspora in the United States is numerous, but also very heterogeneous, in terms of social, educational status, as well as attitudes towards the motherland. What connects it, however, is the permanence of their stay in the United States, which set it apart from the vast majority of Serbian emigrants in Europe, who are more likely to choose to return to the country. According to official US estimates, slightly more than 188,000 people of Serbian descent<sup>7</sup> live in the US, while there are no official data and estimates from Serbia, except for occasional media assessments, which speak of a much larger number. Practically the entire Serbian diaspora in the United States (98.9%) has lived in the country for more than one year, and as many as three quarters (72%) were born in the

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<sup>7</sup> Selected Population Profile in The United States, American Community Survey, US Census Bureau (2017)

United States, which is an indication of a firm, lasting attachment to the United States, or a low likelihood that they will decide to come to Serbia.<sup>8</sup>

The Serbian diaspora in the United States, however, does not have enough confidence in the country of origin or its institutions, “thanks” to the frivolous and unsystematic approach that the Serbian state had for it for decades. There is no confidence in the extent to invest in it. However, they would have much more confidence in Serbia if the US and its institutions were lobbyists of the Serbian state to its immigrants to the US. Of course, only if Serbia and its institutions deserve such treatment by the US government, with their progress in building democratic institutions and a market economy. Serbia today, by its own merits, and probably the only former Yugoslav republic, does not have a loyal diaspora in the US, but that can be changed if the United States, which the American Serbs trust, assures the Serbs there that their motherland has progressed in partnership with the US and that it is their worthy partner.

On the other hand, the potential for developing personal connections also lies in stimulating and promoting the arrival of more American tourists to Serbia. The current figures are not encouraging, but to dedicated partners this can also mean great potential and a field for action. Of the 17.7 million US tourists who visit Europe annually (data for 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, National Travel and Tourism Office), only 39.000<sup>9</sup> or 0.2% “drop in” to Serbia. This percentage can certainly be increased, but it is a task for tourist workers in Serbia. With regard to state institutions, encouraging such efforts would be beneficial for the overall relations of the two countries, as this would directly increase the number of people who gain personal experience with another country. We see these efforts primarily in applying the same experiences of the continental states of the former Eastern Bloc, the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary, but also in the field of accelerating European integration, which will remove borders with neighbors and speed up all administrative procedures.

#### 4.5. Historical connections

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Statistics on tourism in the Republic of Serbia (January-December 2018), Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications (2019)

Awareness and memory of the strong historical ties between Serbia and the US and their people have been the biggest victims of the poor political relations of two countries since the 1990s. Thanks to the anti-Western and anti-American policies that have since created public discourse, generations of young people in Serbia have grown aware that the United States is the enemy of Serbia, that they wish it harm, and that they systematically do so by favoring its enemies. Anti-Americanism did not exist as a widespread social sentiment even during the communist era, that is, before the 1990s. This regression made the collective memories of the strong bonds that people and the two states have made throughout history, and especially in mutually difficult moments, such as World War I and World War II disappear. In these wars a strong alliance was forged, spoken and taught, and which both responsible nations sought to cherish as their valuable heritage. It is only in the last few years, more and more through the efforts of the United States, that historical ties are more strongly strengthened, and in their respect, attempts are being made to build a new relationship between the two nations. On the right track is the separation from the oblivion of friendship between Mihajlo Pupin and President Woodrow Wilson, which also resulted in a favorable American attitude toward Serbia after World War I. It is similar to commemorating the anniversaries of the Halyard mission and promoting the heroism that has been shown in the rescue of American aviators in World War II. Since the end of World War II, the United States has made tremendous efforts to rebuild Yugoslavia whose development remained slow until the mid-1960s, due to the inherited poverty of previous times, the effects of the devastation of war and the loss of over half a million human lives, and the failed economic policies of post-war Yugoslavia. Serbia and the US have a duty to their citizens to make an effort and to bring back from oblivion numerous examples of alliances and friendships, since they are unknown in Serbia for the younger generations, and for those older, only a hazy memory of some earlier times.

The sense of historical alliance and partnership is something that, in the long run, “colors” the relations between the two countries and their nations and lays a solid foundation for building other forms of partnerships. One of the significant foundations of our historical alliance is precisely the experience that Serbia has gained in the Yugoslav community, the only complex country, in state and social sense, which has a similarity to the United States. Several generations of our

expatriates, thanks to this experience, have been able to assimilate and achieve tremendous success in American society in economics, education, and social mobility. If the American dream, based on reality, is the possibility of Serbia's integration into the European Union, that dream, even when it comes to the EU, is based on the support and assistance of the USA to European unification. Finally, the American experience could again help us in the search for peace and new paths of cooperation with our neighbors, because the area of application or understanding of the Serbian language, and all other identical or similar Yugoslav languages, covers a large market of about 30 million inhabitants, much of Southeast Europe.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Serbia and the United States have a great challenge ahead, but certainly both, with great profits from building new, better relationships for the 21st century. Many assumptions are already at hand, and some must come with dedicated work and patience, which will not be easy, given the complexity of relationships so far, and especially their conflict phase over the last three decades. However, the interests of better relations far outweigh the consequences of this difficult legacy, which both governments should be aware of, which should also lead this process. It will not be short or easy, but over time it will bring visible and tangible fruits to both nations, which, by acquiring historical circumstances, are farther from each other than their past, and especially the future, require and deserve.

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