



Serbian Diaspora & Homeland: Together for Serb Prosperity

By
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Since its inception in 1990, the Serbian Unity Congress worked diligently and persistently to bring together Diaspora and the Homeland, to preserve the heritage, culture and identity of Diaspora Serbs, and to re-establish and promote Serbian good name. The Serbian nation is considered to be one of those with a sizable Diaspora - it is estimated at around 3.5 million. The Serbian Unity Congress believes that Diaspora involvement in advancing democratic, civil society and economic reforms can speedup the painful transitional period that Serbia and Montenegro is going through. The SUC takes a leadership role in Diaspora efforts to enable our expatriate nationals to contribute to the rebuilding of the Serbian nation with their knowledge, experience and worldwide connections. Together with other leading organizations in the Serbian Diaspora, we are promoting the rights of Serbs abroad to citizenship, voting rights, and participation in the economic, social, cultural and moral renewal of the Serbian nation. Our Belgrade office plays a key role in enabling this cooperative process.

Since the October 2000 democratic changes in Serbia and Montenegro, the SUC intensified its activities on promoting the rights of the Serbs abroad. Proposals were prepared and submitted to the various Ministries, Parliament groups and committees, government officials and the media, regarding the changes in citizenship law, voting rights, military duty exemption, denationalization, and rehabilitation of wrongly accused. We also proposed formation of the Ministry for Diaspora and a new Diaspora Law.

CITIZENSHIP The SUC strongly believes that all Serbs living abroad should have the right to Serbian citizenship and to all privileges and obligations constituted under the law. This privilege must be given to all Serbs, regardless of when and where they were born, where they now live and which citizenship they now hold. We requested that the application procedure for citizenship be simplified and processing speeded-up. Croatia has recently increased its population by more than 1 million citizens with its liberal Citizenship act.

VOTING ABROAD The granting of citizenship is the first step in obtaining the right to vote. The SUC requested that all citizens of Serbia and Montenegro (SM) should be granted the rights to vote abroad, in the countries where they live, either in the SM embassies and consulates, by absentee ballot, or by proxy. Having in mind large distances in the USA, Canada and Australia, the SUC recommended that the best and simplest way to organize voting abroad is by absentee ballot (letters) that should be mailed to the closest SM embassy and consulate. The application forms for voting should be simplified by eliminating the requirement for people to provide any unnecessary information. It should be enough to specify the name, the SM passport number and the current address.

MINISTRY FOR DIASPORA AND DIASPORA LAW The SUC proposed the formation of the Ministry for Diaspora, with three basic functions, regarding: (a) ECONOMY – to work on the development of economical and financial relationship with 2 to 3 millions of Serbs abroad and to initiate and encourage their business investments in Serbia; (b) CULTURE – to work on sustaining and nurturing the heritage, culture, language and overall identity of the Serbs abroad; (c) EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION – to initiate and coordinate the work of the Serbs abroad to

become more active in informing public opinion and key policymakers in the countries where they live about the true goals and aspiration of the Serbian people. The Ministry for Diaspora should also prepare the Diaspora Law, that will contain all the rules and regulations pertinent to the rights and obligation of the Serbs living abroad. With these defined goals, the Ministry for Diaspora could become a central place to garner the talents, experiences and abilities of Serbs abroad in order to support economic, social, cultural and other positive changes toward a free political system and a moral society in Serbia.

WHAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED With the new elections in December 2000 and the new government, relation toward the Diaspora changed rapidly. The new Ministry for Diaspora was established, and Dr. Vojislav Vukcevic was appointed as the first minister. The SUC has established excellent relationship with the Minister Vukcevic and the Ministry for Diaspora. The modifications to the Citizenship Law, worked on by the Ministry for Diaspora and the Ministry of Interior in collaboration with the SUC, are currently under consideration in the Serbian Parliament. The Ministry for Diaspora also submitted a draft for military duty exemption (including the buy-off option) for the Serbs living aboard, and the Ministry of Defense agreed to take it into a consideration. The Serbian government has started to work on the denationalization and restitution law, which will permit return or reimbursement for the property that was unlawfully taken from the original owners, including the Serbian Orthodox Church. The current Serbian Government, although allowing the Diaspora to vote abroad in the latest presidential elections this spring, did not provide the required conditions for a larger turnout of voters, namely the absentee ballot system that SUC requested was not allowed.

Overall, the SUC's years long efforts on promoting the rights of Serbs living aboard are finally paying off, and the SUC hopes that these recent successes translate into stronger ties and coordination with the government in Belgrade, and that we can finally start to work TOGETHER FOR SERB PROSPERITY.