



SERBIA'S AMBASSADOR TO ISRAEL

BY NEIL SANDLER



“Diplomacy is the combination of politics and journalism, analyzing both political and social relationships.” So said Serbia’s Ambassador to Israel Miodrag Isakov, himself a prominent journalist, to this reporter in our conversation at the Serbian Embassy recently. Serbian National Day was celebrated on February 15 commemorating both the uprising of Serbians against the Ottomans in 1804, which is on a significant day in the Eastern Orthodox Christian calendar, as well as the first Parliament which brought the first constitution to Serbia in 1835. Ambassador Isakov feels the difficulty of being Ambassador after Serbia has come out of wars and “divorces” from the now former-Yugoslav republics. After a long time Serbia is “alone” again. Ambassador Miodrag Isakov became Ambassador to Israel just at the time that Montenegro was separating from Serbia-Montenegro last June. He was posted as Ambassador from Serbia-

Montenegro, but by the time he presented his credentials to the Israeli President he had become Ambassador from Serbia, with changed flag and assorted emblems. The dissolution of former Yugoslavia was extremely difficult for Serbians, because many had lived in Bosnia and Croatia. He said that being Ambassador from Serbia means “carrying baggage” from the history of not so long ago, the wars within the former Yugoslavia and afterwards with NATO. Many of the bad effects of the separation of former Yugoslavia were left “on the back” of Serbia, because Serbia continued into the states of Yugoslavia and then Serbia-Montenegro. Serbia had the continuity of the ex-Yugoslavia. The other former republics had a new beginning as new states, without continuing with the “baggage” from the past. So the difficulty of any Serbia Ambassador in the world now is to represent this “new-old” State and to explain to everyone what really happened and why it happened.

The International Court of Justice in the Hague has just absolved the Serbian State of responsibility for genocide in Bosnia, this is very important of course, in removing another obstacle for Serbia in international relations. The Ambassador said that all the new States from ex-Yugoslavia got a new start, entering the U.N., European organizations, and international organizations, but Serbia continued on as the continuation of ex-Yugoslavia, with the good aspects together with the not-so-good. There is an added satisfaction with being Serbian Ambassador to Israel, he said, because Israel is in a better position to understand the problems of Serbia, some problems being somewhat similar, and have been, throughout history.

And Serbia, the Jewish people and now Israel have had many connections throughout history, with similar tragic situations that they have passed through. So now again Serbia is a single sovereign state like it was in the past. Serbians have lived through a number of different States, in combinations, without moving from their homes, with several Kingdoms and then Socialist and so on Republics, the Ambassador has lived through several “States”. At least Serbia is richer because 4 languages are spoken widely: in addition to Serbian; Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. The Ambassador said that the way is open for EU membership now, the Hague Court’s ruling removes another obstacle in the way, the way will be quicker if Serbia can fulfill its requirements about apprehending wanted war criminals, as required by the Hague Courts. Serbia is still being blamed for not apprehending the ones who were involved in massacres in Bosnia. There were reasons for not apprehending the criminals, including severe budgetary restrictions after the wars, industry was stopped, and the State had to deal with those



problems immediately. Former President Slobodan Milosevic was delivered to the Hague, but General Ratko Mladic, being hunted by Serbia, is still wanted by the Hague Court as a war criminal. As soon as Mladic is apprehended, the Ambassador believes negotiations to proceed with Serbia with EU Membership will begin the next day. But until then negotiations will be difficult. The Ambassador believes that “double standards” are applied to both Israel and to Serbia, for example, in demanding the capture of Mladic before any further advances in EU membership. He said most Serbians and Serbian politicians and government officials also agree that he should be brought to justice. But there are examples of major Nazi-era war criminals who are still living openly in other European countries, not being apprehended, who are responsible for the massacres of Serbians during WWII, including a grandparent of the Ambassador. He said that some mistakes were made by Serbia during the time of the fighting after Yugoslavia began to break apart, although basically intentions were good. Apropos to this, the Ambassador uses the expression: “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Kosovo contains some of the great spiritual sites of Serbian culture, it was the heartland of Serbia at the time of the Ottoman invasion from where Ser-

bians came to spread into what is now Serbia. The Ambassador believes that there could be a compromise on Kosovo if international powers and institutions (U.N., European Union, U.S.) involved pushed for a compromise and worked on it, but they are not. They are only saying that there must be some compromise, or they will enforce a solution. In the meantime the Albanian Kosovars are simply buying time and waiting for an enforced solution because they believe it would be in their favor. “An enforced solution is never a solution”. Within Serbia there are some prominent figures who are offering partition plans between Kosovo and Serbia, among other compromises being discussed. Within the first government in Serbia organized after Milosevic, when the Ambassador was Vice President, there were some agreements about division. The government of Serbia officially considers Kosovo as part of Serbia. The Ambassador stresses that the major players do not realize all the upheavals that could come from an independent Albanian Kosovar Kosovo, creating major problems for neighboring Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. It could also create new divisions within Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Serbs could feel justified in making more demands.

The Ambassador says Serbia welcomes the traditional support of Russia, espe-

cially on the U.N. Security Council, Russia also has an interest in seeking to block secessionist movements within nations. But Russia can find geopolitical advantages in either solution, independence or not, for Kosovo. We should understand that Russia has its own interests, which come first. The Ambassador says the Russians will support Serbia as much as they can. He said Russia is becoming more involved in the region again, which is a good thing, in the field of politics, creating more balanced views. The Ambassador said Serbia maintains very close relations with Montenegro, which voted to separate from Serbia with only the barest majority last June. Montenegro has a major Serb population and the country in general looks to Serbia for protection.

Ambassador Isakov said relations with Israel are good, but could be better. Too much time was lost because of international political alienation, but now he says Serbia and Israel must begin to better support each other in the international sphere. There are strong ties between Serbia and the Jewish people. Yugoslavia was the first country to recognize the State of Israel and former Yugoslav WWII partisans came here to fight for Israel in the War of Independence and Yugoslavia supplied arms to the new Israeli State. Trade is still on a low level, but there is growing cooperation, with growing transfer of Israeli technology to Serbia and investments, like in real estate, but hopefully soon in agriculture and industry as well. Economic trade and cooperation agreements have already been signed. The Ambassador stressed that Serbia is especially important to Israel as an economic conduit both to the European Union and to Eastern Europe and former Soviet countries, at the same time. Israel, in turn, is especially important economically to Serbia because of Israel’s special relationship with the U.S.

Ambassador Isakov has had a stellar career as a journalist, being a major figure on radio and television in ex-Yugoslavia, founder and head of the first independent journalist society,

magazine editor, political integration and tolerance activist. He became Assembly Deputy in the Assembly of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Deputy in Foreign Affairs, then Member of delegation to the Council of Europe and OSCE. He became Vice-President in the first democratic Government of the Republic of Serbia. He has had other major political achievements. He has published four books, including "Parados", chronicling changes in Serbia. He has been Serbian Ambassador to Israel since May 2006.

The Ambassador and his wife adapted very quickly to life in Israel. The Ambassador's wife Jelena Isakov, is an active member of the International Women's Club, and hopes to become President. They have three children:

Alexander, who is studying in university in Serbia, and may come to Israel this year to continue his studies or to begin his career, a daughter, Iva, who is finishing High School in Serbia, and hopes to begin studying in Israel, and a second son Milos, who is currently on a H.S. exchange program in the U.S. His son is an avid basketball player and is also interested in the basketball scene here. The Ambassador would like to create more exchange between Israel and Serbia in the field of basketball bringing great Serbian basketball coaches and players here.

The Ambassador enjoys attending football and basketball games here. He pursues his writing here, both on a diary of his impressions and in creating a novel. He gets great inspiration from the historical sites and personal relationships he has here, and has made many friends. He is in Jerusalem at least two times a week for business meetings. Ambassador Isakov is planning to bring the renowned Serbian film director Emir Kusturica to Israel for a film festival and discussions with the film-making community. The Ambassador hopes to encourage the growing tourism trade between Serbia and Israel, with several major music festivals being a great draw to Serbia, including the Guca and Exit Festivals. An extremely successful International Film Festival was held in Belgrade last February.

Ambassador Miodrag Isakov brings the deep insight of his journalist and literary career to his diplomatic post, as well as his experience of political work in promoting tolerance and democracy. He is extremely pleased with his role in the flourishing relationship between Serbia and Israel. ■



National name: Republika Srbija

President: Boris Tadic (2004)

Prime Minister: Vojislav Kostunica (2004)

Current government officials

Land and total area: 34,116 sq mi (88,361 sq km)

Population (2002): 9,396,411; fertility rate: 1.78/1000; life expectancy: 74; density per sq mi: 275

Capital and largest city (2003 est.): Belgrade, 1,717,800 (metro. area), 1,285,200 (city proper)

Other large cities: Pristina, 204,500; Novi Sad, 191,300; Nis, 174,000

Monetary unit: Yugoslav new dinar. In Kosovo both the euro and the Yugoslav dinar are legal

Languages: Serbian (official); Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak, and Croatian (all official in Vojvodina); Albanian (official in Kosovo)

Ethnicity/race: Serb 66%, Albanian 17%, Hungarian 3.5%, other 13.5% (1991)

Religions: Serbian Orthodox, Muslim, Roman Catholic, Protestant

Literacy rate: 96.4% (2002 est.)

Economic summary: GDP/PPP (2005 est.): \$41.15 billion; per capita \$4,400. Real growth rate: 5.9% for Serbia alone (excluding Kosovo). Inflation: 15.5%. Unemployment: 31.6%; unemployment is approximately 50% in Kosovo. Arable land: n.a. Agriculture: wheat, maize, sugar beets, sunflower, beef, pork, milk. Labor force: 2.961 million; agriculture 30%, industry 46%, services 24% (excluding Kosovo and Montenegro) (2002). Industries: sugar, agricultural machinery, electrical and communication equipment, paper and pulp, lead, transportation equipment. Natural resources: oil, gas, coal, iron ore, copper, lead, zinc, antimony, chromite, nickel, gold, silver, magnesium, pyrite, limestone, marble, salt, arable land. Exports: \$4.553 billion (excluding Kosovo and Montenegro) (2005 est.): manufactured goods, food and live animals, machinery and transport equipment. Imports: \$10.58 billion (excluding Kosovo and Montenegro) (2005).

Communications: Telephones: main lines in use: 2,685,400 (2004); mobile cellular: 4,729,600 (2004). Radio broadcast stations: 153 (2001). Internet users: 1.4 million (2006).

Transportation: Railways: total: 4,135 km (2004). Highways: total: 37,937 km; paved: 23,937 km, unpaved: 13,950 km (2002). Waterways: 587 km; primarily on Danube and Sava rivers (2005). Airports: 25 includes airports in Montenegro (2005).

International disputes: the final status of the Serbian province of Kosovo remains unresolved and several thousand peacekeepers from the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) have administered the region since 1999, with Kosovar Albanians overwhelmingly supporting and Serbian officials opposing Kosovo independence; the international community had agreed to begin a process to determine final status but contingency of solidifying multi-ethnic democracy in Kosovo has not been satisfied; ethnic Albanians in Kosovo refuse demarcation of the boundary with Macedonia in accordance with the 2000 Macedonia-Serbia and Montenegro delimitation agreement; Serbia and Montenegro delimited about half of the boundary with Bosnia and Herzegovina, but sections with Serbia along the Drina River remain in dispute.