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## THE PLAIN DEALER

# Prominent Serbian-Americans Meet to Discuss Aid for Ancestral Home

by Robert Sberna  
*Sberna is a free-lance writer*

As Serbia struggles to rebuild its war-torn infrastructure, an increasing number of Serbian-Americans are taking an active role in supporting their ancestral country.

The Serbian-American diaspora - the community of Serb emigres and Americans of Serbian descent - is wielding its financial, political and intellectual clout to address the economic and social damage inflicted by the decade-long Balkan conflict.

Earlier this month, about 70 prominent Serbian-Americans attended a dinner meeting in Cleveland to discuss strategies for engaging the diaspora in the redevelopment of Serbia and Montenegro, the joint state that was established in 2003 as a successor to the Republic of Yugoslavia.

Plain Dealer President and Publisher Alex Machaskee, who hosted the event, noted that the U.S. views the post-war Balkan countries as a vital and important geopolitical region. "Serbia is the key country there and will continue to be so in the future," he said. "Because of our blood ties and our history, we can serve a constructive role in repairing the recently - and unnecessarily - strained misunderstandings between America and Serbia. We can also help Serbia become more democratic, more stable and more prosperous. As a consequence, we will have a stronger and more reliable friend and ally in the Balkans. It is truly a win-win proposition."

In Serbia and Montenegro, the war's legacy is severe shortages of food and medical supplies, widespread unemployment and poverty, and a refugee population of more than 500,000.

Machaskee said the nation's ongoing transition from its nationalist past to democracy and a market economy has provided an opportunity for Serbian-Americans to establish and strengthen the bonds of trust

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between themselves and their motherland.

"We, as individuals, need to take an interest and stay abreast of what's happening in the Balkans," Machaskee told the gathering, which included U.S. Sen. George Voinovich of Ohio; former U.S. Rep. Helen Delich Bentley of Maryland; Desko Nikitovic, Chicago-based consulate general of Serbia & Montenegro; The Very Reverend John Zdinak, chancellor of the Midwest Archdiocese of the Orthodox Church of America; Milan Puskar, CEO of Mylan Laboratories; Bill Salatich, former president of Gillette North American; the present and past presidents of the Serbian National Federation and the Serbian Unity Congress; businesspeople, educators, attorneys, clergymen and representatives of Serbian media and cultural organizations from throughout the U.S.

The imperatives of the Serbian-American diaspora include "making it very, very clear that what happens in the Balkans is important to the security of the U.S. and the world," said Voinovich, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We have to make sure that part of the world doesn't get neglected."

While he credited several U.S. government officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for their knowledge of Serb issues, Voinovich said the diaspora can be an important force in shaping U.S. policy towards Serbia and Montenegro. "I really believe that the State Department and the Serbian-American diaspora are working together," he noted, explaining that the diaspora convinced State Department officials that former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic could be toppled. "The diaspora persuaded our government that Milosevic could be had," said Voinovich. "If not for their efforts, we wouldn't have gotten rid of him."

The ouster of the Milosevic regime in 2000 removed key obstacles to positive change in the region. Now, said Voinovich, it's time for the diaspora to "step up to the table and do something to help our brothers over there."

Along with contacting legislators and U.S. government officials to raise awareness of Serbia's difficult economic conditions, Voinovich called for Serbian-Americans to pursue opportunities for joint business ventures and knowledge transfers. "One thing that we can do is set up academic exchanges between the U.S. and Serbia," he said. "By bringing Serbian students over here, we'll be training the future leaders of Serbia and Montenegro. If we don't use the diaspora to do something for that country, we can say goodbye to its responsible leaders. The remnants of Milosevic will take over."

Voinovich recently became the first U.S. Senator to join the Congressional Serbian Caucus, a bicameral group focused on improving communication and increasing friendly relations between the U.S. and Serbia. "It would be a good idea for Serbian-Americans to learn which elected representatives are members of the Caucus and stay in touch with them," Machaskee suggested.

While Serbia's current leaders wrestle with the task of implementing their reform-minded agenda, the nation's strategic environment is complex, unpredictable and unstable, said S. Boban Pesic, president of WiseFutures, a global advisory network.

Noting that Serbia's economy is "mismanaged and underutilized and its leadership does not control its own decision-making," Pesic said the Serbian-American diaspora can - and should - be engaged in its motherland's redevelopment.

He explained that an engaged diaspora could provide a wide range of

assistance, including the enhancement of Serbia's global image, promotion of foreign direct investment into the country, and business development expertise.

Pesic also suggested the establishment of an institute for global governance as well as an open, participatory forum that would meet on a regular basis to deliberate and advise the Serbian government on cultural matters. Both the institute and the forum would be diaspora-sponsored and based in Belgrade (the capital of Serbia and Montenegro). The institute's purpose would be to educate and train Serbian and non-Serbian students, scholars, civil servants and public administrators in public policy and global business practices.

In the aftermath of the Balkan conflict, the Serbian nation has found itself dogged by a somewhat-negative image, particularly in the West.

The key to correcting the misperception and fostering understanding of the Serbian people is through cultural awareness, said Dragan Kovacevich, executive director of the department of culture for the Serbian National Federation.

Based in Pittsburgh, Kovacevich explained that Serbian-Americans who want to help their native country can do so by sponsoring cultural awareness projects. "The best way of diplomacy and learning who the Serbs are is through our art," he said. "To experience our dance and our music is to understand us. You can't separate a people's culture from its history."

Throughout dinner, the Continental Strings, a tamburitza ensemble including Machaskee, his son Lex, LuAnn Chmura, Patti Heckman and Steve Mraz, performed traditional Serbian songs. The music's evocative melodies and close harmonies expressed a proud national heritage.

"There's so much in the culture that's rich," Machaskee noted. "An engaged diaspora will help the Serbian culture and its institutions to survive. There are many ways to participate - whether it's considering investment opportunities in Serbia, supporting the Serbian Unity Congress or expressing your views in your local newspaper or the American Srbobran. It's time for us to assess and look forward in a constructive way."