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Diplomacy This Week

🔒 Economic ties push political talk, says Serbian envoy

First-time ambassador brings across the ocean his wife, son—and a piano.



Embassy Photo: Sam Garcia

Mihailo Papazoglu was previously posted to two cities in France before Canada.
[Kristen Shane](#)

When an ambassador is new to a posting, their mind is often running with thoughts of political priorities, and ways to develop a strong relationship with their host country and boost business.

When **Mihailo Papazoglu** started his job as Serbia's ambassador to Canada in June, he was thinking of all that. But his mind was also on the people back in Serbia whose homes and businesses had been inundated. A flood in May killed more than 50 people in the Balkans, affected millions of people and caused billions of dollars in damages.

"You find yourself in a position that ... really [the] first questions to you posed were: 'How are the people dealing out there?'" he recalled in a July 17 interview.

Mr. Papazoglu was lucky that neither he nor his family were directly affected by the flooding, as they were based in the capital, Belgrade. But about 40 kilometres away, he described a dyke's collapse as a "tsunami" that left the area covered by metres of water. "It would never stop. For a week, it was a terrible, terrible rain," he recalled experiencing in Belgrade.

The ambassador called the flooding "biblical, historical," because Serbia doesn't normally get such weather problems, he said. Unfortunately, the heavy rains returned this month, damaging roads, bridges and homes in Serbia and Bosnia.

On the day he spoke with *Embassy* in a small sitting area of his mission filled with natural light and plants, the Canadian government announced it was chipping in another \$100,000 to the Balkans in the aftermath of the flooding and landslides.

That brought the Canadian funding total to \$900,000 in response to the disaster. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs **Lynne Yelich** announced the news at a donors' conference in Brussels.

Serbia was "very satisfied" about her contribution and Canada's support, said the ambassador. Money pledged from the donors' conference would help re-establish electrical grids and shelter people, he said.

A warm welcome

Leaving Serbia with a heavy heart, Mr. Papazoglu was able to find a bit of solace as he stepped off the plane in Ottawa. Practically the first face he saw was **Angela Bogdan**, the chief of protocol for the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, who was once posted as ambassador to the former Yugoslavia in Belgrade. They immediately spoke some Serbian, he recalled with a smile.

She wasn't the only welcoming face. Through his travels so far to Milton and Niagara Falls in Ontario to meet with members of the Serbian community in Canada, which he estimates to be around 150,000, he said he's found great openness. The diaspora is an asset and a "natural bridge" between Canada and Serbia, he said.

"In every part of ...ordinary life you have somebody that has this family name that sounds familiar," he said with a chuckle.

He's also made the DFATD handshake rounds, meeting Foreign Minister **John Baird**, director general for Europe and Eurasia trade and diplomacy **Matthew Levin** and others.

It's Mr. Papazoglu's first posting as ambassador, after working his way up the foreign service ladder since graduating from Belgrade University with a bachelor of laws in the mid-1990s (he later earned a master's in EU law from the same school).

His career included stints at Serbia's embassy in Paris and earlier at the former Yugoslavia's permanent mission to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France. They've left him fluent in French as well as English (and intermediate Greek), an asset for his Canadian sojourn. Most recently, he was chief of diplomatic protocol for his foreign ministry.

Having his whole CV read aloud as he presented his credentials to Governor General **David Johnston** in June was emotional, he said. It was special to hear all the bits and pieces that have made up his career put together as he marked a new chapter in his life as a diplomat.

Mr. Papazoglu's wife, **Djurdja**, and 13-yearold son **Kosta** were set to have arrived in mid-August. Kosta is slated to attend a French school, while Ms. Papazoglu is hoping to teach piano. She runs a music association, he said, in addition to being a pianist. While she's lucky to have a profession that transfers easily from country to country without having to retrain much under new rules or professional bodies, the move does mean the family is bringing over a piano from Europe.

Agreements galore

Mr. Papazoglu said he expected the Serbian and Canadian governments to soon finalize or bring into force agreements on social security and foreign investment. Mr. Baird is set to soon visit Serbia, Croatia and Albania.

A 2012 economic agreement has already led to \$1.5 billion in contracts for Canadian companies in Serbia, especially in fields of Canadian expertise such as mining and hydro, he said. Eighty per cent of all Serbian state mining licences, he added, are granted to Canadian companies.

"The economic content of bilateral relations is pushing the political dialogue ahead," said Mr. Papazoglu.

He expected an air traffic agreement to lead to the first direct flights between Toronto and Belgrade as early as next spring.

When he's not trying to drum up more business and political ties between the two countries this fall, Mr. Papazoglu said he's keen to play soccer with other members of the diplomatic corps and basketball with a group of fellow Serbs in Ottawa, "if they agree, if I'm good enough," he said with a laugh.

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