



Portuguese Republic

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H.E Luis de Almeida Sampaio

The Portuguese Republic is a country situated in southwestern Europe on the Iberian Peninsula.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, as the result of pioneering the Age of Discovery, Portugal expanded western influence and established a global empire that included possessions in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and South America, becoming the world's major economic, political and military global power.

The Portuguese Empire was the first global empire in history, and also the longest lived of the European colonial empires, spanning almost 600 years.

However, the country's international status was greatly reduced during the 19th century, especially following the independence of Brazil, its largest colony.

Portugal today, is a developed country with an advanced and high-income economy, with a very high Human Development Index.

It has the world's 19th-highest quality of life, one of the top health care systems, and it's also one of the world's most globalized and peaceful nations.

We were honored to talk about Portugal to His Excellency Luis de Almeida Sampaio, Ambassador of Portugal to Serbia.

Your Excellency, you have been in the position of Ambassador to Serbia since 2008. What were your expectations at the arrival to our country and were they met?

I arrived in Serbia at a moment when it was still very fresh the decision of my Government to recognize the independence of Kosovo. It was thus natural that one of my concerns was to make sure that the traditionally excellent political and diplomatic relations between Portugal and Serbia were not affected by that decision.

I must say that it was a remarkably easy success and it took me very few weeks to realize that our relations are based on extremely solid foundations, reinforced by mutual respect and sympathy and projected towards a common future of shared interests.

The other main dimension of my mandate was to contribute for a quantum leap in terms of our economic relations. Also in this field the results

are impressive as our trade increased many fold and we have now Portuguese companies in strategic sectors of the Serbian economy.

What was your diplomatic career like before appointment to the position of Ambassador?

I had served in many other countries and many different positions before coming to Belgrade as Ambassador. I started out back in 1983 so I think that I can claim some diplomatic experience and I had hold many extremely interesting and challenging diplomatic jobs, in different continents and under very different circumstances.

Serbia was the real turning point of my career as nobody remains the same after being exposed to such a kind people, such a proud and old nation, such a politically dense and complex environment, such an astounding beautiful country. I am sure that I am now, after my years of Serbian experience, a much better prepared professional and more accomplished human being.

For how long have diplomatic relations between Serbia and Portugal dated back? What were they like in the past and what are they like nowadays?

Even though Portugal and Serbia are far apart geographically speaking, almost in opposite ends of the European continent, our mentalities, attitudes towards life, tastes and way of living, are very close and very similar.

Our relations date back to the Middle Ages as Portugal was a global power and our sailors and tradesmen crossed almost the entire Earth but only one century ago the first treaty, a commercial treaty, between Serbia and Portugal was signed.

In the recent past our relations, although excellent in political and diplomatic terms, were not that de-

veloped in the economic field. This is what we are changing now. We are creating the conditions for the establishments of partnerships between companies and businessmen of our two countries.

What is the level of economic cooperation of Serbia and Portugal? What can our two countries offer each other and on what condition could they exploit their opportunities in order to achieve good economic cooperation?

If you look at the crude figures you will not have the accurate picture of what is going on, nevertheless despite the low level of exchanges that still characterize our economic bilateral relations (in 2011 Serbia was Portugal's 103rd client and Portugal's 86th supplier) we believe there is good potential to explore new possibilities and raise the relationship to a new level. There are encouraging signs: bilateral trade has increased on average 65% per year in the past 5 years, which allows us to be optimistic regarding the future as encourages us to strengthen our commitment to the development and diversification of our relations.

What advantages of Serbia could, for example, Portuguese investors use and are they interested in investing in Serbia?

Portuguese companies have a recognized added value that can be very useful in the development of joint projects in Serbia and in the rest of the Balkans. Being roughly of the same size, Serbian companies are interesting partners for their Portuguese counterparts, enabling the establishments of balanced partnerships that are thus more adequate for the preservation

How could you comment the fact that Serbia did not get its EU candidacy last year in December? Do you think it will happen this year and under which conditions?

If it would have depended on Portugal alone, Serbia would have been granted the candidate status already. We firmly believe that Serbia deserves it and that the Government, this Government, took the necessary measures and made the indispensable steps towards fulfilling the criteria and conditions required to achieve that goal. As we all know everything now boils down to the progress within the framework of the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue and last December the European Council set out clearly what needs to be done. What needs to be done is achievable, will be achieved and Serbia will be granted, as it fully deserves I repeat, candidate status now.



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of both sides' interests in the development of joint activities.

What can Portugal offer to Serbian investors and at your knowledge, are Serbian companies interested in investing in your country?

Portugal has a very attractive business friendly environment, being a predictable economy and a very open market. Portugal can also constitute a key interlocutor and partner of Serbia in other regions of the world such as in Africa (especially with the African Portuguese speaking countries) and in Latin America (Brazil).

Serbia belongs to Europe and it will be part of the family sooner than later.

In the same way Serbia can constitute a strategic platform in the Balkans and be the hub to markets like Turkey, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, etc., given the preferential agreements has with those countries granting favorable treatment for their products.

How do you see the future of EU? Do you think that EU existence has been jeopardized since numerous predictions of such kind? What could be the exit from crisis, in your opinion?

The European Union will come out of the current crisis reinforced, stronger and more prosperous than ever. This is the history of the European adventure. Crises are opportunities.

Opportunities to grow, to deepen the integration and to foster enlargement and to reach out to new frontiers and this is not only applicable to the economic and financial dimensions of the European endeavor.

As I always stress Europe is not only about money. Europe is about shared values and about building a common future.

How does Portugal "fight" the economic crisis and all its consequences, including high unemployment rate, just like in Serbia?

We are doing a very serious homework, being even stricter than what the international financial institutions are asking from us.

Public debt and financial budgetary imbalances are being corrected with a great sense of responsibility and with very firm political commitment. We are very fortunate to have a national political

Lisbon, Torre de Belem





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and social consensus around these objectives. We would like other European Union countries facing the same difficulties we are faced with to follow our example.

We, like Serbia, are a very old nation that already went through very much good and bad moments, extraordinary achievements as well as daunting challenges. This crisis is nothing we cannot overcome and every single Portuguese citizen knows that very well deep in his heart.

Do you agree with the opinion that Portuguese and Serbian people are alike in temperament? What other characteristics connect our two nations, though remote?

As I just said we know that we will prevail. Determination and a sense of destiny, of having our special place in history is a common trait between Portuguese and Serbian peoples.

We are both friendly and open minded. We are both Mediterranean peoples without having a Mediterranean shore.

Our traditional cultures have a lot of similarities. It is amazing how everybody here in Serbia knows and loves *fado*, the traditional Portuguese music. Even when it comes to gastronomy and wines I find everyday that we share very similar tastes.

Let me repeat, our attitude towards life is very similar. Portuguese and Serbs get along always

very well and in my country there is a lot of respect and sympathy for the Serbian people.

Cooperation in the field of culture of our two countries gained additional significance last year, when the Portuguese language was the guest of honor of Belgrade Book Fair. How else can we cooperate in the field of culture, sports, education...?

The 2012 Belgrade Book Fair was really a major public demonstration of our cultural affinities. Being the guest of honor of that huge European event that is your Book Fair, the Portuguese language was promoted to the forefront of all the public attention.

Dozens of new books of the best Portuguese, Brazilian, Angolan and other Portuguese speaking countries' literatures were translated for the first time into Serbian language.

The interest and the curiosity of your public opinion is still visible as the results of the Book Fair are discussed in newspapers, specialized magazines, workshops and conferences across Serbia.

If anyone would have a doubt about the prestige and international importance of the Portuguese language in Serbia, the 2012 Belgrade Book Fair was the perfect answer. The Portuguese language is of a global scale, one of the most widely spoken international languages of our time and is a vehicle of vibrant and diverse cultures present in almost every continent on Earth. The Serb public appreciates this in its full significance.

Also in all other cultural, cultural heritage, education and sports related dimensions our bilateral

cooperation is developing and building bridges every day.

To give you only another example: hundreds of Serb young University students are learning Portuguese in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Kragujevac, thus creating not only powerful cultural bonds as well as building up the indis-

GUIMARÃES 2012
EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE

Besides Maribor in Slovenia, Portuguese city of Guimarães was proclaimed to be European Capital of Culture in 2012. What will this city offer to its visitors in 2012?

It was an incredible honor for Portugal and the Portuguese people that Guimarães was awarded, together with Maribor, geographically speaking a Balkan city, the title of 2012 European Capital of Culture as it is a very ancient city whose roots are intrinsically linked to Portugal's independence. In fact, the city is known as the "Cradle of Portugal" for its historical significance. Therefore, Guimarães was the perfect and unavoidable choice because it is, in a sense, a germinating point for Portuguese identity and culture that has helped shaped European history. Thus, over the course of one year, the city will be the promoter of Europe's cultural diversity, revealing its creations and welcoming those from other countries. In 2012, Guimarães will be hosting a major gathering of creators and creations: music, cinema, photography, fine arts, architecture, literature, thought, theatre, dance, street art. In Guimarães, the artistic products imagined and created by its residents will merge with those coming to the city from all over Europe. Besides, Guimarães 2012 European Capital of Culture will also be a catalyst for development of the city and surrounding region.



Lisbon, monument El Padrao dos Descobrimentos

pensable critical mass of Portuguese speaking professionals that will be instrumental for our companies, our businessmen, our mutual trade cooperation.

How do you spend your spare time? Do you have any favorite place you often visit?

I spend almost every single minute of my spare time trying to better know Serbia, Serbs and Serbian culture. I think that now, after almost three years and half living in Serbia, I visited every corner of your beautiful country and I have a full stock of good memories that will be with me forever. If I have a favorite place, I will not reveal it out of respect for many hundreds of other extraordinary places and spots I became familiar with during my mandate.

What will you take with yourself to remind you of the time spent in Serbia?

As I have stated already, Serbia constitutes a real turning point in my diplomatic career for the many reasons I have presented. I cannot deny that having the opportunity to serve my country in Serbia, which stands at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, of the West and the East, which lies at the very heart of this old continent, has also constituted a great privilege. A privilege for the people that I have met, for the culture I have tried to immerse myself in and for the immense experiences I have lived and shared.

I cannot pinpoint a single object or experience as the moments I have lived here attain their most poignant meaning when looked at from a general standpoint.

I believe that Serbia's future will be filled with bright achievements as Serbia will definitely constitute a bright memory in my professional and personal past.☺



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