July 14, 2017

The Honorable Mike Pence  
Office of the Vice President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Vice President Pence,

I am writing out of concern for the proposed July 17th visit of President Aleksandar Vucic to Washington. It is my hope that you will cancel this visit until the Government of Serbia provides greater clarity on unfulfilled pledges from his June and September 2015 visits to Washington.

I strongly support Serbia’s European integration and applaud the efforts of U.S. Ambassador Kyle Scott to foster democratic institutions, respect the rule of law and advance economic reform. I share a priority in assisting Serbia in becoming a regional economic hub and engine for critically necessary private sector regional growth. I remain hopeful that we can work together as the Administration monitors Russian and Iranian influence in the region.

First, just last month Serbia engaged in a joint military exercise with Russia and Belarus named “Slavic Brotherhood” just miles from the Polish border on the day after Montenegro became a member of NATO. These provocative drills further a disturbing pattern. In 2015, Serbian troops traveled to Krasnodar Krai bordering Russian-occupied Crimea and in November 2016, Serbia hosted similar military exercises with Russian troops the same week American troops were with NATO allies in Montenegro. What is most disturbing, however, is the personal offer last March by President Vladimir Putin to provide Serbia with six MiG-29 fighter jets, 30 T-72 tanks and 30 BRDM-2 armored vehicles. I believe these moves destabilize this fragile region. I hope that you will secure a pledge from President Vucic whether he will accept this offer, and inquire as to why Serbia requires such heavy military equipment.

Second, I am concerned by reports that a small group, led by the President’s brother, Andrej Vucic, and four of his close friends, Nikola Petrovic, Zvonko Veselinovic, Slavisa Kokeza and Nenad Kovac, continue to consolidate all infrastructure and public works projects. Their relationship with Alexander Mikhailovich Babakov, special envoy appointed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, also deserves scrutiny. Knowing of your commitment to a free market economy and fostering opportunities at home and abroad for American industry, I hope that you will secure pledges from President Vucic about the activities of this cabal.
Third, just ten days before your March 26th Washington speech further putting Iran on notice, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications Rasim Ljajic welcomed an Iranian delegation led by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Serbia is actively pursuing deeper diplomatic and commercial ties with Iran. Following the bilateral visit, Belgrade is now home to the new Iranian Business Centre for the Balkans with a stated goal of establishing more direct flights to Tehran from the region. Iran is actively looking for investment opportunities in Serbian privatization schemes. Last November, the Speaker of Parliament Maja Gojkovic visited Tehran for extensive discussions with Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh. I hope that you will secure a pledge from President Vucic on whether his government intends to allow Iranian resources to invest in Serbia, and whether he intends to launch a direct flight from Belgrade to Tehran.

Fourth, before visiting the White House, President Vucic must clarify future plans for the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Nis. Russia has been asking Serbia for a special protected diplomatic status for this facility and the Russians working inside. I do not believe that Russia has good intentions locating this facility less than 150 miles from 600 U.S. troops stationed at Camp Bondsteel. I hope that you will secure a pledge from President Vucic not to grant diplomatic immunity to this facility, and that he will schedule civil emergency situation exercises with NATO before the end of the year like he has pledged.

Fifth, as the Administration lays out bold plans for American LNG exports, I am deeply concerned by Serbia’s embrace of South Stream last month. In December 2014, Russia announced a halt in the work on the gas pipeline, which was set to span Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. I intend to work with the Administration on diversification of European energy sources to free the grip our allies face from the Russian monopoly. I hope that you will secure a pledge from President Vucic to cease the revival of South Stream and to work with the United States and Europe on fostering alternative energy sources.

Lastly, it took Serbia seven years to convict the nine men who burnt the U.S. Embassy in February 2008. However, most were given suspended sentences only to be served if they commit another crime. Further, those who executed three American citizens in 1999 remain at large. Before meeting with President Vucic at the White House, I hope you will secure a pledge from him clarifying the sentence of these criminals and newly formed Serbian government’s plans to resolve the Bytyqi case.

President Vucic made impressive pledges in his June 2015 and September 2015 visits to Washington. He reaffirmed these when Vice President Biden visited Belgrade last August. Unfortunately, no discernible progress has occurred on these pledges. Indeed, in many respects, further backsliding on democratic values and Euro-Atlantic integration has occurred.

It is my hope that until tangible progress and clear pledges have been made that you will postpone your meeting with President Vucic. I applaud your scheduled visit to Podgorica next month to meet leaders. I know that your time in the Western Balkans will further foster democratic values and free market principals. Rather than hosting President Vucic this month in Washington, I hope you will encourage President Vucic to work constructively for regional cooperation amongst allied democracies. This will not only benefit this important bilateral relationship, but the stability across the entire region.

Sincerely,

Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Member of Congress