

Bilateral Trade on the Rise Again

Patrizio Dei Tos

President of Confindustria Serbia

Confindustria Serbia has established itself as a central point of reference for Italian companies and institutions in relations with Serbia. Its goal is simple: to work to make it easier for Italian companies to do business in Serbia



Patrizio Dei Tos firmly believes that growth is stronger where politics and businesses have discourse and cooperate. Our interlocutor has a lot of confidence in the Italian business community in Serbia, which represents a network of highly experienced professionals that has built strong knowledge of Serbian culture and society over past decades.

You have been at the helm of Confindustria Serbia for five years. Despite numerous challenges and global crises, have you managed to realise the plans and ambitions with which you took on this important role?

— I am an entrepreneur, so I'm used to starting conversations with numbers as the best way to express results. In December 2023, Confindustria Serbia had 200 member companies – the highest number since this organisation was established in 2012. Secondly, I am also satisfied with the strengthening of our offices: the president is the figurehead, but the quality of the association is provided by the dedicated work of the people who work in our offices every day. Their dedication and skills are the key to our results. Confindustria Serbia has established itself as a central point of reference for Italian companies and institutions in relations with Serbia. On the other hand, during the years that I've held the presidency of Confindustria Serbia,

I've felt the growing trust of the Serbian institutions and business community towards us and our work. It's undeniable that we've been hit by "black swans" over the past five years, such as the pandemic and international crises, but, on the other hand, this climate has strengthened the general awareness of the importance of cooperation within the European continent. Italy and the Western Balkans are natural partners and, as president, it has been my job to work to make this natural affinity increasingly evident.

Could you explain your clearly defined strategy encompassing several key aspects?

— We work to make it easier for Italian companies to do business in Serbia. It is an all-encompassing task that covers the initial phases of the internationalisation process, but also daily problems arising from bureaucracy, legislative aspects, or relations with local institutions. The heart of our strategy is the strengthening of institutional relations with the Serbian authorities at all levels – from mayors to ministries. Confindustria Italia is based in Rome and has a direct relationship with Italian ministries, and is consulted by ministers when reforms are implemented. We have set ourselves the same goal for our offices in Belgrade: we firmly believe that growth is stronger where politics and businesses have discourse and cooperate.

As a long-term strategy in this sense, we recently launched a new platform of collaboration called "Confindustria per i giovani" (Confindustria for the youth), with the aim of fostering strong relations between young people in Serbia and Italy at all levels: academia, career growth, collaborations with Serbian companies operating in Italy and vice versa, and of course bringing young people into contact with institutions.

Economic relations between Italy and Serbia, which are characterised by decades of successful cooperation, are now gaining new opportunities to deepen even further. Which areas and sectors offer the best prospects for improvement?

— As emerged during the Italy-Serbia Business Forum held in Trieste, trade between our countries in 2023 reached 4.5 billion euros. Growth is transversal across all sectors, both traditional ones, such as manufacturing or agriculture, but even more in areas

like IT and sustainability. As for Confindustria itself, we see extraordinary margins for growth in a circular economy, as in the entire agri-food chain. The latest edition of Wine Vision hosted more than 570 wineries and attracted great interest from Italian companies. Another sector in which Serbia has great room for growth is that of logistics and transport. Confindustria Serbia has been trying to keep pace with these tendencies, by launching an ESG Lab to offer concrete support to SMEs, but also by organising conferences and workshops on green tech solutions, as well as on transport and logistics. The real challenge will be to enhance advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, to place them in the service of sectors in which Serbia already represents a natural partner.

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How important is it for potential Italian investors to receive encouraging messages from Serbia, to understand that they can count on the unwavering support of both our Government and Confindustria Serbia?

— It is crucial! Bottomline, this is my main job as president. It is for this reason that I always want to remember that, beyond my role in Confindustria, before anything else, I am an Italian entrepreneur who decided to invest in Serbia around ten years ago. I am satisfied with the choice I made, which is why I'm fully convinced to recommend it to anyone considering this country. The economic continuity demonstrated by Serbia, even through political crises, demonstrates the country's maturity and its desire for growth. Furthermore, I have a lot of confidence in the work of our office and in the entire Italian business community generally, which can support not only Italian companies, but all European companies. The support of the Government, ministers and authorities has never been lacking. We have always found collaboration and pragmatism.

The second Business Forum of Serbian and Italian Entrepreneurs was held in Trieste recently and brought together more than 200 companies. How important are such events for our two countries and our cooperation?

— The Business Forum was a success. More than 15 representatives of our governments participated, including Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani and Serbian Prime Minister Miloš Vučević. In addition to a strong political presence, there was a significant participation of financial institutions... SACE, SIMEST and CDP all have their own offices in Belgrade. This means that the Italian Government not only believes in relations with Serbia, but that it tangibly encourages companies to internationalise in this country. Five bilateral agreements were signed in Trieste, enabling the launch of concrete collaborations between Italy and Serbia in the sectors of infrastructure, energy, telecommunications and decarbonisation. The Forum provided a chance for over 150 Italian companies to meet potential partners and clients among the 100 Serbian companies that participated. "I also want to express my sincere gratitude for the excellent collaboration we have with the Embassy of Italy in Belgrade, H.E. Luca Gori and his team."

Considering that Europe is increasingly opening up to the Balkans, does the intensification of relations between Italy and Serbia represent a crucial factor for enhancing stability and economic development in the Balkans?

— We are natural partners thanks also to our geographical proximity. We must have the ability to see what the world will be like in ten years, and in that context I want to see Serbia in the European Union. That's because the European integration process is not complete without Serbia. It has been said for years that the U.S. creates, China copies and the EU regulates. Europe must regain its role and position as the leading continent in the creation and production of ideas and products. We must have a common industrial strategy and must remove the obstacles – whether infrastructural or bureaucratic – that currently limit our ability to compete. But History has taught us that commercial relations aren't always enough to stop wars. It is for this reason, besides the process of economic integration, that we need to work together to strengthen the common European spirit. ●