

U.S. Ambassador McEldowney: I feel sad that I'm leaving so soon

Nancy McEldowney, the U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria is Libras. She was born on October 6 and has been serving in Foreign Service since 1984.

Current position: the U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria since 2008. Previous positions: DCM in Azerbaijan and after that - DCM in Turkey

Future appointment: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau for European and Eurasian Affairs. Married to Tim Hayes, retired pilot. They have two adopted daughters – Jessica, 9 and Alyssa. Native state – Florida. And this is where her family home is.

Mrs. McEldowney, what are your impressions with the election campaign in Bulgaria? Do you have any concerns about the political process in this country?

The people of Bulgaria will go to the polling stations in a few days and will decide on the future government of this country. The U.S. government has made it very clear that it does not interfere in the domestic political affairs. We don't have favorites among the political parties or candidates – this is not our business. But we will follow with interest the negotiations on the makeup of a next ruling coalition. We hope that Bulgaria will have a strong government as a result of those elections. We want the best result of the best possible election process.

What do you think about vote buying?

We were very concerned about the reports of vote buying and other types of vote fraud during the elections for European Parliament. I hope very much that this won't happen at the national elections again.

Vote buying is a negative phenomenon in many ways. It is bad for those who sell their votes because they deny themselves the right to vote. It's bad for the parties who buy votes because this undermines the legitimacy of every participant in the election process.

Corruption is in the focus of the elections campaign. Barack Obama personally asked you to work tirelessly in this regard. Have you been following his advice?

Many people in the Bulgarian government and at the American Embassy worked hard on the problem with the fight against organized crime and corruption. However, hard work is important but what is more important is the results. The progress that has been made is not sufficient, and the results are not satisfactory. I say this as a friend and an ally. Corruption exists everywhere – in the United States and in any other country too. The question is what mechanisms to fight corruption have been established, and if it can be identified and limited so that the effect it has on the society, economy, and politics can be minimized.

It is important for the new government to have the ability and the powers to lead the fight against OC and corruption. It needs a concrete and clear plan what needs to be done and the timeline within which it will be done. All this have to be made public so that the media and the people can monitor the implementation of that plan and keep the government accountable. Of course curbing corruption does not happen overnight. There is no "silver bullet" against it. The solution is – hard, persistent, and

constant efforts. Everyone can make promises. The question is that promises should be kept and results should be seen. The media have an important role to play to keep the authorities accountable.

Other important feature of this campaign is the criticism against the so called ethnic model. The ethnic model is something for which Bulgaria has been taking credit for quite a long time.

Bulgaria is known to be a place of ethnic tolerance. This model gives the different ethnic groups a possibility to live together in peace. The rhetoric in this campaign was quite controversial. It speaks badly about those who stir tension. Every time when the language of hatred is driving the people apart instead of uniting them the results are negative. That's why we look upon those attempts with regret. And that's why we stand even firmer by the principles of tolerance, ethnic, religious, and other type of diversity because it makes us stronger.

You are taking a high position in Washington. What is your job going to be?

The title itself is rather long. The essence is that I will work at a Bureau which deals with all – about 50 – European states, including Russia, with NATO, EU, and OSCE. This involves contacts with more than 80 posts and it is a big challenge for me. I am preparing for this job now. And it was a big honor to be offered such an appointment.

On the other hand I am said that I have to leave Bulgaria so early. My family and I felt Bulgaria like home. I launched a lot of projects and initiatives which I have to give up now. But many of them will be part of my future job so I will follow their development.

At your new job will work to bring President Obama to Bulgaria?

I can't rule out such a visit. We'll see. His schedule is very busy. But Obama's administration showed that this region is priority to us. Vice President Biden was on a trip to the Balkans recently.

Do you stay in touch with your predecessor who is now in Moscow?

John Beyrle is an old friend of mine. We know each other for 20 years. I have worked together on many project, we do that now too – through email messages, the way we work with the other Ambassadors in the region. He is very interested in Bulgaria. He's been here twice for which I envy him because I've spent here only a year.

Who's going to succeed you here?

We don't know yet. They are looking for the right person.

Do you help with that?

(Laughing) Yes, as much as I can.

The Bulgarians are very much interested in how soon they'll be able to travel to the United States without visas?

There a tendency here to look at the removal of the visas as a miracle that will solve many problems immediately. It is very wrong. Whoever has a good reason to travel – to study, to do business, or to travel as a tourist – he or she would get a visa. The VWP has certain criteria that have to be met. If Bulgaria meets those criteria it will join the Program. For example, some of those criteria is the

introduction of biometric passports and bringing the visa refusal rate below 10%. Now it is around 13-15%.