

**Virtual Consular Town Hall on COVID-19 and U.S. Elections**  
**August 31, 2020, 11:00 a.m.**

**EMCEE**

- Thank you, Madam Ambassador.
- Good morning and welcome to the first Virtual Consular Town Hall!
- Our panelists this morning include the Consular Chief, Mr. Bernard Uadan and members of the Consular team at the U.S. Embassy. Our Consular Chief will offer remarks and a briefing on Embassy consular operations. The team members will follow answering questions submitted in advance.
- Let's begin with our Consular Chief.

**CONSULAR CHIEF:**

- Thank You! Good morning everybody.
- My name is Bernard Uadan and I am the chief of consular services at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje, North Macedonia. I am happy today to have this chance to speak to you all.
- First of all, I would like to give you an update on the status of services here at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje.
- In response to significant worldwide challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of State suspended routine consular services at our overseas and domestic facilities in March 2020 while continuing to process emergency and critical cases.
- The Department took these steps to protect our customers, our workforce, you, our applicants, and public health worldwide.
- As conditions have evolved across the United States and around the world, the Department has initiated a phased resumption of routine consular services on a location- by-location basis, based on public health data and local conditions.

- At this moment the U.S. Embassy in Skopje is at a point where we are providing limited American Citizen Services (ACS), primarily emergency ACS services and passport services for those who have urgent need to travel. Unfortunately, at this stage we are still not able to offer notarial services.
- I am happy to announce that starting this week, we are starting to resume scheduling limited visa appointments. At this time, our priorities are student visa applicants and several types of immigrant visa applications. While the number of available appointments will initially be limited, we will continue to assess the current situation and look for opportunities to increase appointment availability.
- As we move forward, we will continue to closely monitor the situation and adjust our level of services as long as we have the resources and as long as these services can be provided safely.
- I must remind you that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect countries differently. Challenges to any international travel at this time may include mandatory quarantines, travel restrictions, and closed borders. Foreign governments may implement restrictions with little notice, even in destinations that were previously low risk. Since the safety and security of American citizens overseas is one of our top priorities, we strive to keep U.S. citizens informed by regularly providing COVID-19 information and other security information on our website and by sending security and health alerts to all registered American citizens in the country.
- In order to stay up to date with all the developments in the country and the Embassy's engagement in helping American citizens, we strongly encourage you to enroll in [STEP](#) (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) to receive Alerts and make it easier to locate you in an emergency. The Department uses these Alerts to convey information about terrorist threats, security incidents, planned demonstrations, natural disasters, etc. The website for enrollment in STEP is [step.state.gov](http://step.state.gov).
- The Department of State is committed to ensuring that U.S. citizens abroad like you are aware of their right to vote and have the tools and resources to successfully do so - from anywhere in the world.

- So, stay on the lookout for our regular voting messages between now and Election Day. We hope to see your ballot soon!
- With that, let me hand this back to our Emcee.

**EMCEE:**

- Thank you very much!
- Now, let's start with our Q-and-A segment:

**EMCEE: Here's our first question. I need to travel to Germany in two weeks. What are the entry requirements for U.S. citizens?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** If you are planning to visit or travel throughout Europe, we urge you to check the websites of the relevant U.S. Embassies or consulates for information on restrictions, foreign quarantine policies, and urgent health information provided by relevant authorities.

Some European countries currently prohibit entry by tourists and other non-essential travelers. We recommend that you visit the websites of those countries' embassies in the United States for additional information including entry/exit restrictions and permissible categories of travel.

**EMCEE: Here's our next question I am going to a conference in Belgrade, Serbia this coming weekend. It is my understanding that I need to have a PCR test before my planned trip. Where can I get one in North Macedonia?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** U.S. citizens may obtain a COVID-19 test from a number of health care providers and laboratories in North Macedonia. Testing fees must be paid by each patient. At the moment, there are a number of places where you can get a PCR test. The full list can be found on our website on our COVID-19 information webpage. Some of them are:

- Acibadem Sistina Hospital
- Avicena Laboratory
- Biotek Laboratory
- Zan Mitrev Clinic

**EMCEE: My parents are planning to visit me here in North Macedonia. Do they need to have a PCR test to enter the country?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** U.S. citizens do not need to provide the results of PCR tests upon arrival into North Macedonia. At this moment, there are no entry restrictions for U.S. citizens to come to the country.

**EMCEE: Let's go on to the next question. I am writing to inquire whether the Consular Section provides fingerprint cards and fingerprinting services to U.S. citizens? I would like to obtain an FBI background check which is required for my application for a temporary residence permit?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** Thank you! This is a very common question! First of all, everyone should understand that the U.S. Embassy in Skopje and other U.S. Embassies and Consulates overseas do not have the authority or capacity to perform background checks and/or to issue clearance certificates. In the United States, each state maintains individual records regarding criminal records of citizens residing there. Embassies and Consulates do not have access to a centralized database which combines all of the data from individual states.

However, the [FBI](#) office in the U.S. offers that service for their citizens. Please visit their official website for more information.

In regard to getting fingerprints, unfortunately, the U.S. Embassy in Skopje does not provide this service. If you need to get fingerprints taken, once you get the fingerprint card from the FBI website and print it out, you can contact the [Ministry of Interior](#) in Skopje and get the fingerprints done there.

**EMCEE: Here is another common question: I am a U.S. citizen and I will be 62 in October. How do I go about applying for Social Security retirement benefits?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** Unfortunately, U.S. Embassies abroad no longer assist with federal benefits overseas, including social security benefits. These are handled directly by offices of the Social Security Administration (SSA) overseas. The nearest SSA office in charge of beneficiaries residing in North Macedonia is located in Naples, Italy. Please send an email to [FBU.Naples@ssa.gov](mailto:FBU.Naples@ssa.gov) and they will be able to assist you with your request.

**EMCEE: Here is a voting question: Who is eligible to vote overseas? What elections can U.S. citizens overseas vote in?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** Most U.S. citizens 18 years or older who reside outside the United States are eligible to vote absentee for federal office candidates in U.S. primary and general elections. In addition, some states allow overseas citizens to vote for state and local office candidates and referendums. More information is available at [fvap.gov](https://fvap.gov) website.

**EMCEE: Here is another complex, but common question about voting: Can a U.S. citizen who has never lived in the United States vote?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** Each state has residency requirements relating to voter eligibility. Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia allow voters who have never lived in the United States to use their parents' state of voting residence. We recommend that these U.S. citizens contact the local election officials in the place where their parents last lived, to find out if they are eligible to register to vote. Consular voting assistance officers can help U.S. citizens contact local election officials or they can find more information at [FVAP.gov/citizen-voter/reside](https://FVAP.gov/citizen-voter/reside).

**EMCEE: Can a U.S. citizen who has not lived in the United States for a long time and cannot remember their previous address register to vote in any state?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** All voting in the United States is based on a citizen's state residency. Normally, a citizen will use the address where they last lived before leaving the United States, even if it was a long time ago. This voting residency is valid even if the voter no longer has any ties to this residence, or if the residence has been torn down or repurposed. If they do not remember that address, they can ask family or friends who may know, consult online mapping programs, check medical, school, religious institution or property records or contact the [Social Security Administration](https://www.ssa.gov).

**EMCEE: If a U.S. citizen drops his/her ballot off at the embassy, what happens to it?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** If a U.S. citizen drops a ballot off at the U.S. embassy, the embassy will send the ballots to a U.S. Postal Service facility in the United States through diplomatic pouch. The USPS will then send the ballot to the local

election board. Unfortunately, your ballot is the only thing Embassies abroad are permitted to forward to the U.S. Postal Service on behalf of private U.S. citizens!

**EMCEE: Here's our next question: Why are some embassies putting out messages to U.S. citizens saying the Embassy can't mail completed ballots, but others put out messages encouraging people to drop completed ballots off for mailing to the U.S.?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some embassies and consulates are closed for all but emergency consular services. In limited cases, embassies may temporarily pause ballot collection, due to local conditions and to safeguard the health and safety of U.S. citizens.

In cases in which depositing a ballot at the U.S. embassy or consulate is not currently possible, or if doing so is not the most expedient way for a U.S. citizen to send his or her ballot, the embassy or consulate will alert U.S. citizens overseas as to alternate methods to mail a completed ballot back to their local voting offices in the United States.

At some posts around the world, we are advising U.S. citizens that the most expedient way to mail a ballot to their local voting office in the United States is by private courier service or international mail, as local health conditions currently dictate the Embassies remain closed for all but emergency cases. In some U.S. jurisdictions, voting by fax or email is allowed, and U.S. embassies and consulates stand ready to help U.S. citizens explore all options to vote. The Department is committed to assisting U.S. citizens to vote and will accept and send to local voting offices requests for absentee ballots and completed ballots as soon as local conditions allow.

We are now accepting ballots at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje, so we hope to see your ballot, soon!

**EMCEE: This is a question we hear a lot from long-term expats: What effect does voting have on a U.S. citizen's taxes?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** U.S. citizens have an obligation to file federal tax returns wherever they live. Voting for candidates for federal offices does not affect federal or state tax liability. Voting for candidates for state or local offices could affect their state's income tax liability. U.S. citizens should consult legal counsel if they have questions about state income tax liability.

**EMCEE: I am a dual citizen of the United States and another country. Can I still vote in US elections?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** That's a great question! Dual citizens who have U.S. citizenship and who are residing outside of the United States may vote in elections for federal office by registering and requesting a ballot from the election office in their state of legal voting residence. They can get started at [FVAP.gov](https://fvap.gov). However, being a dual citizen of another country doesn't make a difference when you are voting in U.S. elections.

**EMCEE: Here's our next question: Can I use the Embassy's fax to transmit my ballot?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** I will answer this question myself. You are welcome to drop off your completed, signed, and sealed paper ballot at the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate and we'll get it to the U.S. Postal Service for delivery to your election office. We are not able to fax your ballot or other election materials.

**EMCEE: May I drop off my ballot at the U.S Embassy in Skopje and what is the procedure to do so?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** Yes, you can drop off your completed voting forms and ballots, addressed to your local election officials, at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje. You will need to place your ballots in postage paid return envelopes or in envelopes bearing sufficient U.S. postage, in order for them to be delivered to the proper local election authorities.

You can drop your ballot by off by visiting the Embassy let the guard know you are dropping off a ballot or voting material, and we'll arrange to send it to the United States for you without the need to pay international postage. It's that easy! The side entrance of the Embassy in Skopje is open for drop-off every workday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Normal transit time from the Embassy to the United States is 14 days.

**EMCEE: I read on your website that your visa services are currently suspended. When are you planning to reopen, and are you going to start processing all types of visas?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** During the suspension we continued to provide emergency and mission-critical visa services. As of today, our mission will phase in processing limited interviews for specific categories of visas that are exempt under relevant Presidential Proclamations, including students, exchange visitors, and other limited categories. We will also be focusing on processing immigrant visas for the spouses and children of U.S. citizens.

We will gradually expand our services if the local conditions and resources allow us to do so. Due to the substantial backlog, there is likely to be increased wait times for completing such services.

**EMCEE: What steps are being taken to protect customers from the spread of COVID-19?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** The health and safety of our workforce and customers will remain our priority. Our embassies and consulates are implementing safeguards to keep staff and customers safe, including implementing physical distancing in our waiting rooms, scheduling fewer interviews at a time, frequent disinfection of high touch areas, and following local health and safety regulations.

**CONSULAR CHIEF: So, it looks like we've also gotten quite a few more questions concerning visas. Since we have a little time, let's answer those as well.**

**EMCEE: Here is an F1 visa question: I'm an American citizen. My nephew was accepted at the Columbia University. Can he apply for a student visa?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** In response to significant worldwide challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of State temporarily suspended routine visa services at all U.S. Embassies and Consulates as of March 20, 2020, including the visa services for F1 student visas. We are happy to announce that starting today U.S. Embassy Skopje will resume limited visa services for students attending schools in the United States. Your nephew should contact the embassy about scheduling an appointment.

**EMCEE: Another F1 visa question: As an American citizen can I get information and guidance how my niece can get an expedited appointment for a student visa? She was accepted at a U.S. university and she has to be there for the orientation meetings as soon as possible.**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** As mentioned in the preceding question, the United States Embassy in Skopje is resuming visa services for students attending schools in the United States.

Your niece should visit our [Global Services](#) website and schedule a consular section appointment then immediately request an expedited appointment. She will need to submit a reason for the request. Unfortunately, we cannot guarantee that her request will be immediately approved, but we will do our best to accommodate inquiries based on the current situation and resource availability.

We recognize the serious challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to universities and students alike, and we hope that many international students who had planned to study this fall in the United States will be still able to do so under these temporary exemptions.

**EMCEE: Here is a B1/B2 tourist visa question: My father has been several times to U.S. to visit me and my family. Now his visa has expired. I know from the previous communication with you that you are closed, but recently my wife has delivered a baby and we want my father to be with us during this happy moment for our family. Can he renew his visa with an expedited appointment?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** Although we have started to schedule limited in-person visa services, we are prioritizing student visas, exchange visitors, and several other limited visa categories. As the situation and resources allow, we will consider resuming tourist visa appointments as well.

**EMCEE: Another B1/B2 tourist visa question: I'm a U.S. citizen. My mother has a valid tourist visa, can she come to the U.S. to visit me?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** Currently non-immigrant visa holders with valid visas can travel to U.S. with no issues if their connection flights are not via Schengen zone countries or any other countries affected by a presidential proclamation that bars entry to the U.S. from that country. You should check the Department of State's website at [travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov) for a list of countries affected by one of these presidential proclamations. At the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov)'s website you can also see the list of the countries that U.S. visa holders can't travel through. Also, at the same site you can find the recommendations and requirements for entering the U.S.

**EMCEE: Here is a K1 fiancé visa question: My fiancée was not allowed to board at the airport in Vienna yesterday even though she had a valid K1 visa. Could you please tell me what happened?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** Unfortunately, your fiancée traveled through Vienna. Vienna, Austria is included in the group of countries affected by a Presidential Proclamation that does not allow some visa holders, including K1 applicants, to enter the United States after being present or even transiting through the Schengen zone. As she was present in Vienna, she will need to stay outside of the Schengen zone for at least 14 days and then travel to the U.S. via another non-Schengen airport like Belgrade or Istanbul.

**EMCEE: The fee that I paid for my mother to apply for a visitor's visa expired while your routine services are suspended. Do I need to pay again when she applies?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** As long as you paid less than one year ago, you do not need to pay again. The Machine Readable Visa (MRV) fee is valid and may be used to schedule a visa appointment in the country where it was purchased within one year of the date of payment. This counts for all visa categories.

**EMCEE: Our last B1/B2 tourist visa question. My sister is coming to the U.S., she has a valid tourist visa. Does she need a PCR test or something else upon entering the U.S.?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** In addition to reviewing the information on the Department of State's website, [travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov), please visit [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) and [CBP](https://www.cbp.gov) web sites for the restrictions and recommendations regarding entering the U.S. as visa holder.

**EMCEE: Here is a CR1 Immigrant visa question. I'm done with filling the petition for my husband and it was approved. What is next?**

**CONSULAR CHIEF:** Now that we have resumed routine visa services, [The National Visa Center](https://www.nvc.gov) will schedule an appointment for your husband and inform you about the date of the interview. They will send you instructions for the interview.

**EMCEE: When will processing of Diversity Visas (DV) resume? Will DV applicants whose cases are expiring be prioritized in the resumption of services?**

**CONSULAR PANELIST:** On April 22, 2020, President Trump signed a proclamation suspending entry into the United States of certain immigrants who present risk to the U.S. labor market during the economic recovery following the COVID-19 outbreak. The proclamation will expire on December 31, 2020, unless continued. Applicants for immigrant visas covered by the Proclamation, including Diversity Visa applicants, who have not been issued an immigrant visa as of April 23 are subject to the Proclamation's restrictions unless eligible for an exception.

**EMCEE: To conclude:**

- This concludes the Q&A portion of the Consular Town Hall. Thank you for sending your questions in advance. And thanks to our panelists as well. Our Consular Chief will now end the Town Hall.

**CONSULAR CHIEF:**

- Thank you. It was my pleasure to host this very first consular virtual town hall for American citizens in North Macedonia. On behalf of the consular team, I want to thank you all for participating in it.
- And I would like to ask all American citizens in North Macedonia a favor: please help us by helping **you**, by taking care of yourself and your families and staying safe under this unprecedented time of the coronavirus pandemic. And again, please don't forget to exercise your right to vote. It will determine your future both domestically and overseas.
- Thanks, and have a great day.