

AROUND THE GLOBE

Croatia and Minnesota: partners for peace

Strong economic and cultural connections link Balkan nation with state



Ember Reichgott Junge

The traveler's guidebook to Croatia exclaims on its cover, "Get in before the crowds return!" That one phrase tells much about the exquisite beauty of the country, and the opportunities at the forefront of this infant democracy. It also acknowledges the pain and struggle of the people of this war-torn country, and the challenges they must yet overcome.

Few understand this as well as Lt. Gov. Mae Schunk, a Croatian-American who just returned from leading a diverse delegation of Minnesotans to Croatia. For her, it was an emotional trip where she visited the boyhood home of her father, and met several first cousins for the first time. For me and four other travelers of Croatian descent, it was an opportunity to experience the heritage of our families, including the strong work ethic and resiliency of the people, their most generous nature, and their dramatic history. For all of us, it was a chance to build on the partnership established by the Minnesota National Guard with Croatia in 1996. That partnership was elevated by NATO when Croatia was recently accepted as a member of the Partnership for Peace Program seen as a prerequisite for full NATO membership.

Why Minnesota?

So why should Minnesotans care about Croatia? Our ties are strong. Thousands of Minnesotans are of Croatian descent, many living on the Iron Range. Many remember how former Gov. Rudy and Lola Perpich went to their homeland of Croatia to assist with foreign trade, even as bombs came down around them in Zagreb during 1991-92. The connections are so enduring, that as we sat on the patio overlooking the beautiful Adriatic Sea at Dubrovnik, we discovered an entirely separate delegation of Minnesota Iron Rangers staying at the same hotel, including the famed Chisholm journalist, Veda Ponikvar. And Minnesota is the only state in the country with a designated Honorary Croatian Consul, Boris Miksic.

With patience and nurturing, opportunities will open in partnership for both Croatia and Minnesota, both of similar size. Delegation members spoke of student exchanges, legislative and civic leader exchanges, agricultural trade, and possible new business opportunities, particularly in tourism and hospitality. But the core of our relationship is based on the outstanding work our Minnesota National Guard has done with Croatia to strengthen the promising democratic institutions of Croatia. A former province of Yugoslavia that declared its independence in 1991, Croatia's location bordering on Serbia and Montenegro, and Bosnia Herzegovina could make it a strategic and stable democratic and economic force in the ever-volatile Balkans. The U.S. government is showing increased interest in Croatia following the election of President Stjepan Mesic in February, who appears committed to democratic principles and human rights.

The pain of war

Talk of the war brought tears to the eyes of some Croatians we met. Americans can't fathom what war is like on our home soil. We can't fathom what it means to become a refugee or leave our home behind. Masses of refugees still remain, waiting to learn their fate, while the government tries to deal with unemployed ex-soldiers, housing for displaced Croats, and a severely damaged infrastructure.

Then there are the mines. About 1.2 million land mines are thought to be hidden in the hills and valleys of Croatia. No one knows where they all are; but they cause injuries and deaths each year. Extensive demining operations are ongoing, but even the most optimistic estimates, based on hoped-for dollars of infused aid, still call for 10 to 20 years to complete demining.

The destruction and reconstruction of Dubrovnik, the "Pearl of the Adriatic," tells the story of both pain and hope. Caught in the crossfire of the civil war that ravaged the former Yugoslavia, Dubrovnik was pummeled with some 2000 shells in 1991 and 1992. Located near sea level, the attacks came from the high hills above the city as well as from the sea. One former soldier told several delegation members how the hopelessly outnumbered Croatian forces had to move their artillery from place to place to make their defenses look larger. When the dust cleared, shells struck 68 percent of the 824 buildings, including residences, in the walled old town, leaving holes in two of three tiled roofs. Nine historic



Minnesotans who traveled to Croatia last month with Lt. Gov. Mae Schunk and the Minnesota National Guard were: Front row, kneeling (left to right) Adjutant General of Minnesota, Maj. Gen. Eugene Andreotti; Sgt. Jim Mayasich; Spc. Anna Lewicki; Maj. Tom Miller; Lt. Col. Denny Shields; IRRRB Commissioner John Swift; Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge; Sgt. Melanie Nelson; and Col. Denny Lord.

Back two rows (left to right): Star Tribune writer Jackie Crosby; Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture Gene Hugoson; Minneapolis Lincoln High School Principal Abraham Dehzad; Rep. William Kuisle; Paul Deputy, dean of the College of Education and Human Services Profession at UMD; Rep. Tom Rukavina; Joe Sertich, president, Northeast Higher Education District; Deloris Henderson, a St. Paul educator; Paul Moore, governor's office; Lt. Gov. Mae Schunk; Don Gillmor, professor emeritus of media law at the U of M; Sgt. Melissa Strassburg-Peltz; Lyle Bowyer, international business development manager at 3M; John Dosen, a Grand Rapids business owner; Steve LeBeau, governor's communications office; Boris Miksic, honorary counsel general of Croatia; Gary Hill, KSTP-TV; Duluth School Superintendent Julio Almanza; Mark Ludlow, a Cook business owner; Sen. Roy Terwilliger; Command Sgt. Maj. Chuck Benda; Kim Van Wie, St. Paul educator; and Brig. Gen. Harry Sieben. (Photo courtesy Minnesota National Guard)

places were completely gutted by fire, and others suffered serious damage. Many tourist hotels, the pride of their economy, were completely gutted. Yet, even with all the challenges, Croatia has managed to repair a great deal of the damage done during the war, and tourists are now returning. The restoration of Dubrovnik has been particularly successful, with immediate restoration of the roofs and about half the hotel rooms restored in this breath-takingly beautiful city.

A future exchange of Minnesota legislative and congressional leaders with members of the Croatian Parliament may be the first step toward economic reforms, providing opportunity to present legislative and tax code alternatives to Croatian civic leaders. The Minnesota National Guard is already exploring such an exchange for next year. ... The progress made on this mission should not be put aside, but be the foundation for future partnerships.

Economic challenges

One message was clear in our meetings with Croatian President Mesic, Parliament leaders, business leaders and educators — the future of Croatia rests in its ability to jump start its economy and attract foreign investment. The Croatian population is highly educated, and we visited schools that focused on economics and technology. But it is still a poor economy, and resources are limited. Joe Sertich, a delegation member of Croatian descent who is President of MNSCU's Northeast Higher Education District in Chisholm, talked enthusiastically of coordinating student exchanges with Croatian students — a "win-win" for all.

Another possible area of exchange is agriculture and trade. Croatia's terrain of steep hills and rocky soil allows for limited crop growth or raising of livestock. Commissioner of Agriculture Gene Hugoson, a delegation member, can spearhead opportunities in this area.

The business members of our delegation discovered first-hand the economic challenges. The U.S. is supporting efforts in Croatia to effect real privatization, control public expenditures, and sustain economic reform that redresses past mismanagement and abuse. Bottom line, the current economic structure in Croatia does not provide incentive for investment. Extensive regulation, and

a highly burdensome tax structure including a payroll tax that is more than 100 percent of wages paid, have contributed to an extensive "gray market" where goods and services are exchanged and bartered to avoid these burdens. In my view, any economic changes have to start in the powerful Parliament, which is now considering numerous amendments to virtually all laws in this area. A future exchange of Minnesota legislative and congressional leaders with members of the Croatian Parliament

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Finally, fundamental to democratic and economic reforms is a free press. The journalists in our delegation discovered challenges there, in that Croatian television is still state-managed, as are many radio stations.

While newspapers are independent, we were told that some 1,000 lawsuits are still pending against Croatian journalists related to their expression of views.

Partnership for the future

Croatia is truly the "Good News of the Balkans." Minnesota's cultural and ethnic traditions with that small country make us a natural partner. Lt. Gov. Mae Schunk, our gracious leader with strong family connections to the area is the perfect point person. I suggest to the lieutenant governor that the progress made on this mission not be put aside, but be the foundation for future partnerships. A task force of delegation members and other interested parties can continue to work closely with the Minnesota National Guard to develop new opportunities for both Croatia and Minnesota. No, we won't see results overnight. But significant benefits to both will be very possible with long-term commitment and dedication.

Senate Assistant Majority Leader Ember Reichgott Junge, whose mother's family comes from Croatia, was one of four legislators to travel in the delegation. Others included Rep. Tom Rukavina, also of Croatian descent; Sen. Roy Terwilliger; and Rep. Bill Kuisle.