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Cortec Corp. leader considering run at Croatian presidency

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NORTH OAKS — Resident Boris Miksic has amassed millions from his White Bear Township business Cortec Corp.

Now, he said all he wants to do is give back to his country of Croatia — as its president.

If he runs for the office in 2009, it won't be the first time. The 60-year-old Zagreb native lost out to then-incumbent Stjepan (Stipe) Mesic in his first attempt in 2004/2005, in an election he says involved foul play. Exit polls and other reports leading up to the election had him coming in second, and because Mesic had less than 50 percent of the vote, Croatian law would have entered Miksic into a final two-person presidential runoff. But later polls showed him in third, and in the end he was two percentage points away from the runoff.

One reason, he said, is that his opponents counted votes from people who had died but were never discounted.

"I will be campaigning around cemeteries next time," he joked.

There may or may not be a next time. He said he doesn't want to think about that decision for another six months, partly because he's worried about what he considers a corrupt system and an unfair game.

"Corruption is the number one problem right now (in Croatia,)" said Miksic, who has dual-citizenship. "I have difficulty with the electorate system over there. I don't think it is a fair place all the way up to the constitutional court. Sometimes, it feels like I'm spinning my wheels trying to overcome this unfair playing field.

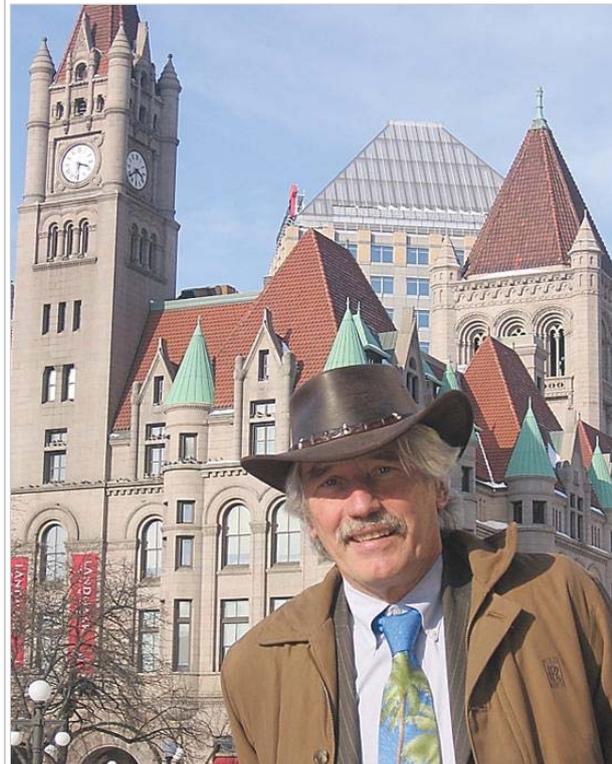
"Politicians who have ways to manipulate the elections will be the prevailing decision."

Political and business success

Miksic immigrated to the U.S. in 1974 with only \$37 in his pocket. A few years later he founded Cortec out of his garage in Hugo; the manufacturer of anti-corrosion products now has offices across the globe and annual sales of about \$50 million.

But he never gave up his interest in the politics of his homeland, serving as honorary consul general (promoting trade between the U.S. and Croatia) in 1995 and running unsuccessfully for the Croatian Parliament in 2003.

According to his 1996 biography "American Dream: A Guy From Croatia" (Cortec Corp.) the idea of running for president was planted in 1995 by his friend, former Minnesota governor Rudy Perpich. At first Miksic was skeptical of the idea because he was busy running Cortec, but almost 10 years later "the idea took hold." In the fall of 2004 he returned to Croatia to conduct his first



Boris Miksic wants to do is give back to his country of Croatia - as its president. - Photo by Nicholas Backus

campaign.

"The motivation for me is very simple," Miksic said. "I have to go back to my roots and do something good.

"I never intended to return to Yugoslavia (now Croatia,)" he noted in his biography. "In those days it was unthinkable that Communism would ever collapse, that the Berlin Wall would fall, that Yugoslavia would come apart at the seams and Croatia would again be free."

Since 2005 he has served on the Zagreb City Council, a board he considers "the second most important parliament in Croatia." He spends about a week each month in Croatia taking care of related responsibilities. He said he has helped negotiate for several area projects in the city of about 685,500, including a new airport, a new major hospital on a scale with the Mayo Clinic and a new convention center which collectively cost about a billion euros and will provide about 20,000 jobs.

Still, he laments that he cannot influence things like foreign policy, exports and the country's 12 percent unemployment rate. And he considers President Mesic to be incapable.

"The politicians over there are from Communist times," he said.

To run or not to run

If Miksic runs again in 2009, he said he would change a few things on his platform, including the fact that he was initially euro-skeptic, or opposed to the process of further European intergration. At this point, Croatia is on the verge of joining the European Union.

He said he'll continue to act as an independent candidate in the middle of both leftists and rightists, working with them both. He wants to be a new face, a candidate free from corruption — since he already has money and the means to fund his own campaigning.

He said he dreams of a Croatia whose independence in development of new technologies will make it less subject to globalization. His priority : improving the economy, a platform for which he used the campaign slogan "When the economy breathes, the society blossoms."

He said his business and life experiences would likely help him once in office.

"As a businessman I can do certain things for my employees and for a narrow community," Miksic said. "But as a politician I can influence a lot of good things for a whole country."

If he opts to run, Miksic will have only about 30 days to convince Croatians to vote for him, as the country's presidential candidates can publicly campaign for only a month before the actual election.

"These 23 percent of the popular vote would probably vote for me again," he said. "Ninety-five percent of the people in Croatia know who I am. I have been exposed in the media almost too much ... sometimes people get allergic to it."

After his 2004 loss, a large group of his supporters rallied in the streets of Zagreb in protest. Later, Miksic lost two appeals against his displacement in Croatia's supreme court.

A second opinion

Ivanica Schrunk, a University of St. Thomas history adjunct professor who is from Zagreb, recalls the 2004 campaign when Miksic originally wanted to bring change to Croatia. She said she's unsure if Miksic could gain a big enough vote to win the Croatian presidency in 2009.

"(People who run for change) are not excluded from elections," Schrunk said. "But my feelings say that it is harder for someone who has been out of the country to convince people."

She compared Croatia's 2004 presidential race to the current Minnesota Senate race.

"Coleman is saying things were unfair," she said. "Unless one can prove that something was done wrong, perception is what point of view you have. People who lose feel like it is much more unfair than people who win."

Some sources say Miksic lost his second-place status in the election due to votes cast by Croatian citizens in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Schrunk said she doesn't feel Croatia is more corrupt politically than any other nation.

"It is an open democratic country," she said. "I wouldn't say it has corruption on a high scale. It (corruption) exists like it exists everywhere."

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