

June 15, 2009

NFCA 2009 Assembly of Delegates Convenes in Washington

Rockville, MD: The National Federation of Croatian Americans (NFCA) just completed its 16th Annual Assembly of Delegates this past weekend with meetings all day Saturday, June 6, at the Gaithersburg Hilton Hotel just outside of Washington, D.C. The delegates came to Washington to discuss and formalize the NFCA's new agenda in this promising era of full NATO membership for the Republic of Croatia and a new political environment for Croatia and the Croatian American community.

Steve Rukavina, the newly elected NFCA President, committed the organization to continuing its work to make a difference for the Croatian American community on a moment's notice whenever new political, public affairs, economic, or government relations issues and initiatives related to Croatia present themselves. He stressed that: "The NFCA is so uniquely positioned to speak out for the Croatian American community in numerous ways at all levels of the U.S. federal government in the coming years."

The NFCA schedule began early Friday afternoon at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building – part of the White House complex -- for a meeting with the National Security Counsel's recently appointed Southeast Europe Director, Katherine Helgeson. The eight person NFCA delegation included Ed Andrus, Zvonko Labas, Tony Dizdar, Steve Rukavina, Tom Steich, Miro Kovacevic, Bill Vergot, and Joe Foley. The NFCA group was pleased to hear about the grave concern and disappointment that the U.S. government has with Slovenia's use of bilateral issues to confound Croatia's pursuit of new Euro-Atlantic multilateral organizational memberships. The NFCA delegation engaged this NSC official on many issues including Croatia's membership in NATO, the current political situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, matters related to Southeast European oil pipelines and future oil availability for Croatia, as well as Croatia's future European Union membership.

The Saturday session started with President Ed Andrus highlighting all the accomplishments of the NFCA during the past 12 months. President Andrus outlined the many high level meetings the NFCA has had with the White House, Congress, and State Department in recent months. He discussed the official NATO Flag Raising Ceremony saluting new NATO members Croatia and Albania in Norfolk, Virginia, which was attended by several senior NFCA members in May. He shared many details about Cardinal Vinko Puljic's visit to the U.S. in early February of this year and the success the Cardinal had in finally getting his permit to build a new church in Sarajevo -- after nine long years of waiting in frustration. It is assumed that the NFCA "White Paper" on Cardinal Puljic's U.S. trip and the subsequent follow-up meeting at the Bosnian

Embassy in Washington had some impact related to long-awaited issuance of this permit.

The NFCA Delegates heard from Treasurer Zvonko Labas and then from Joe Foley, NFCA Director of Government Affairs. Mr. Foley presented information about all the key NFCA political initiatives and, like Mr. Andrus, added more details about how the NFCA works with Capitol Hill. There was an impressive amount of Congressional interactions, legislative initiatives, and Senate Foreign Relations Committee testimony that the NFCA took the lead on and was intricately involved with over the past year -- and at nearly every stage of the NATO ratification process for the Republic.

Ambassador Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic spoke to the NFCA Delegates in the late morning, and her presentation covered a lot of ground. The Ambassador's briefing of the NFCA Delegates included matters related to the recent NATO membership accomplishments, the current issue of pending approval for the 'visa waiver' with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and social security agreements that are of particular interest from the Croatia-U.S. bilateral trade and investment perspective. The Ambassador thanked the NFCA for all of its work in helping to ensure that Croatia would be joining NATO at the April 2009 Strasbourg Summit. She indicated that U.S. Ambassador to Croatia Robert Bradtke, a great friend and ally of Croatia, would be happy to attend a Croatian American event this fall. The Ambassador also took questions for nearly thirty minutes as she shared more developments about double taxation, EU membership matters, and Croatia's complicated geo-political relationship with Slovenia.

President Ed Andrus presented a special NFCA Appreciation Award to the Croatian Ambassador which saluted her success and leadership in achieving early U.S. Senate ratification of Croatia's NATO Accession Protocols. He also gave NFCA Lifetime Achievement Awards to the NFCA's National Secretary Anne Pavlich and National Treasurer Zvonko Labas for their outstanding dedication and work for the NFCA over so many years. Past President John Kraljic saluted Ed Andrus's five years as NFCA President with many earned compliments and a fine bottle of Croatian wine to show the entire Federation's appreciation. Ed Andrus also took time to acknowledge Assembly Delegate and Croatian Fraternal Union (CFU) National President Bernard Luketich for his 50 years of service to the Croatian community and his 31 continuous years as CFU President.

In the afternoon, the Delegates brainstormed for over two hours about new initiatives and outreach including extended discussions on additional ways to involve more Croatian Americans in the NFCA organization. It was decided to implement several programs such as internships and activities that would involve more Croatian Americans from the under thirty-five age groups. Also, the NFCA Delegates discussed ways to be an advocate for Cardinal Puljic and the Croatian

community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

The Delegates were able to view the outstanding new DVD and movie created and directed by Jack Baric of San Pedro, California entitled "Searching for a Storm." The ninety-minute documentary was an incredibly powerful walk through the 1991-1995 war in Croatia and how the ICTY indictment against General Ante Gotovina is politically motivated and biased utilizing illegitimate logic and skewed evidence. The documentary, which was produced by Andrea Balen and Arif Hodzic, was scored by Denice Baric and is available for purchase through the NFCA national office in Rockville, Maryland for \$25.

The NFCA delegates held elections in the afternoon. Former President and Philadelphia resident, Steve Rukavina, was elected as the NFCA President. Joe Brigich, from the Croatian Fraternal Union, was re-elected as the Executive Vice President. The new NFCA National Treasurer is Tom Steich from Annapolis, Maryland, while popular and ardent Croatian American activist Bill Vergot from Pittsburgh was chosen the new National Secretary. The NFCA Delegates also elected three regional Vice Presidents as John Kraljic (Eastern), Frank Jerbich (Central), and Jim Kresnik (West) take these important officer slots.

Newly elected President Rukavina shared with all the Delegates his ideas on how to "grow the organization further after this milestone achievement of the Republic's membership in NATO." The new President felt strongly that the NFCA's work must continue, and the NFCA network and friends will promote the organization as the representative of the Croatian American community at all levels on matters involving the U.S. government. Mr. Rukavina also said that it was even more important now to involve more Croatian Americans with the NFCA organization. He also pledged that the NFCA will find ways to help Bosnian Croats at this critical juncture in BiH. He also shared his ideas about opportunities to allow more Croatian Americans to learn the Croatian language, to bring more interns to the NFCA office to assist in the Federation's valuable work for the entire Croatian American community, and to stay involved in many public relations and special events that are of interest to Croatian Americans. President Rukavina thanked Ed Andrus for all his valuable contributions of time, resources, and ideas over the past five years as President of the organization.

New NFCA Board members Paul Kunder, Michael Stempihar, and Miro Kovacevic all pledged to help the NFCA organization with special projects as did Assembly Delegates Ed Pazo and Marie McGuckian. In addition, Assembly attendees Tony Margan and Ivan Sucic -- from the local Croatian community in the Washington area -- committed to support several new and innovative projects. Also, Toma Kovacevic of New Mexico has offered to help with several computer and important web page projects. There will be additional Croatian American leaders

from organizations in Minnesota, Missouri, California, New York, Louisiana, and Ohio whom will soon be added to the NFCA Board via the proxy vote process in that their state Croatian American groups remain in good standing within the Federation.

On Saturday night, the NFCA delegates and special friends were treated to an incredible dinner with many Croatian-style delicacies prepared by the Embassy's Master Chef -- Ivo Svircic. Ed Andrus presented Chef Ivo with the first NFCA Presidential Medal for his plentiful successful years in Washington, for making many friends for Croatia, and for furthering Croatian causes with his big smile and wonderful national cuisine. Chef Ivo has wined and dined many important Americans and international diplomats at numerous official functions at the Embassy and throughout the nation's capital during his tenure here. Chef Ivo will be returning to Croatia this July, and he hopes many NFCA members will visit him at his Sibenik restaurant and marina.

The NFCA organization was extremely thankful for Ambassador Grabar-Kitarovic's gracious presence at the affair and the Embassy's hospitality on Saturday evening. The NFCA Delegates and their special guests were extremely pleased to visit with Deputy Ambassador Marijan Gubic, First Secretary for Economic Affairs Domagoj Juricic, Counselor for Political Affairs Dario Mihelin, and other Croatian diplomats during the evening's festivities.

The entire NFCA organization would like to publicly thank and acknowledge the outstanding organizational skills of Sandy Butt, daughter of Zvonko Labas, who was this year's Assembly Coordinator. We would also like to acknowledge the invaluable work and long-time support of Joe Foley, the NFCA's Government Affairs Director. The 2009 NFCA Assembly of Delegates could not have happened without the extra dedication and the many hours extended by these two individuals. The NFCA looks forward to another great year representing Croatian Americans, innovative projects in support of the Republic of Croatia, and choosing another excellent meeting place for our 2010 Annual Assembly next June.

The NFCA is the national umbrella organization of Croatian American groups that collectively represents approximately 130,000 members.