

A Short History of House Resolution 529

NFCA President Chronicles U.S. Congress Support of Croatia's NATO aspirations

By Frank Vinko Mustak

Back on December 14, 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted a resolution recommending Croatia's admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as soon as possible.

An initiative of the National Federation of Croatian Americans (NFCA), the resolution, known as H. Res. 529, acknowledges the progress Croatia has made meeting political, economic, military and other requirements for NATO membership, and recommends the Croatia's admission into that trans-Atlantic organization.

"This is a 'Sense of Congress' Resolution that commends the Republic of Croatia for the progress she has made since her victorious war for independence 10 years ago and recommends she be invited to join NATO at the earliest possible date," read a press release issued by the NFCA on December 23, 2005.

The genesis of the H. Res. 529, according to NFCA President Edward Andrus, can be traced back to July 2005 when Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader was in Washington, D.C.

During his official visit, Sanader at a reception for Congressmen George Radanovich (R, California) and Peter Visclosky (D-Indiana) presented one of the highest Croatian government honors on the two congressmen, The Order of Duke Branimir with Ribbon, for their work in founding the Congressional Croatian Caucus.

Officially launched in February 2005, the caucus currently boasts more than 45 House members and one U.S. Senator. Its charter, in part, is to promote and support the Republic of Croatia within the U.S. Congress.

Andrus, who lives in Pennsylvania near Philadelphia, said that during the evening of the reception, he along with other NFCA members, including the organization's treasurer Zvonko Labas, of Maryland, and NFCA Congressional lobbyist Joe Foley, also of Maryland, discussed a strategy to begin an initiative with the goal of achieving a consensus in the U.S. Congress to recommend Croatia for full membership into NATO as soon as possible.

The mechanism of choice by which to document that consensus was to be by way of a Croatia-specific House Resolution.

Earlier, in June 2005, during the NFCA's annual assembly of delegates held in Omaha, Nebraska, NATO membership for Croatia; Andrus said, was determined to be the top priority issue that the NFCA would pursue. One of the organization's tactics was to engage the Congressional Croatian Caucus in the effort.

"We knew that the U.S. State Department had hardened its position," said Andrus.

U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns essentially changed U.S. Government policy in early 2005 from Croatia having to "fully cooperating" with the International Criminal Court for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to the apprehension of former Croatian Army General Ante Gotovina as a precondition for joining NATO. Gotovina was still a fugitive at the time.

"The State Department was so harden over, we didn't feel it was worth while taking them on," Andrus said. "But, we also felt that Croatia was really being punished in an unprecedented way because of Gotovina."

"The Gotovina issue was there. We couldn't resolve it. We felt that peace and stability trumped that issue," he said. "The

resolution focuses not on that but on these positive things concerning peace and stability in the region."

"We certainly don't want to be viewed as an organization that is not supportive of General Gotovina, because we are," Andrus said. "Our membership is sympathetic to his plight."

"The Gotovina matter hopefully will be resolved," Andrus said. "It is a separate issue from peace and stability in the region and the contributions that Croatians can make in NATO."

To begin the task of gaining support for the resolution, Foley was tasked with ap-

proaching members and staff of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Relations, and the Subcommittee for Europe and Emerging Threats, which is chaired by Elton Gallegly (R-California)—also a founding member of the Congressional Croatian Caucus

Helping the progress of the resolution through the House of Representatives, Andrus said, were statements made in October 2005 by ICTY Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte expressing her opinion that Croatia was indeed fully cooperating with The Hague Tribunal.

"That gave us a little momentum in moving this resolution along," Andrus said.

In early November 2005, Andrus sent a letter to Gallegly thanking him for introducing H. Res. 529 and outlining the NFCA's reasons why Croatia should become a NATO member as soon as possible.

"We agree with the view that stability in

2005 on the floor of the House of Representatives as amended.

A similar resolution introduced in the U.S. Senate by Senator George Voinovich (R-Ohio) and designated as S. Res. 342 was passed by unanimous consent on December 21, 2005.

Passing resolutions is one of the important ways in which the U.S. House of Representatives establishes its will concerning U.S. foreign policy, Andrus said.

"We felt the Congress was quite courageous," Andrus said. "The House resolution is pretty powerful stuff. It's the House of Representatives speaking to the people of Croatia."

"It's not insignificant," he said. "We also believe that the Croatian people were not being fairly treated" he said. "They deserve more, and they could add to peace and stability to the region."

"The Congressional leaders supporting this resolution stood behind that and are willing to fight for it," Andrus said.

Foley added, "It's our position as an ethnic foreign policy special interest group that stability in that part of the world is paramount."

"The Congressional Croatian Caucus came through," he said.

Andrus stressed that Croatia's admittance into NATO was a step-by-step process.

"We were willing to take the things we could get and move the ball forward," Andrus said. "Our philosophy is: 'We'll take a piece at a time.'"

"We helped to advance the cause of the Republic of Croatia," he said. "The people of Croatia will benefit from our work."

"I think the Congress is providing positive reinforcement for Croatia's advancement," Andrus said.

As transcribed in the Congressional Record of December 14, 2005, Gallegly, Radanovich, Visclosky, along with Congressmen Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), Christopher Smith (R-New Jersey), Benjamin Cardin (D-Maryland) and Tom Lantos (D-California) all spoke on the House floor in support of H. Res. 529.

Lantos in his remarks, however, did call Gotovina an "infamous war criminal."

Radanovich, in his remarks on the House floor, said, "The success to date of H. Res. 529 is due to the vision and resolve shown by members of the Caucus to effectively drive this important measure forward, in addition to the hard work of the National Federation of Croatian Americans, NFCA, and the Croatian Embassy."

With the passage of the resolutions on behalf of Croatia in both houses of the U.S. Congress, Andrus said the U.S. State Department should take notice.

"I think with all that Undersecretary Burns has said he was going to do for Croatia when the general was turned into The Hague, we're going to hold him to that," Andrus said.

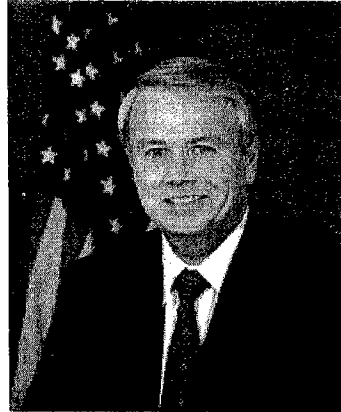
He added that Croatia is the most economically and democratically developed country in the region on the path to NATO membership, and as such should not be hindered from NATO membership because of other nations in the region not as far along in achieving the reforms required to join the trans-Atlantic organization.

"Some of those countries are so far behind," Andrus said.

"Croatia is a nation of strong courageous people," he said. "Its people won their independence, now security is the issue. They're going to need the protection of NATO in order to evolve."



NFCA President Edward Andrus



Congressman Elton Gallegly (R-California)



Congressman George Radanovich (R-California)



Congressman Peter Visclosky (D-Indiana)

"Gallely and his staff were on the same page," said Foley, adding that it was Gallegly who introduced H. Res. 529 in his subcommittee. "He deserves some good credit."

"He courageously led the charge," Andrus chimed in. "Congressman Gallegly took this as far as he could go knowing full well there could be opposition from the State Department."

Gallegly; Andrus said, also enlisted the support of Radanovich and Visclosky. Congressmen Dana Rohrabacher (R-California) and Robert Wexler (D-Florida) also lent their name in support of H. Res. 529.

South Central Europe is of a very high priority, and that Croatia has become a valuable, constructive partner in this delicate region. Given the potential for future regional conflicts, NATO should want to take advantage of the greater contribution that Croatia would make toward peace and stability as a full member of NATO," said the letter, which Radanovich in early December 2005 read into the Congressional Record.

During the first week of December 2005, around the same date that General Gotovina was apprehended in the Canary Islands by Spanish authorities and transferred to The Hague in the Netherlands, a floor vote on H. Res. 529 in the U.S. House of Representatives was delayed.

The resolution was subsequently amended, removing the language urging Croatia to cooperate in apprehending its "remaining indictee," language that referred to Gotovina.

H. Res. 529 passed on December 14,