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**Subject:**  
**Date:** April 25, 2016 at 3:06 PM  
**To:**

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**"US Ambassador Julieta Valls Noyes Meets with Top Croatian Americans at the State Department before Her Departure for Zagreb"**

October 12, 2015

**Washington, DC** - On September 9, newly Senate-confirmed US Ambassador to Croatia Julieta Valls Noyes met with senior leaders of the National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation (NFCA) and the Croatian Fraternal Union (CFU) at the US State Department in Washington DC. The Ambassador and the newly appointed Croatian Desk Officer, Emilie Bruchon, hosted eight members of the two major Croatian American organizations: Mijo Radocaj, NFCA President; Ed Pazo, CFU President; Zvonko Labas, NFCA Executive Vice President; Bernadette Luketic-Sikaris, CFU National Secretary/Treasurer; Steve Rukavina, past NFCA President and current Vice President; Vlatka Persin, NFCA National Secretary; John Kraljic, past NFCA President and current Vice President; and, Joe Foley, NFCA Public Affairs Director.

The new Ambassador to Zagreb showed great understanding of the history of Croatia and its current concerns in Southeastern Europe and on the world stage. In her prior assignments for Secretary of State John Kerry and his predecessors she had been Deputy Chief of Mission to the Holy See, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs, Director in the Office of Multilateral and Global Affairs, Deputy Director for the Office of Policy and Coordination for the Western Hemisphere, Desk Officer for Greece, and she administered political affairs positions in several US Embassies in Central America. Ambassador Noyes has become fairly fluent in Croatian language and appreciated the briefing on issues of concern for the Croatian American community.

Issues reviewed with the Ambassador included; (1) the enlargement of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) to encompass Croatia; (2) the needed expansion of economic activity between the US and Croatia that could eventually lead to the signing of a joint Double Taxation Treaty; (3) continued Adriatic energy exploration and the regional economic benefits of energy transportation infrastructure development through the area to enhance Eastern European national security; (4) the Croatian American community's continued concern regarding instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), including the ongoing economic and political difficulties experienced by Bosnian Croats; and, (5) the participation of NFCA Board Members in the Croatian Government's 55-member Advisory Council for Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia.

Mijo Radocaj congratulated Ambassador Noyes on this important posting in South Central Europe. Croatia is a close US ally and the newest member state in both NATO and the EU. Mr. Radocaj offered future support from NFCA for the Ambassador's success while in Zagreb. Ed Pazo invited Ambassador Noyes and Desk Officer Bruchon to visit CFU headquarters in Pittsburgh at their first opportunity. Mr. Pazo also reviewed in detail the longtime relationship that the CFU has had with the Republic of Croatia.

Steve Rukavina, a founding member of the NFCA in 1993, expressed his appreciation for the fine relationship that State Department has had with the NFCA. In these regards, Mr. Rukavina cited liaison during the establishment of the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA), the successful creation of the Brcko District, and related projects with many former US Ambassadors posted to Zagreb. Bernadette Luketic-Sikaris also drew attention to the important history of the CFU, which was established in 1894. She cited the many contributions to CFU's ongoing success and to that of the Croatian diaspora in the US over the prior 40 years contributed by her father, Bernard Luketic, as the long-serving President of the organization.

Other matters discussed in detail were the NFCA's continued support for US Representative Janice Hahn's (D-CA) initiative in the last Congress, H. Res. 705, that called for renewed US interest in national reforms in BiH, The need for such reforms are illustrated and necessitated by the political and economic difficulties that Croats in Bosnia continue to experience in this relatively new nation-state. The sentiments and goals expressed in the Hahn Resolution continue to gather support in the US Congress and within various multilateral organizations. It was also noted that Congresswoman Hahn continues to serve as Croatian Caucus Co-Chair in the new 114th Congress.

With respect to the proposal for a Double Taxation Treaty (DTT) between the US and Croatia, NFCA Public Affairs Director Joe Foley provided an update and documents on the prior supportive contributions by NFCA. In that connection, the participants discussed the recent establishment of a progressive dialogue on the DTT between the US Department of the Treasury, the US Congress, and the Croatian Embassy in Washington. Mr. Foley cited Croatian Caucus Co-Chair David Joyce's (R-OH) continued interest in the pursuit of this beneficial treaty between our two countries.

Zvonko Labas and John Kraljic, as NFCA Vice Presidents and charter members of the Croatian Government's Advisory Council for Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia, discussed at length the benefits the establishment of a DTT would yield. For instance, such tax relief for Croatian Americans whom wished to partially or fully retire to Croatia would encourage more transnational exchanges and provide helpful economic stimulus for Croatia.

Ambassador Noyes assured the meeting participants that she will continue to monitor these matters. The Ambassador also expressed her interest in: (1) seeing that the benefits of the pending Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the EU and the US are well understood in the Croatian American community; and, (2) needed legal reforms in Croatia that would promote economic expansion of essential small and medium-sized business enterprise and naturally increase commerce between our two countries.

CFU President Pazo noted that the Ambassador should expect to be hearing from CFU's membership while in Croatia on various matters, including that of visa waiver. Ambassador Noyes expressed her sincere interest in Croatia joining a potentially expanded VWP by the end of her tour. This would be once the national security concerns of program expansion are fully addressed by the US Congress and the matter of a higher than allowed visa refusal rate is addressed for Croatia. The Ambassador was also pleased to receive Mr. Rukavina's report that the Croatian American community had readily contributed funds to and heartily supported the Croatian Special Olympics team's visit to Los Angeles for the Special Olympics successfully held this past July.

NFCA President Radocaj expressed his strong interest in seeing a continued and productive dialogue with Ambassador Noyes. Desk Officer Bruchon also reached out to the CFU and NFCA in similar regards. Ambassador Noyes noted that her posting to Zagreb will be complete on September 22, and that she looks forward to visiting with officials of the two leading Croatian American organizations when in Zagreb.

The NFCA is the national umbrella organization established in 1993 for Croatian Americans, related professional associations, and the many fraternal lodges that collectively represent approximately 130,000 members. For individual membership and chapter information, recent newsletters, opportunities to donate to the NFCA, and for other Croatian American news please visit our web site: [www.nfcacf.org](http://www.nfcacf.org).

