

The United States and Croatia: The Bilateral Relationship Since 1991

*Thomas P. Melady**

Professor and Senior Diplomat in Residence, Institute of World Politics
United States Ambassador to the Holy See, 1989-1993
United States Ambassador to Uganda, 1972-1973
United States Ambassador to Burundi, 1969-1972
Senior Advisor to the US Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly
President Emeritus of Sacred Heart University
Former United States Assistant Secretary for Post Secondary Education

The period of 1991-2008 witnessed significant development in the bilateral relations between Croatia and the United States. Is this situation due to one person or several? Did events energize this change or was it the result of a series of well conceived strategies? Before proceeding with the diagnosis, it would be appropriate to examine briefly the history of Croatia.

Croatia: An Ancient Nation but a New State

As a nation united in language and values, Croatia has existed in Europe for over 1,500 years and has had a significant impact on the region today. In order to understand the changes in the US-Croatia bilateral relationship, the evolution of US policy in the western Balkans should be examined. At the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson pushed for the break up of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. He championed the principles of national self-determination and democracy; he disliked empires based on absolutism. He also made little effort to disguise his dislike for the Central European kingdom that for over four centuries held the different nations together.



Croatia, an independent nation since 1991, has a population of approximately 4.5 million (about the size of West Virginia).

Source: The World Factbook, 2008.

Events birthed the kingdom of Serbs, Croats, Slovenes at the end of 1918. The idea was for national unity of the Southern Slavs. While the new nation recognized the Croats and the Slovenes along with the Serbs, the new state ignored and marginalized the other national groups, such as Montenegrins and Macedonians, inside the future Yugoslavia.

* The author appreciates the research assistance of Ms. Ferida Mandic and the editorial assistance of Mr. Brooks Sommer, Executive Assistant, at the Institute of World Politics, in preparing this article.

The constitution of the Kingdom of Croats, Serbs and Slovenes represented the implementation of President Wilson's principle of self determination. The Wilson plan for the Southern Slavs was a matter of great discussion at the Versailles Conference. Despite its idealism, the plan ignored a very important political fact of Serb domination. By 1929, when the kingdom took the name of Yugoslavia, many discerned that Serbian institutions, particularly the military, the political establishment and the civil service, dominated the new state.

An Equally Complicating Factor Results From Past US-Yugoslav History

Yugoslavia's volatile political situation endangered the special relationship that the United States had with the country since World War II. One of America's best geo-strategic accomplishments during the height of the Cold War with the Soviet Union resulted when Yugoslavia pulled out of the Soviet communist sphere.

The United States invested billions in assisting Yugoslavia to develop its own institutions separate from the Soviet dominated Eastern European structure. While the US goal of turning Yugoslavia into a western model of democracy did not materialize, Yugoslavia under Josip Broz "Tito" did successfully exit the Soviet dominated Warsaw Pact community. Yugoslavia thus pricked the Soviet's psyche.

Many diplomats, including some from United States, served in Belgrade during the decades of the 1950s-1980s. Through their work, they became supporters of the US policy of keeping Yugoslavia united. When I reported for duty as the US Ambassador to the Holy See in 1989, the administration instructed me to promote the US policy of helping the Yugoslav leadership to maintain the unity and independence of this multi-nation state.¹

From 1989-1991, the pro unified Yugoslav position of the Department of State establishment factored into the calculations that caused the United States to hesitate in facilitating the collapse of Yugoslavia and to recognize Croatia and neighboring Slovenia. In those early days of the Croatian state, its leaders easily recognized a pro-Serbian bias on the part of some US diplomats.

When the Holy See and the European Community (now known as the European Union), led by Germany and Austria, recognized Croatia's independence in January 1992, I urged the US government to do the same within a few days. But it did not occur until April 1992.

During the early years of Croatia's independence, the pro Serbian atmosphere in the US Department of State contributed to a cooling in relations between the two countries. However, American friends of Croatia, especially in the US Congress, came together. The newly-opened Embassy of Croatia in July 1992 capitalized on these connections and the popularity of Croatia among influential Americans. Dr. Petar Sarcevic, first Ambassador of Croatia to the United States, served until early January 1996.

¹ Thomas P. Melady. The Ambassador's Story: The United States and the Vatican in World Affairs. (New York: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994), p. 137.

Dr. Miomir Zuzul, who arrived in early 1996, became the second ambassador to the United States. Recognizing the good will that many Americans felt towards Croatia, he launched a campaign to improve the bilateral relationship. He recruited a staff of young Croatian intellectuals including Marijan Gubic, who would later serve as the Deputy Chief of Mission. The Embassy, during the Zuzul period, was known for its cultural programs, its advanced public diplomacy and people-to-people contacts.

Ambassador Zuzul's tenure transpired during the early years of Croatian independence. His close, working relationship with President Franjo Tudjman allowed him to respond quickly to the concerns of the US government. However, the US Secretary of State's attitude complicated US-Croatian relations.

Dr. Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State during the second term of President Clinton (1996-2000), was open in her disdain for the Tudjman administration and publicly criticized him and his government. The public knew that President Tudjman's remaining time in office was short owing to his battle with cancer. In view of the fact that Dr. Tudjman was the first President of the Republic of Croatia and had many US friends, some observers felt that Dr. Albright's dislike exceeded discretion when at her direction no high ranking US envoy attended Tudjman's December 1999 funeral. The United States was represented only by its Ambassador; however, thousands and thousands of Croatians citizens came out in the bitter cold to pay their last respects to the founding father of the country.

The Tudjman government was succeeded in 2000 by the government of the late Prime Minister Ivica Racan who represented and led a broad coalition of the left. The US-Croatian bilateral relationship in this period basically stagnated. A significant new element in the bilateral relationship arrived in December 2003, when the party of the late President Tudjman, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), returned to power under the leadership of Dr. Ivo Sanader, a young Croatian intellectual.

Dr. Sanader, who holds an Austrian Ph.D., wrote poetry and edited a literary magazine in Split, Croatia. In his early years, he led a successful effort to reform and transform the HDZ into a center-right, conservative political party. Few could doubt his commitment to improving the bilateral relationship with the United States. He recognized that such a relationship could not evolve unless a determined effort to examine all the issues had occurred. With the appointment of a new staff at the Croatian Embassy in Washington, Ambassador Neven Jurica led the systematic change in the country's bilateral relationship. Marijan Gubic's assistance helped fundamentally to chart a new course due to his four years of previous service at the Embassy.

The Department of State made it clear to the Croatian government that one of the elements to successfully advance relations with the United States and the European Union necessitated full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague. However, no clear standard of "full cooperation" existed, and Brussels' definition differed from that of the Department of State. In 2004, Croatia encouraged the transfer of two retired Croatian Generals, Ivan Cermak and Mladen

Markac, to the tribunal in The Hague; a third general, Ante Gotovina, fled. For two years, this issue strained relations with both Washington and Brussels. When Brussels certified that Croatia continued to fully cooperate, the European Union opened membership negotiations and bestowed candidate status on Croatia. In December 2005, General Gotovina was arrested by Spanish authorities and now awaits his trial at The Hague.

In this period, the two countries also worked on issues such as the right of return of refugees and property restitution. Forward movement occurred on these and other matters. The two countries witnessed success with the Bilateral Agreement on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Embassy leadership resurrected the agreement that the previous Croatian government considered but did not complete.

Recognizing the importance of addressing the problem of human trafficking, Croatia initiated cooperation with the United States on this issue in 2004. This action resulted in closer contacts and cooperation between the relevant departments in Zagreb and the Department of State. On another issue, there was significant progress in a program to integrate Holocaust studies into Croatia's educational system and to increase Croatia's participation in an international Holocaust-related commission.

The creation of the Congressional Croatian Caucus reflected support for stronger relations between Croatia and the United States. Cooperation between the embassy and the Caucus intensified on several key issues. Caucus Co-chairs, Representatives George Radanovich and Peter Visclosky, a Republican and Democrat respectively, led this effort. President George W. Bush's reception of the Croatian Prime Minister at the White House in October 2006, symbolized the improvements that occurred in the bilateral relationship. This visit was a historic turning point in the relations of both countries. President Bush clearly stated, "We just had a very lengthy and interesting discussion, which is what you'd expect friends to do. I consider the Prime Minister a friend; I consider Croatia a friend, as well. We talked about foreign policy issues, issues of peace. I thank the people of Croatia for their support in Afghanistan of a young democracy."

During this period the relationship with the Pentagon also significantly improved. An indication of this very satisfactory relationship occurred in early 2004 when the Secretary of Defense visited Croatia. The State Partnership program with the Minnesota National Guard also has served as a strong factor in building the bilateral relationship, in particular the military-to-military relationship. Step by step the Embassy of Croatia built a solid operational level of relationships with the US government.

Against this background, the announcement in March 2008 that the President and Mrs. Bush would visit Croatia and stay overnight in Zagreb surprised few observers of the bilateral relationship. The current, very good relationship found its roots in hundreds of years of people-to-people contact.

There is a footnote to US-Croatian relations that most students of the relationship do not know. In the final days of its sovereignty, the Croatian city state of Dubrovnik (then known as Ragusa) in the early 1800s played a special role in the first few years of US

history by recognizing American Independence. The diplomatic recognition of the United States occurred during the term of the second President of the United States, John Adams.

This must have pleased the then US Ambassador to France, Thomas Jefferson, because the future US President knew the history of Dubrovnik. This city along with Venice and Genoa served as a Trinity of Platonic democracies in Europe. At this time, Dubrovnik was the preeminent city state in the western world. After his service as US Ambassador to France, Thomas Jefferson returned to the United States and would soon become the third President.

More than a century between the Croatian city state of Dubrovnik's recognition of the United States and President Wilson's pro-Serb position at Versailles resulted in some forgotten memories regarding early US-Croatian diplomacy. The pro Serb atmosphere permeated the professional circles of the Department of State in the period after 1980 when Yugoslavia was in the process of collapsing. As the country disintegrated, the pro Serb atmosphere favored positions advocated by Belgrade.

As recently as 2006, Nicholas Burns, who was then serving as the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, stated, "Serbia is the keystone state in the Balkans. If the Balkans is going to be an area of increasing prosperity and stability, Serbia is to be a successful country."

There also has been a significant change in the attitude of the Department of State toward Croatia. The difficulties in the US-Croatian relationship have been essentially removed. The improved and expanding economy of Croatia and especially the growth of tourism has resulted in many calling Croatia the "new Riviera." The growing people-to-people contacts indicate a solid foundation for the future.

Recognition must be given to the Croatian leadership of the past several years, with a competent staff at the embassy in Washington, who played a significant role in strengthening the relationship that resulted in the decision of President Bush to visit Croatia in April 2008. In Zagreb's historic St. Mark's Square on April 5, President Bush told the leaders of Croatia and the thousands in the square, "Should any danger threaten your people, America and the NATO alliance will stand with you, and no one will be able to take your freedom away." On April 6, the new Croatian Ambassador, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, arrived in Washington. All of these developments are striking examples of diplomacy—and statesmanship—that have resulted in the positive transformation of the bilateral relationship over a relatively short period of 17 years.

Croatia is a steady mature friend for the United States in Central Europe and in the Balkans. We need such a friend, now, given the volatility in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia. The significant improvement in the bilateral relationship serves the interest of both countries.²

² Ambassador Melady has served as an adviser to the Government of Croatia.