

# War Criminal vs. European Union Should Be an Easy Choice

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**By NICHOLAS KULISH**

As a Croatian-American, I have spent more time thinking about the public image of that small Balkan nation than has the vast majority of people outside its borders. When it stepped into the diplomatic limelight with a supporting role in the recent drama over Turkey's membership in the European Union, my instinct was to pray the attention would end as quickly and quietly as possible. Croatia should be calm and cooperative, enjoying the unlikely good fortune of recent years rather than jeopardizing it for an accused war criminal.

This past March, the E.U. refused to begin membership negotiations with Croatia as scheduled because Croatia had failed to arrest a general indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Talks were still halted when Austria chose last weekend's crucial 11th-hour negotiations over Turkey as the moment to push for Croatia's bid. Turkey has human rights problems, too, was one of the arguments advanced. As a volunteer spokesman for Croatia, I would humbly suggest that it could improve on "No worse than Turkey" as a slogan.

In my experience, explaining that your family hailed from the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea was never easy. In the 1980's, Croatia was part of Yugoslavia, a country best known here for its cheap, unreliable car, the Yugo. In turn, the car was best known for jokes, like: "How do you get a Yugo to go over 60 miles an hour? Push it off a cliff."

In the 1990's, I could most easily explain my heritage by saying, "You know, where the war is." It was the nasty, brutal neighborhood in the otherwise optimistic Europe. Most Americans didn't know Marshal Tito from Tito Jackson. I had gotten used to a little embarrassment.

The war ground to a halt, and it was the Serbs who emerged as the prominent bad guys, and Slobodan Milosevic as the one Balkan villain who penetrated American popular consciousness. Croats took part in the ethnic killings of the era but were overshadowed in this dubious distinction by the Serbs. Croatia was independent, and one could breathe a sigh of relief.

Then things took an unexpectedly positive turn. It was a bit like being a New England Patriots fan. For years your team is a punch line, the next thing you know it has championship trophies and bragging rights.

In 1998, the Croatian national soccer team made it to the semifinals of the World Cup, a spectacular achievement for an infant nation of around 4.5 million people. The tall, lanky tennis player Goran Ivanisevic won Wimbledon in 2001. Seeing Croatian flags waved in celebration, I felt a growing pride. Friends began asking me for vacation advice. They wanted to visit the historic town of Dubrovnik or stunning islands like Hvar, where my grandfather quarried stone as a young man.

This past February, the staffers of the popular Lonely Planet guidebooks named Croatia the top travel destination in the world for 2005. Not a top destination, but the top destination, just ahead of some place called China, with a pretty big wall and rather famous cuisine.

Perhaps that was what led to the debacle with the E.U. the very next month. A little buzz went straight to a small country's head. Suddenly Croatia thought it could throw its weight around, and would be embraced by the E.U. despite criticism from The Hague.

Unfortunately, I believe the problem runs a bit deeper. Traveling through the country a few years ago, I found it hard to miss the bullet-pocked walls and the blackened foundations of razed houses. But I also noticed the ubiquity of the Croatian flag. If I had to guess, I would say there were four flags for every person in the country.

There is pride, and there is hypernationalism. Alas, the birthplace of my family tends toward the latter.

The chief United Nations war crimes prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, said Monday that Croatia was cooperating fully in the search for Gen. Ante Gotovina, and the E.U. reopened membership talks. Rather than seeing this as a victory, Croats should recognize it for what it is: a bullet dodged.

Croatia needs the E.U., which according to the organization accounts for 70 percent of its trade. In contrast, Croatia scrapes together less than 1 percent of total E.U. trade. One side holds all the cards, and that side is not Croatia.

More important, where else does the little Balkan country turn for allies? Albania? Serbia?

Croatia also needs good P.R. more than other countries. Thanks to its breathtaking coastline, its economic growth relies in large part on a huge tourism industry. Fewer people want to bask on the beach in the home of the unreconstructed war criminals.

I am rooting for you, Croatia, and will keep coming back. Most people can just as easily go somewhere else.