

Introductory Remarks
By
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Honorary Consul of Croatia in Ireland

Here, at the National Bank of Croatia of all places, Ante Čičin-Šain does not need any introduction. However, it is appropriate to say a few words about the background to today's event.

Ireland and Croatia have always had much in common.

Both are small countries with similar histories and shared values. In particular, both countries had to struggle against great odds for political independence and national survival. It is hardly surprising therefore that there was great potential support for Croatia among the Irish. However, to realise that potential, Croatia needed to be represented in Ireland not only by an accomplished diplomat but also by someone with whom Irish people would personally empathise. In selecting Dr. Čičin-Šain as Croatia's first Ambassador to Ireland, the late President Tudjman certainly picked the right man for the job.

Dr. Čičin-Šain was never a resident Ambassador in Dublin. It is a tribute to him and to the Government he represented that this did not impede the rapid and immensely successful development of Irish Croatian relations.

In this context, it is highly appropriate that today's events are occurring during the premiership of Dr. Ivo Sanader. When Dr. Sanader was Deputy Foreign Minister of Croatia, he made a memorable impact in Dublin and contributed hugely to the political and economic links then being forged.

The bond between the two countries was immeasurably strengthened by the close relationship he developed over the years with our Prime Minister, Mr. Ahern, and also indeed with our then enormously successful Minister for Finance, Charlie McCreevy.

Indeed, to understand the significance of the links that developed between Ireland and Croatia, we need only remember that it was during one Irish EU Presidency that Croatia gained admission to the Council of Europe and, during the last Irish Presidency, Dr. Sanader was again in Dublin when Croatia achieved candidate status for full membership of the European Union.

As Croatia advances towards full EU membership, it is important that we further strengthen and develop the links between our two countries. While all EU members share similar values, some also share certain self interests. In particular, close cooperation between the smaller members is in everyone's interest, adding as it does to the influence of the smaller countries but also assisting the larger states by facilitating cohesion and promoting stability.

The Irish Croatian Business Association decided to establish this series of lectures as a means of providing an annual focus for discussion and contact between Ireland and Croatia on matters of economic interest, as well as marking Dr. Čičin-Šain's own unique contribution to this process.

The Association has been greatly assisted in undertaking this initiative by the whole hearted encouragement of Croatia's current diplomats in Ireland, in particular Ambassador Veselko Grubišić, and Deputy Ambassador Antun Babić who, of course, is the Honorary Secretary of the Association. The Association is deeply grateful to the Croatian Embassy in Dublin for its support.

On behalf of the Association, I also wish to thank Ireland's Ambassador to Croatia for being here today. As a non-resident Ambassador himself, Ambassador McCabe will appreciate the difficulties

previously encountered by his Croatian counterparts but he is assisted by a very active Irish Honorary Consul who, by a strange coincidence, is none other one Dr. Čičin-Šain.

Above all, the Association is indebted to the National Bank of Croatia. In this case, it is not a cliché to say that, without the National Bank, this event would not be half the success it is going to be. Given the close connections between the National Bank of Croatia, the Central Bank of Ireland and the Irish Croatian Business Association, not to mention Dr. Čičin-Šain's own former role in the National Bank, we had reasonable, and indeed perhaps fairly high, expectations of support and assistance from the National Bank as regards hosting this event.

However, as it has transpired, the commitment of the National Bank of Croatia to this project from the moment it was first invited to participate has been truly astonishing.

On behalf of the Association, I wish to extend our sincere thanks to Governor Željko Rohatinski for all his assistance and support. In particular, I wish to thank Deputy Governor Tomislav Presečan whom I was privileged to work with on another project in the past but whose dedication to ensuring that this lecture was a success has led to him having made nearly as many Irish friends as perhaps Dr. Čičin-Šain himself.

I have no doubt but that today marks not only the culmination of one joint enterprise involving the National Bank and the Association but the starting point of many more.

Finally, I come to our guest speakers.

As the senior member of the Government of Croatia with responsibility for all the economic ministries, the Association is privileged that Deputy Prime Minister Polančec has agreed to deliver the response to this year's lecture. The successful management by government of the Croatian economy in the last few years is well known and we therefore look forward to Deputy Prime Minister Polančec's response with keen interest.

And so we come to Commissioner McCreevy.

It is a great personal pleasure for me and his other friends in the Irish Croatian Business Association that he agreed to deliver this lecture. As Minister for Finance in Dublin, he was always a great supporter of the Association and a good friend of Croatia.

Of course, he is perhaps more likely to be remembered from those days as the Minister for Finance who presided over the most successful economy in the European Union. During those years, a lot of imaginative policies were implemented, a lot of bold choices were made and a lot of tough decisions were taken - and stood over. Making some of those choices and standing over some of those decisions was often quite difficult and controversial. However, there is no doubt that Ireland's prosperity today is due in very significant part to his ability to make the right choice, almost invariably, and to stand over it, absolutely invariably.

While Minister for Finance, he was always acutely aware of the enormous significance of Ireland's membership of the European Union.

Now, as the Commissioner in charge of the internal market of the European Union, he is ideally placed to deliver an assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing Croatia as it moves towards that full membership of the European Union which has proved so successful for Ireland.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great honour to introduce Commissioner McCreevy.