

WITTY

LEAKS

IN THIS SERIES, DIPLOMATS SHARE PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES ON “EXCURSIONS” into Hungarian culture, art, gastronomy & scenery.



## SPORTS AND DIPLOMACY

‘CROATIA’S SOFT POWER OF FOOTBALL IN 2018: WHAT’S NEXT?’

BY MLADEN ANDRIĆ, AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

On July 15, 2018, while preparing, with my staff, the Croatian residence in Budapest for watching the 2018 FIFA World Cup finals with the Hungarian Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén and other distinguished guests including the newly appointed French Ambassador Pascale Andreani, I also thought of the success of our national team as a special asset – and additional contribution to Croatian perception and image.

The excellence in team sports favor the advantages of economy of volume, namely material and financial facilities, but mostly the population as a pool of talents to train for becoming top athletes. Although, not classified as such, and being the smallest country to play the finals since Uruguay in 1950, when only twelve teams were competing, Croatia obviously proved its skills, talents, commitment, dedication and even leadership in this very particular field.

In fact, this very success provided a unique opportunity to raise not only international but also global awareness of my country and its potentials, not only in sports, but also in economy, culture, tourism and landscapes. Being the member state of the EU and NATO, as well as at the geopolitical crossroads of Central and South-East Europe and the Mediterranean, Croatia has also achieved this splendid soft power asset and opportunity. Moreover, its football has enabled us to break the initial barriers of every modern marketing campaign: visibility and brand recognition.

### Croatian branding

An important additional element was the exposure and attitude of supporters of the team, but even more the heartfelt cheering of Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, who won the public eye both in Croatia and abroad. In the crowd of T- and white shirts and grey suits, she stood out in the national red and white dress even during the medals ceremony. The social media found her peculiarity refreshing, with more than 80% of mentions being positively intoned. Thus, the process of Croatian branding was supported effectively, making my job as a diplomat more complex but much easier. Successful diplomacy sometimes means being able to combine the achievements of your country with its promotion among fellow diplomats, creating an atmosphere of dialogue, tolerance, cooperation, friendship, support, joy and happiness.



That is how we felt each time when hosting ambassadors, other diplomats, representatives of Hungarian institutions and of Croatian community, while organizing events of watching together some of the matches during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. It was not only about football! It was even more about how it puts together different spirits and attitudes, through a variety of national foods and drinks, songs, but foremost the transmitting of positive feelings and vibes. The fact was also that small gifts of the Croatian Football Association, kindly provided by the Croatian MFA, were disappearing repeatedly in a moment after being offered.

### Joint viewing

On June 16, 2018, the Croatian Embassy organized the first event to watch the match of Croatia vs. Nigeria, in collaboration with the Nigerian Embassy. Watching it on a huge double video screen brought together more than fifty people, including ten ambassadors, other diplomats and high ranking guests. The event was co-hosted by Ambassador Eniola Olaitan Ajayi, who supported it with a picturesque presentation of authentic Nigerian food, which was accompanied by Croatian wines, beer and soft drinks. In our short

opening speeches, we emphasized that even the realizing of such an event means a victory in advance for both countries, bringing us together in the spirit of friendship and common understanding.

The second gathering of sport and diplomacy was held during the quarterfinals match between Croatia and Russia on July 7, at the same venue and this time co-organized with the Russian Embassy. In the absence of Russian Ambassador, I hosted this event with the charge d'affaires a.i. Valery Lyakhov. The attendance of ambassadors increased to 15, with Szabolcs Takács, State Secretary for EU Policies at the Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary, as our guest of honor. A variety of national foods and drinks were offered, from Russian piroshky and vodka to Croatian prosciutto and cheese.



### Street celebration

Entering the semi-finals also meant time for celebrating on the streets of Budapest. Driving proudly in our diplomatic cars, using horns and waving Croatian flags, we received unanimous support from the people walking the very center of the city after midnight. It was an amazing sensation and celebration of happiness, which we shared with Hungarian friends. Our already well-known polo shirts with squares were recognized wherever we passed, becoming the best promotion of Croatia that we could provide at that moment. The same enthusiastic spirit of promoting countries and sports continued at the semi-finals – Croatia vs. England, again at our residence, and this time co-hosted by the charge d'affaires a.i. Caitlin Jones from the British Embassy. Offering English whiskey and Croatian food, the rooms became almost too small for all those who wanted to attend. As the tournament continued, it became a sort of prestige to be part of this unique atmosphere. Achieving the greatest success of Croatian football ever, we wanted to share it with the whole world!

It became a reality: Croatia qualified for the final! Heroes' Square was the first stop of our celebration that continued further along Andrassy Avenue among tourists and residents of the Hungarian capital. We realized that 'the boys' became also the best ambassadors of our country. Even the British Ambassador, Iain Lindsay congratulated via e-mail from his vacation in Croatia at the island of Hvar! So, diplomacy is also about that!

### To be continued

It was like a dream come true: not so long before the World Cup, the promotional tourist video 'Croatia – full of life' was awarded best video of the year, and its invitation 'to take a Tour of Champions in the tiny country which dared to dream' became so vivid and close through these particular football-driven achievements. But, each and every story, even a fairy tale, comes to an end. The French team won the World Cup, but according to international media 'Croatia won the hearts of spectators around the globe'. Moreover, the captain of our team, Luka Modric became the first player ever to win the World Cup Golden Ball, the UEFA Player of the Year and the FIFA Player of the Year, all in the same year!

However, we will continue with and without sports, hoping to repeat somehow and somewhere such an event of joy, proud, hopes and happiness. Thus, we would go further here, there and everywhere, notwithstanding the forthcoming challenges from changing actors and factors of the international matrix, economic and political fluctuations, to the Brexit, illegal migration and forthcoming EP elections, just to mention a few. It seems I should stop here, but let me finish by quoting one of the most prominent modern thinkers, Sir Winston Churchill, who once mentioned that 'success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts'.