

A Minnesota Military Partnership National Guard unit has been working with Croatian defense forces since 1996

By Frank Vinko Mustac

The National Guards from about 20 American states are teamed with roughly an equal number of emerging democracies in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus under the auspices of the State Partnership Program.

As part of that program since 1996, the Minnesota National Guard has been cooperating with the Croatian military, having participated in more than 120 bilateral activities with the Croatian armed forces both in the United States and Croatia.

In a continuation of that ongoing relationship, the Croatian Ambassador to the United States Ivan Grdesic and the Embassy's Military Attache Lt Col. Damir Trzic traveled to Minneapolis in April for a two-day working visit with U.S. Gen. Larry Shellito of the Minnesota National Guard.

Accompanying the Croatian delegation for part of the stay was Croatian American businessman Boris Miksic.

Miksic, who is the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Croatia in St. Paul, Minn., recently announced his candidacy for the Croatian presidency, elections for which will take place in 2005.

"We talked to National Guard officials about cooperation," Grdesic said about the visit. "They provide expertise and help... specifically with the NATO Partnership for

Peace Program."

Gen. Shellito, Grdesic said, will be in Washington in June to take part in bilateral defense consultations between the United States and Croatian Defense Minister Berislav Roncevic will be part of a group of officials from Croatia who will attend.

"We have a very active bilateral military cooperation," Grdesic said.

The individual officer exchanges between Croatia and Minnesota over the years have provided individuals on the Croatian side with valuable insight into American military professionalism, Grdesic said. He added, however, that the program is a two-way street.

"Minnesota is interested in turning some of their artillery troops into peace keeping troops," Grdesic said. "They are looking into our expertise in peace keeping."

Croatia currently has about 60 troops attached to German military forces in Afghanistan. It also has contributed United Nations observers to Kashmir, East Timor and Sierra Leone.

"These are the top notch of the Croatian military," Grdesic said. "Many of them have war experience."

Grdesic said that during his trip, he also met with Croatian American Minnesota

state legislator Tom Rukavina (D) and Gov. Tim Pawlenty (R).

"I thanked the governor for his support of the Croatian American community. It's an old community, hard working," said Grdesic about the descendants of Croatian immigrants who came to work in the vast iron mines of Minnesota during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Col. Denny Shields, director of public affairs for the Minnesota National Guard, had high praise for the Croatian defense forces.

"Their military has been evolving over 12 years. It's just incredible how far they've come," Shields said. "My personal experiences have been extremely positive."

One of the individual officer exchanges during the summer of 2002, Shields said,



From left, Croatian Amb. to the U.S. Ivan Grdesic, Minnesota National Guard Gen. Larry Shellito, Croatian Embassy Military Attache Lt Col. Damir Trzic and Minnesota Croatian American Boris Miksic in Minneapolis.

brought Capt. Marijana Plesa-Cadonic to Minnesota. She is now one of the U.N. observers in Kashmir on the India-Pakistan border.

"We worked her into a couple of radio interviews to help promote the program," Shields said.