

Croatian man defiant in defeat

He lost presidential bid, eyes next move

BY MARY BAUER
Pioneer Press

Out of the hundreds of speeches Boris Miksic made in his quest for the presidency of Croatia, he skipped one.

"I never conceded," he said, "because I wasn't defeated."

Miksic is back at his North Oaks home, recuperating from the flu and an achingly close loss in the Croatian presidential election Jan. 4. President Stipe Mesic won Sunday's runoff against Jadranka Kosor, and Miksic is haunted by the belief that he should have been part of it.

"I feel cheated," he said from the office of his White Bear Township-based business, Cortec. "I'm so disappointed in the way it was handled. I'm trying to control my emotions a bit."

He mulls over details of his campaign and the oh-so-close

Croatian elections

(continued)

tally — only 2 percentage points separated him from the runoff — but reaches the same conclusion: The elections were rigged, an allegation dismissed by Croatian courts, the media and political analysts.

Miksic has also alleged ransacked campaign offices and threats on his life — a drama worthy, perhaps, of a Hollywood movie. He has fielded calls from a California producer fascinated by the story of a man who fled his country, got rich elsewhere and returned to nearly reclaim the presidency.

"I struck a nerve with people," Miksic said. "I showed (the government) up pretty good."

The Hollywood ending, however, is up in the air. He and his wife, Anna, came home a week ago as Croatia appeared to withdraw the welcome mat. Police in Zagreb threatened to charge Miksic with organizing illegal protests after the election. Mesic stripped him of his title as honorary Croatian consul to Minnesota because of insults leveled during the campaign.

Unflattering stories peppered the Croatian media during the past week, one erroneously alleging that the self-described advocate for the common man actually lives in a house once owned by Prince. Others focused on the breakup of his first marriage and ex-girlfriends.

Miksic shrugs. "I never said I was a perfect guy."

The most serious claims against a man who campaigned for more manufacturing jobs allege that Cortec is a distributor, not a manufacturer, and that Miksic's claims of his success are inflated.

The stories indicate that Croatian media have contacts in Minnesota digging up details on everything from how Miksic spends his free time to his rating with the

Better Business Bureau.

Voters who knew little about Miksic before the election are now hungry for details, said Lidija Knezevic, a reporter with a Zagreb radio station.

"He was definitely the biggest surprise of this election," she said through an interpreter from Zagreb. "And the ruling party, on election night when they thought he was second, everybody asked themselves, 'Oh, God, who voted for him?'"

The answer, they've since decided, were conservative-leaning members of their own party, Knezevic said.

Miksic said the adverse coverage is being fed by the government. Knezevic said the coverage was normal for a major presidential candidate, only reporters didn't know he was a player until after the election.

"He is a new face on our political scene, and he was running for president," she said.

But his claims of autonomy from any political apparatus resonated with voters, she said.

Which explains why Miksic is reconsidering plans to form a new political party in Croatia. The country has dozens of parties, some with as few as 250 members, he said.

"Being an independent is part of my brand," he said.

Miksic, who also ran for Croatia's parliament last year, had said the presidential race was his last bid for a Croatian office, but he has since changed his mind. In April, he said, he will run for mayor of Zagreb, one of his strongholds in the presidential election.

Knezevic warns he faces stiff competition from the current deputy mayor, Milan Bandic, an ambitious populist. To retain and build on his base, Miksic must face recent questions, she said.

"That could be a very feisty election," she said.

Miksic wouldn't have it any other way. As he continues to seek office in Croatia, he clings to an American motto: If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

"I'm not afraid. Business is a much tougher place to survive than politics. You have to take it as far as you can until something breaks."

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JOHN DOMAN, PIONEER PRESS

"I struck a nerve with people," North Oaks resident Boris Miksic said of his race for the Croatian presidency.