



**NATIONAL FEDERATION OF CROATIAN AMERICANS
CULTURAL FOUNDATION**

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January 18, 2012

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman
The Honorable Charles E. Grassley, Ranking Member
Judiciary Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Request Regarding the Visa Waiver Program Bill – S. 2046

Dear Senators Leahy and Grassley :

As President of the National Federation of Croatian Americans (NFCA), the Croatian American umbrella organization representing more than 130,000 Croatian Americans throughout the United States, we respectfully request that your Committee soon consider S. 2046, as introduced by Senators Barbara Mikulski and Mark Kirk. Please act expeditiously on this bill, also known as the Visa Waiver Program Enhanced Security and Reform Act of 2012, and report the bill to the Full Senate for consideration.

The NFCA has continued to remain a staunch supporter of the Republic of Croatia and the building of ever-closer relations between Croatia and the United States. This includes the bipartisan support developed in the US Congress for Croatia's accession to NATO several years ago, which is particularly remembered and appreciated by Croatian Americans.

S. 2046 is another crucial milestone for the growing relationship between our two countries. The Visa Waiver Program Enhanced Security and Reform Act of 2012 would enable Croatia to join the **Visa Waiver Program (VWP)**. While Croatia is not requiring visas for Americans, the U.S. requires Croatians to have visas when traveling to America.

As part of the current VWP, citizens of 36 foreign countries can travel to the United States for up to 90 days without a visa. To be admitted to the VWP, a country must meet various security and other requirements. These matters understandably include enhanced law enforcement and counterterrorism, ramped up security-related data sharing with the United States, and timely reporting of both blank and issued lost and stolen passports.

Croatia is in full compliance with these conditions having not only entered into all the relevant arrangements with US government departments and agencies, but the Croatian government has already started their implementation. In this regard, Croatia is ahead of many present or potential VWP members, thus enhancing American homeland security.

However, Croatia has been excluded from the VWP because of a visa refusal rate slightly higher than the one prescribed by current legislation. At present, 5.3% of Croatians are denied visas and 3% is the present threshold. In absolute numbers it comes only to several hundred refused visa applications, not thousands or tens of thousands! It should be noted that many countries joined the VWP when that threshold was set significantly higher, which was then 10%.

The Visa Waiver Program Enhanced Security and Reform Act changes this qualifying criterion by abandoning visa refusal rates and introducing overstay rates, allowing countries with an overstay rate of less than 3% to be included in the VWP. As significantly fewer than 3% of Croatians who come to America stay longer than allowed on their visas, Croatia would be entitled to join the VWP.

Croatia is one of America's greatest allies in NATO and is fighting alongside the United States in Afghanistan. In fact, Minnesota, as Croatia's partnership state in the US, has its National Guardsmen operating under Croatian command in Afghanistan and vice versa. Croatia is one of the main US partners in South East Europe and will soon join the European Union. However, Croatian citizens cannot enter the United States without a visa thus creating a sentiment among many of being a second-class ally.

As President of the National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation, I respectfully request that your Committee express its support for the Republic of Croatia to be included in the Visa Waiver Program and report out the bill to the Full Senate for consideration as soon as possible.

If the NFCA may be of additional assistance on this important matter for Croatia, please have a member of your staff contact NFCA Executive Vice President Zvonko Labas at the address and telephone noted above.

Thank you.

Bill Vergot
President

BV:jpf

CC:

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)
The Honorable Mark Steven Kirk (R-IL)
The Honorable Mark Begich (D-AK), cosponsor
The Honorable Roy Blunt (R-MO), cosponsor
The Honorable Sherrod Brown (D-OH), cosponsor
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), cosponsor