

The CIVIC Citizen

The Council for International Visitors to Iowa Cities

By MATTHEW STEELE

Matthew, a CIVIC volunteer, is a reporter for the newsletter. He is also an anthropology and art major at the University of Iowa. In the article that follows, he describes what he learned from a visit, and his hopes for the potential influence of the visitors on their country.

Early in the summer, the Council for International Visitors was privileged to host two distinguished visitors from the ex-Yugoslavian nation of Montenegro. The main objective of their trip was to observe American volunteerism and NGOs in action, hoping to pick up new ideas to take home that could help their, and other, groups improve in basic areas like organizational structure, managerial techniques, defining strategic goals, and optimizing fundraising capacity.

I looked forward to meeting the two of them because, from where I sit, it is difficult to discern the nature of Montenegrin independence. Most political maps indicate Serbia-Montenegro, and many news items make no mention of Montenegro as a sovereign entity. Montenegro does have its own Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic, and Serbia does as well, in Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic. However the name that is likely to show up more often in the American media is that of President Svetozar Marovic, the leader of a political entity called Serbia-Montenegro which, our two visitors say, exists only in the hearts of United States and European Union leaders, and possesses virtually no power over-- or even recognition from-- the peoples of either nation.

Montenegro is a small country (population about 650,000, sitting on about 13,812 square miles, mostly of mountains), which is ethnically and linguistically distinct, with a strong reputation for fiercely defending their independence. To this day Montenegro has never been conquered in battle, even having defended themselves against the armies of Napoleon. They lost their independence in the months immediately following the end of World War I (a war in which Montenegrins fought side by side with American allies). While their entire military force was held captive, Montenegro was occupied by French directed Serbian troops, and annexed, unofficially in 1917 (this was rejected by American President Woodrow Wilson with fierce...rhetoric), and officially in 1922, officially becoming a part of the new Yugoslavia.

After seventy years as a unified nation there was, and still is, sadness over the fallen Yugoslavia. But this is offset by optimism: for a new beginning, and for the reclamation of a nearly forgotten identity. The Montenegrins do not want to miss this opportunity to earn the respect of independent recognition, which they feel has been owed to them for many years.

Our two visitors are both leaders in Montenegro's ongoing effort to ensure the development of a democracy that can act as a model to the rest of the ailing Balkans. Mr Zlatko Vojovic, Director of CEMI The Monitoring Center (a very successful election monitoring service that acts as a watch dog to prevent election tampering), is hard at work drafting legislation to regulate campaign financing, and campaign coverage in the media, in addition to overseeing the actual voting process itself. Their record is impressive, and the legitimacy of the Montenegrin election process is providing a solid basis for future lobbying for EU recognition, which admittedly remains a far off goal.

Ms Jadranka Vojvodic, Program Manager for the United States Agency for International Development Montenegro Advocacy Program (USAID MAP), spoke with me at length about another element of the new Montenegro, which she hopes will further distinguish them from their neighbors as a model for rebuilding throughout the region. The Montenegrin constitution declares their Republic a "Constitutionally Ecological State" (<http://www.montenet.org/econ/ecostate.htm>). Naturally, as an environmentalist, this caught my eye, but I had to admit that I had no idea what it meant. Her answer was very simple: considering the fact that the infrastructure of their former economy-- with respect to energy and resources, among other aspects including tourism-- had now collapsed, they had a large task to rebuild, which was to be taken as an opportunity to improve. Considering the fact that they are a small population with only two major city centers that rests on an extraordinary piece of land on the Adriatic Sea, it is viewed as a reasonable and equitable undertaking to rebuild their infrastructure in the most environmentally sustainable way possible.

Although news from this area has been pushed aside of late, it is well known that the Balkan region needs a model of sustainable democracy. Also, it is quite clear that the world needs a model for ecologically conscientious development. Each of these tasks is fairly daunting, but the attitude I perceived from conversations with Mr Vojovic and Ms Vojvodic was very positive. The recounting of their experiences through intensive social and political transitions was nothing short of inspirational to me, and I am eagerly following the progress of their challenging, and globally significant, tasks. Thank you to CIVIC for providing me with such an excellent opportunity to meet and engage with these two people.

Looking forward to more visitors,
Matthew Steele

Recommended readings:

CEMI The Monitoring Center: www.cemi.cg.yu

USAID/Ort Montenegro Advocacy Program: www.ortmap.org

The Crime of the Peace Conference, by Whitney Warren