

Postovani gosti,

Dobro vecher i dobro dosli na proslavu dana republike indije.

Hvala vam puno na dolasku

H.E. Mr. Stjepan Mesic, former President of Croatia,
H.E. Mr. Ivo Josipovic, former President of Croatia,
Hon'ble State Secretaries,
Hon'ble Members of Parliament,
Hon'ble Members of the European Parliament,
Hon'ble Mayors & Deputy Mayors,
Diplomatic Colleagues,
Heads of Religious Organizations,
Dear Guests and friends of India,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My wife, Ananya, and I have great pleasure in extending a very warm welcome to each and every one of you. It is our privilege to host this event for the second time in Zagreb.

As many of you are aware, January 26 marks the anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950, and its celebration every year is an affirmation of the thriving democracy that is India.

The past year has truly been a watershed in our bilateral relations with Croatia. Many of you present here this evening have been fellow travellers on this journey, but I think it is an opportune time to take a relook at some of its images and relive the intensity of activities across Croatia.

The highlight was the first State visit by the President of India to Croatia, accompanied by the largest Indian business delegation ever to visit this country. We are grateful to the President of Croatia, and to its people, for awarding its highest civilian award 'The Grand Order of King Tomislav' to our President. It is of some satisfaction that the decisions taken during the visit are being implemented in a timely manner.

An important announcement during this visit, coinciding with the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the global apostle of peace, was the gift of his bust to the people of Croatia. We are thankful to the Prime Minister of Croatia, and to the Mayor of Zagreb, for unveiling this first ever bust of Mahatma Gandhi in Croatia on his 150th birth anniversary on October 2 at Bundek.

I am happy that it has already become a new landmark in Zagreb and we hope it will inspire future generations with the lasting message of Mahatma Gandhi. Numerous other events throughout the year were also held to commemorate Gandhi@150. My special thanks to our partners, particularly the Academy of Fine Arts.

Another component of our bilateral activities was the year-long Festival of India in Croatia. Apart from the special music and dance troupes that flew in from India specifically for this Festival, other events were also held across Croatia with local support.

I do hope all of you will take advantage of the final element of this Festival – the Food Festivals in this very hotel and in Hotel Park in Split, in mid-February.

The year also marked the 550th birth anniversary of the Guru Nanak, the religious head of Sikh community, and I am happy that their sacred religious text, the Guru Granth Sahib, was brought to Croatia for the first time.

Our annual celebration of International Day of Yoga continued to be a success with large participation in 40 cities across Croatia. A special development was the approval by the University of Zagreb of Yoga as an elective course. We look forward to an even larger celebration of Yoga Day this year.

It is wonderful that more and more Croatians have found it useful to avail of the skill upgradation scholarships that we offer under our ITEC programme.

Tourists from India to Croatia continued to increase to nearly 70,000 during 2019. We hope to see a similar increase in Croatians visiting India, now that we have further simplified our online e-visa system.

Collaboration in sports also intensified significantly, but more on this later.

Constraints of time do not permit a comprehensive listing of all the activities that we undertook last year. But I have no doubt that these events would not have been as successful without the unstinting support from Friends of India. I would also like to thank the Indology Department of the University of Zagreb for their continued partnership, and I am happy to announce that we will shortly be filling up the post of Sanskrit Chair, which was announced during our President's visit.

The last year also saw tremendous changes in India. The world's largest democracy, with around 900 million voters, voted back to power the government led by Prime

Minister Narendra Modi with an even larger mandate. Some of you were part of our event to observe the live counting of results!

Sadly, we were subject to continued terrorist attacks, but our resolve to protect our citizens was demonstrated clearly.

India's economic growth and its quest to become a US\$ 5 trillion economy by 2025 continues, despite a temporary slowdown. Our ease of doing business ranking jumped again by 14 places last year. We are happy that Indian investments here now generate jobs more than 400 Croatians.

Amazing changes are taking place in India. Let me list just two recent news – the largest solar power park in the world has just become operational in India. And new chipsets by Qualcomm for smartphones will now also use India's satellite navigation system NavIC. Clearly, the new India holds much promise.

In the international arena, India continues to extend its hand of friendship to all, particularly the European Union, which is a strategic partner. Our shared values of democracy, pluralism and the rule of law are the lodestars of our partnership. In this context, we are delighted that Croatia has assumed the presidency of the European Union and we wish it the very best in the discharge of this important responsibility.

I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate the city of Rijeka for being a Cultural Capital of Europe for 2020. I am happy to announce that a special troupe from India will take part in this year's Rijeka Carnival.

I am also pleased to announce that we will be supporting the Archeological Museum of Zagreb in their celebration of India Year during 2020.

I am confident that last year has set the template for a renewed vigour in our bilateral relations. We look forward to continuing to work with our Croatian partners to make our shared dreams a reality.

As I always say, Indija e Hrvatska zajedno rastemo.

Hvala. Thank you.