

Croatia Unfazed by Skier's 'Pro-Nazi' Remarks

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Nationalists back skier whose apparently right-wing comments provoked outrage abroad.

A ski champion's seemingly admiring remarks about Hitler's invasion of Russia has garnered more praise than criticism at home.

After winning a slalom race in Kranjska Gora, Slovenia, in mid-January, 24-year-old Ivica Kostelic attributed his victory to the fact that he had been "as ready as a German soldier on June 22, 1941" on the day of the race.

Although Kostelic - brother of Janica Kostelic, winner of four medals (including three golds) at the last Olympic Games in Salt Lake City - later played down his words, claiming they were taken out of context, many observers interpreted them as support for Operation Barbarossa, the assault on the Soviet Union in 1941 that caused the deaths of millions.

Only a few days later, the Zagreb weekly *Nacional* ran excerpts from an interview he is said to have given the magazine last May, which contained pro-Nazi remarks. In the piece, Kostelic spoke of his fascination with the German Third Reich, saying at one point that "Nazism was a healthy system".

He is reported to have said that both Nazi and Communist systems were totalitarian, but Hitler did not kill his generals every day and only executed those plotting to assassinate him, "That is the big difference, and I would do the same if I were a dictator. Stalin, on the other hand, killed one general a day, even his friends."

The skier's most recent comments were carried on a number of foreign news agencies, provoking widespread condemnation abroad.

The Alliance of Social Democratic Fighters of Austria, a World War Two veterans organisation, immediately urged a ban on Kostelic's participation in all Austrian sporting competitions. Some of Kostelic's sponsors, including Austria's Hypo Bank, also said they wanted an explanation and an apology.

"Austria is particularly sensitive about Nazism," the bank's chairman, Heinz Truskaller, explained. "The furore that Kostelic's statement made in Croatia is not as nearly as great as it was in Austria."

Apparently realising the threat his remarks posed to his own financial support, Kostelic apologised, claiming they were a clumsy metaphor made "under the influence of a war movie" he had watched a few days earlier.

"Neither I nor any member of my family is in any way involved in Nazism. Both I personally and my family loathe Nazism and see it as one of the greatest evils in the history of the world," Kostelic told the Croatian news agency HINA. He added that he "most sincerely" apologised for the hurt he had caused.

However, a few days before his son's outburst in Kranjska Gora, Kostelic's father Ante, who is coach to both Janica and Ivica, made equally bizarre comments that were seemingly racist in an interview with the

weekly magazine, Globus. Kostelic senior said he thought the Croatian president "ought to have blue eyes" whereas the country now had a head of state - Stipe Mesic - who resembled a "porcupine".

In spite of their strange and unsavoury content, the remarks of the Kostelic duo have caused little stir in Croatia beyond the ranks of a few intellectuals, commentators and journalists. Instead, several right-wing and centre-right politicians gave the Kostelics their full support.

Drazen Budisa, leader of the Croatian Social Liberal Party, HSLs, which recently quit the governing centre-left coalition of Ivica Racan, claimed the Kostelics were victims of a media campaign being waged against them for the disparaging remarks about President Mesic. Josko Kontic, a deputy from the HSLs party in the Croatian parliament, added, "Ante Kostelic would make a better prime minister than Racan and most of the Croatian politicians."

The country's right-wing war veterans' associations also supported the Kostelics. Ex-fighters from Sinj, in Dalmatia, claimed the skiing family was being "pursued" by what they called "foreign elements who cannot accept the fact that a small country has such good sportsmen".

Many of Croatia's sportsmen, including football players and the famous tennis player Goran Ivanisevic, are well known for their nationalist views.

In July 2001, Ivanisevic and the entire national football team signed a petition asking the government to release General Mirko Norac, indicted for war crimes and currently standing trial in Rijeka.

Expressing the anger felt by a minority, Mirjana Krizmanic, a psychology professor at Zagreb University, said she was "bothered by the lack of any reaction from society. I wonder why people don't get shocked when Ivica says he felt like a German soldier on the day Operation Barbarossa started".

Krizmanovic added that it was possible people were indifferent because "they think the right will return to power one day, so why expose yourself to future unpleasantness".

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