

## **Bosnia: Convict May Govern Town he Ethnically Cleansed**

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Bosnian Serb war criminal hopes to be elected mayor on a multi-ethnic reconciliation ticket.

Simo Zaric is a mayoral candidate with a vision of his hometown as a thriving place where Serbs, Muslims and Croats can live together in peace and harmony, building a better future for their war-torn community.

What sets his bid apart is the fact that he is a former Bosnian Serb intelligence officer who was sentenced to six years imprisonment in The Hague for ethnically cleansing the very same place he now plans to govern - Bosanski Samac.

Voters in this north-west Bosnian town, population 24,000, will go to the polls on October 2, to choose a new mayor, and Zaric is confident that he, as the Socialist Party candidate, will be chosen regardless of his past.

His four rivals for the top job are also Serbs. Bosanski Samac was thoroughly cleansed of its 33,000 Croats and Muslims from 1991-93 and only around 1,600 refugees have since come home - too few to have any serious voting power.

Zaric, a vigorous man in his early fifties, with close-cropped grey hair and a lively gaze through his tinted glasses, sits in his son's café in the centre of town and reflects on his unusual bid for office over a cup of coffee.

Zaric told IWPR that he first decided to enter politics following his release from the tribunal's detention unit in January. While Bosnian law bars inmates, indictees and fugitives from voting or running for office, former convicts are allowed to do so.

From the outset, Zaric has campaigned on the need to rebuild a multi-ethnic Samac, stressing the need to "apologise" to the victims of the war, and calling on them to return.

But he also believes he could be able to give a much-needed kick to the local economy, which has been all but extinct for the last decade.

"I feel capable of getting this municipality out of its crisis," he said, describing his hometown as "completely dead".

"The pavements have been destroyed, there are no lights anywhere, the ecology is a catastrophe. The whole place is a garbage dump," he sighed.

Nine years after the end of the war, Bosanski Samac is a sorry sight. Its streets are narrow and filled with potholes, which probably fuel the main economic activity here - car repair workshops that specialise in patching up damaged exhaust pipes, and roadside restaurants serving roasted lamb to those waiting for their cars to be fixed.

Most of the two-storey Austro-Hungarian buildings are crumbling, with sheets of shredded plastic flapping from their missing windows. The only new additions to the town are a garishly painted hotel and a monument to Serb casualties during the war.

Attracting foreign investment, said Zaric, is the only way to improve things. But when asked if overseas businessmen might become skittish about putting their money into a town led by a convicted war criminal, he waved dismissively.

“I know my worth as a man,” he said. “If I’d done anything wrong it wouldn’t cross my mind to stick my nose in politics. And if I were guilty – if I were – I have done my time.”

Zaric surrendered willingly to the tribunal in 1998, saying that it was the best way to prove his innocence. But judges concluded that he had known of the torture and beatings suffered by Muslim and Croat prisoners in the town’s many detention centres during the war - because he had personally interrogated many of them and heard their complaints.

And while the prosecutors failed to prove he ordered the mistreatment of non-Serb civilians, the court ruled that he had given encouragement and moral support to those who had. He was sentenced to six years in prison as “an aider and abettor of persecutions”.

While in detention, Zaric wrote a book about his trial and his life in prison, *On The Hague Crucifix*, and said he entertained his fellow inmates with his violin-playing and singing of Serb folk songs.

He has maintained his innocence throughout, claiming that the case against him was “rigged” by prosecution witnesses who had allegedly been briefed by the Bosnian security services.

In spite of his conviction, Zaric believes that more indictees should follow his example and turn themselves over for trial in The Hague. He called on his former political leader Radovan Karadzic – the tribunal’s most-wanted fugitive indictee who has evaded justice for nearly a decade - to stop “tainting the name of the Serb people” and surrender to the tribunal.

“That’s my message to those who are hiding in the woods – if you’re such a great Serb, show yourself and don’t hold [your own] people hostage,” he said.

But on the eve of the election, IWPR found little evidence that Zaric has been able to convince the Muslim and Croat returnees that his intentions are good.

Sulejman Ceribasic, who fled to Germany in 1992 and returned home eight years later to rebuild his life and his business – a petrol station, told IWPR that he had known Zaric well before the war.

“But before the war was something else entirely,” he said, guardedly. “He was a good man then.”

In spite of a muted response from the area’s returnees, Zaric still maintains high hopes for winning. He claims that he has won support from moderate political parties, and may voters disillusioned with the ruling Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, which has been in power for 13 years.

“I’m a big optimist,” he said cheerfully. “Here we are, nearly ten years after the Dayton Agreement, and the SDS is still talking about ‘Serbdom’. They have their heads in the clouds!”

Beth Kampschror is an IWPR contributor in Sarajevo.

**Location:** Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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