

## **Bosnian Serb Leaders Attack Mladic**

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While RS politicians are increasingly open in their criticism of the general, some say they are only trying to pass the buck.

Leaders of the Republika Srpska, RS, are trying to take advantage of the potential surrender or arrest of General Ratko Mladic to absolve the leading party of responsibility for war crimes, local analysts claim.

The last few weeks have seen a series of public attacks on the general's name by former allies in the ranks of the ruling Serbian Democratic Party, SDS.

Mladic-watchers argue that the Bosnian Serb government has shifted its position on the fugitive general's continuing freedom, largely under pressure from Serbia.

But they also say the real aim of the RS authorities is not to see Mladic arrested but to absolve their own party of all blame for the crimes committed in the 1992-1995 war.

Mladic has been on the run since the war ended and the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague has indicted him for genocide over events in Srebrenica in July 1995, when his forces executed about 8,000 Bosniak men and boys.

Despite the evidence unearthed so far about Mladic's role in the war, the former general remains much respected in the Serb entity of Bosnia and Hercegovina.

A survey conducted this April, almost ten years after his indictment, showed 60 per cent of respondents in the RS regarded him as a hero.

"These numbers have only slightly decreased since the footage of the Scorpions killing Srebrenica civilians was broadcast," Srdjan Puhalo, director of Partner agency, which conducted the survey, told BCR.

Puhalo was referring to the video released by the Hague court, which showed members of an elite Serbian paramilitary unit executing six Bosniaks in cold blood in 1995.

But if the public mood has barely shifted, the political leadership of RS has become more flexible.

After a decade of silence over the atrocities committed under Mladic's command, they have recently altered their position.

In a statement last month, the RS deputy prime minister and interior minister, Tomislav Kovac, insisted Mladic conducted the military operation in Srebrenica on his own and without the prior approval of the RS government.

"I clashed with Ratko Mladic as early as 1992 as I realised he would not cooperate with or observe any

rules of combat engagement concerning civilians and their treatment in war,” said Kovac.

Soon afterwards, RS general Manojlo Milovanovic, a former defence minister, broke four years of silence to criticise his former commander.

Milovanovic lambasted Mladic for having “not surrendered to the court in The Hague 10 years ago in order to protect all of us who had been around him.

“I believe 17 high-ranking generals and officers have gone to The Hague because Mladic wasn’t there.”

Branko Todorovic, director of the RS Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, said such comments were intended to create the impression that “Mladic’s biggest victim was the Serbian Democratic Party”.

Todorovic damned Kovac’s statement as “a pathetic attempt [by the SDS bosses] to disassociate themselves from the policy designed by the party, of which Mladic was only one of the prominent executors”.

He added, “I wonder why Kovac didn't speak up – if not in 1993, then in 1996 - but instead kept quiet to this day.

“The explanation is that Mladic, like any other war commander, was part of the criminal network created within the political circles of the SDS.”

Todorovic also suggested that the recent statements of the SDS party leadership had been synchronised with a view to passing as much blame as possible on to Mladic.

“Through people like Kovac and Milovanovic, they are spreading a story about a psychologically unstable general who was in conflict with the SDS,” he said.

Aleksandar Sekulovic, a Banja Luka-based analyst, agreed. “Various people with different interests are talking about Mladic but the objective seems to be the same,” he said, “which is to dissociate themselves from Mladic's wartime actions and so [exonerate] themselves with respect to everything done wrong in the war.”

Miodrag Zivanovic, a professor at the Banja Luka Faculty of Philosophy, told BCR that the “anti-Mladic campaign” was not indicative of a genuine determination to arrest the general, or any other perpetrators of atrocities.

“This fuss about Mladic is a cheap show directed by the ruling elite whose only concern is to preserve its positions in power,” he said.

Whether the rhetorical shift is genuine or not, the RS political elite will find it hard to shift popular opinion of the runaway general in the same direction.

A poll by BCR on the streets of Banja Luka, the capital of the RS, showed support for Mladic was as strong

as ever.

Vojislav, an RS army captain, said Mladic had only obeyed orders. "I know how we soldiers act," he said. "Everything Mladic did was on orders issued by [RS president] Radovan Karadzic."

Radojka Markovic, a civil servant whose brother was killed serving in the RS army, said Mladic was the last person who should go to The Hague.

"Were it not for him, there would be no Serbs left in these parts," she said.

Milos, a geography student, agreed. "Mladic showed the Muslims that they couldn't do what they pleased in Bosnia," he said. "If he had been in charge, we'd now be part of Serbia. He would never have betrayed us like the other politicians."

Irrespective of whether Mladic ends up in the dock, such views look unlikely to change, at least while the SDS remains the dominant political force.

"As long as it has the support of the electorate, we'll stay where we are now," said Todorovic.

Gordana Katana is a regular BCR contributor from Banja Luka.

**Location:** Serbia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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