

Comment: I Know Who Killed Bulatovic

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The death of a defence minister has raised the question: Who rules Serbia?

The death of a single individual no longer constitutes a tragedy here. In today's Serbia, the death of anyone, no matter how important, is just another statistic.

A reporter dies - it is just a drastic form of censorship. A businessman is liquidated - it is just the Serbian custom of dividing the spoils. A politician is killed - it is just a payback for a broken promise to a businessman.

But what does it mean when a defence minister is killed?

Speculation over the culprits has been rife, with Albanian radicals and Montenegrin separatists suspected. The most likely perpetrator of the Bulatovic job, however, may be a private internal grouping - a secret brotherhood - combining that special Serbian mix of political, business and security interests stirred up through a decade of war and black-market profiteering.

There is no evidence pointing to Albanians, who would probably not put Bulatovic first on their list anyway, and Montenegrins have never been so rash.

The aim of the Bulatovic assassination, if it is indeed a Serbian group, is clear - namely to raise the question of who, in fact, rules Serbia?

The state's monopoly control on physical violence has been destroyed. The decade's violence and hatred has been brought home. Now every Serb is at risk of summary judgement by some hidden source of power, which passes only one, incontestable ruling.

With these power groups, there will be no negotiation. The killers eliminate people according to their own criteria and act with a complete lack of fear or hesitation. The indicted are provided with no judge, no jury, no attorney and no right to appeal. The death of the accused, evidently, is merely the cheapest and surest variant of achieving one's aims, whether to protect business interests, revenge a betrayal or simply defend honour or reputation.

Everyone is fair game. After Bulatovic, there are no immortals, no untouchables, no protected family names. No one involved in the creation of this latest Serbia has been absolved of paying their dues.

The killers are looking beyond the current regime. They are staking out their turf, and establishing contacts with those who could form part of some new Serbian government. Such groups, rejected by their former patrons, may even offer support for the opposition during a turbulent transfer of power - to expiate their sins, secure their assets and legitimise themselves as businessmen who came up from the underground.

Bulatovic's tragedy is to have served as the bearer of this message. He was known as a large and gentle man, temperate in his politics and accommodating - the kind of person who would always lend a hand when he could. He liked to sit with friends, relaxing in cafes, drinking and holding his own. Eschewing that essential symbol of all prominent Serbs, even generals, Bulatovic went about town without a bodyguard,

and indeed died with no one to protect him.

Rare among Montenegrins, he did not display great ambition. Those who knew him say he was mobilised for all his high positions, rather than actively seeking them. Having served as a pliable federal police chief, he may have been called to his new position by Milosevic to pull the army together again after several years of internal tensions.

Media reports have stressed that he was the uncle of Darko Asanin, an underworld figure murdered in 1998. Yet Asanin made a career for himself, such as it was, well before his uncle. He had already become rich, reached the pinnacle of the kitsch, moneyed and violent world of Yugoslavia, while Bulatovic was still a petty professor in Podgorica.

Some fact may emerge to provide a definite motive. But until then, the inscrutability of the case may itself be the clue. A seemingly senseless killing with a very sharp message that will not go unnoticed by those who matter.

But for the rest, Bulatovic will pass. In any European state, the assassination of a defence minister would cause a storm. In a Serbia anaesthetised by evil, the story will last a week. After a decade of hatred and thievery, the collapse of the state and nearly every institution within it, all that is left is indifference. The struggle against the New World Order, the heroic reconstruction, the historical mission - all are in vain, and Serbia itself is now a great morgue, in which the barely alive bewail the recently dead.

It is in this environment that such a secret brotherhood can thrive. Violence has been introduced into every form of public life: politics, economics, the media, the judicial system, hospitals, schools, the street, elections, the cafe, the hotel. Damned and despairing, we Serbs merely stand in line. The news of Bulatovic is that there is no other choice. Behind every success, all wealth and power, the henchman is there, and his judgement awaits.

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