

Comment: Milosevic the Peacemaker

Author: [Adam LeBor](#)

Testimony of former EU negotiator recalls the West's unedifying efforts to bring an end to the Balkan wars.

Lord David Owen's lacklustre testimony at the trial of Slobodan Milosevic is an embarrassing reminder of how the international community for years bolstered the Serbian leader as the only man who could bring peace to the former Yugoslavia.

Testifying as a court witness this week, the ex-British foreign secretary and European Union negotiator sought to portray Milosevic as a potential peacemaker. "I believe you wanted peace from April 1993 onwards," said Lord Owen.

He lamented Milosevic's failure to sufficiently pressurise the Bosnian Serbs to accept peace plans, "I wish you had made your verbal support for peace into military and economic pressures which could have brought about peace earlier."

Milosevic as peacemaker is certainly an original take on the man who ran Serbia from the late Eighties to October 2000. During his time in power, hundreds of thousands lost their lives, and two million their homes, as a peaceful multi-national federation was deliberately destroyed.

The defendant impoverished his own people by wrecking the economy, and created a new class of gangsters and criminals. His policies set in motion events that led to the expulsion of the centuries-old Serb communities in Krajina, Kosovo and parts of Bosnia.

Yet all through the years of war and destruction, Milosevic was courted by dignitaries such as Lord Owen. In March 1994, the latter took a helicopter trip along the Danube together with his wife, to join Milosevic and his wife Mira Markovic at one of Tito's former retreats. There, the two couples enjoyed a long and companionable lunch. In his memoirs, *Balkan Odyssey*, Lord Owen recalls he suspected Milosevic of "playing the nationalist card".

In a recent interview with Mira Markovic, I asked her about her guest's remarkable powers of perception. "I told Lord Owen, 'You can be sure that my husband is not a nationalist, because, if he was, I could not live with him. I am the main guarantee to you that Sloba is not a nationalist. We have the same political opinions. We cannot have different political opinions and live together'," she insisted.

Certainly, Markovic warmed to Lord Owen, "He left an impression of a very civilised and cultured person, close to me in many things regarding the war in Yugoslavia itself, and in general questions of civilisation. It was an easy conversation. He was absolutely close to my stance."

It is perhaps unfair to focus on Lord Owen. Throughout the early Nineties, a stream of international envoys and dignitaries made the great trek to Belgrade, to sit on Milosevic's sofa and appear on Serbian state television, nodding thoughtfully at his latest peace proposals.

This at a time when the then Serbian leader's central role in the Yugoslav wars was known to high-level officials. The prosecution's pre-trial brief is full of telephone taps and intercepts that record his intimate knowledge of the events on the battlefields.

The curious appeal of Milosevic for the diplomatic great and good significantly boosted his standing domestically and internationally.

Tibor Varady, Yugoslav minister of justice in the short-lived pro-western government of Milan Panic, recalled, "I am not entitled to guess their motives, but for western diplomats speaking with Milosevic was some kind of achievement. It was very important for their careers to have negotiated with this mighty, ruthless ruler. To say 'I was there with [Yugoslav prime minister] Kotic', well, who on earth is Kotic? But Milosevic, that was more manly as well. Diplomats are also human."

Eventually in Washington, London and other European capitals, the penny dropped. As one western diplomat told me, "Of course we all knew he was the biggest part of the problem right from the outset. But what took longer for us to get was that he could never ever also be part of the solution."

Markovic clearly believed that he would. "Now the Hague prosecution is saying that he did this in 1991 and 1992 and so on," she told me. " [But at Dayton] the West treated him as their ally, and as a factor of stability and peace in the Balkans. They should be grateful to my husband for the Dayton peace accords and they well know that."

Milosevic: A Biography, by Adam LeBor, is published in paperback by Bloomsbury UK, and in Dutch by Balans.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Serbia

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/comment-milosevic-peacemaker>