

## **Comment: Towards A Post-Milosevic Era**

**Author:** IWPR

Serbia is in shock and will inevitably see the indictment of Milosevic as part of the NATO attack. But in the task of renewing the country, it is in fact a lifeline.

The indictment of Slobodan Milosevic and four of his closest associates marks a historic moment for the Serbian people. But it also presents them with a crucial challenge: Serbia now needs to look inward to consider the issue of its responsibility for a decade of atrocities in the Balkans.

For the first time in a legal setting, and with the imprimatur of the United Nations Security Council which established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the true nature of the Greater Serbian programme has been laid bare.

There is no equalising, no relativising, no excuses. The indictment charges the head of state, the head of the republic, the commander of the army, the Interior Minister, and another senior deputy. It lists the names of 340 Albanians killed in incidents in March and April in Kosovo and refers to the systematic deportation by the state of more than 740,000 of its own citizens. As investigations continue, the charge sheet will surely be amended and expanded. The list of victims, and of the accused, will grow.

But even these tragedies are only the culmination of a policy of aggressive nationalism which brought the destruction of Yugoslavia and war, massacres and expulsions for a decade. It also fuelled rival nationalisms elsewhere in the region, blocked economic development and impacted the course of regional and international relations.

Milosevic was elected head of state three times. During this time, most opposition attacked the regime for its failure to achieve Greater Serbian aims, rather than the fundamental goals themselves or even the horrible means used. The issue of electoral and media manipulation aside, all those in Serbia who lent support to the regime, to the broader ruling establishment and to the implementation of its designs are, to different degrees, also implicated--politically, if not criminally.

As such, this is indeed an indictment not of the Serbian people as a whole but of the extremist programme so many subscribe to.

This will not be easy to come to terms with. It is an extraordinary circumstance for a country to have its sitting president indicted for war crimes. How did he get there? How long will he stay? No society could handle such a deep question readily, especially at a time of war.

The leadership in Belgrade will reject the indictment as merely another weapon in the West's propaganda arsenal. It will deride the court as "Madeleine's tribunal", referring to US Secretary of State Albright. It will also mock it: Deputy Prime Minister Vojislav Seselj, leader of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, has even joked that he was offended by the indictment of so many of his senior colleagues since his name had been omitted.

More seriously, the regime will paint the tribunal generally and this charge in particular as a collective indictment of the Serbian nation-"Yet more proof that the world is against us". This fits in neatly with the heavy propaganda about the NATO bombing campaign. And it continues long-standing arguments, even from representatives of the democratic opposition, that the court is not about international law and justice but about criminalising all Serbs.

These responses are unfortunate and in the short-term damaging. Rammed home through the regime-controlled media, they prevent people from confronting the reality of the Greater Serbian programme, and the truth about what it continues to do in Kosovo in their name.

But such a rejection of the tribunal should be taken seriously, and addressed with care rather than derision. Having reached such a critical moment, it is vital to try to be supportive rather than dismissive of Serbian society as the indictment forces it to undertake this painful process of reconsideration and understanding.

Part of this is simple refusal. The scale of what has occurred, and the reality of what Serbia is responsible for, is not easy to admit.

Another element is fear. The establishment around the regime includes business interests, political supporters, war-profiteers, Mafia operators, and a whole range of other people and institutions with a stake in the status quo. A proportion of this establishment will conclude that it has gone too far down the road with Milosevic to turn back. They will believe, or convince themselves, that they can continue to resist. As a result, they will up the stakes, escalate the war in Kosovo and turn on their domestic opponents. War against Albanians can move on to civil war within Serbia and Montenegro.

Conflict will erupt with others within the establishment who have profited through Milosevic but now feel it is time to distance themselves from him and work out a way to deal with the West. They may put out various signals internationally, to try to demonstrate that they can become reliable partners in the future. There is no way to predict how substantial this group is, and how serious such a conflict may become.

Some within the opposition have spoken about Milosevic as a criminal for many years. During the massive street demonstrations of 1996-97 some even paraded effigies of the Serbian leader in a prisoner's outfit. But now that the issue has come home so directly, it can no longer remain merely rhetoric and political theatre. It will take courage for fresh voices to open up the debate, and given the danger of expressing any alternative views now, it is unlikely that this will happen soon.

The West, too, is part of the problem. For whatever reasons, the indictment comes nearly a decade after the story began, even though the problem was evident from the start. Like Serbian society, the West itself has itself prevaricated over Milosevic, at times portraying him as a factor of stability, at others muddying the issue of responsibility and making easy "all-sides-are-to-blame" arguments, and now, as the West seeks to justify its own war, crudely vilifying and stereotyping Milosevic, the regime and Serbs. Such hesitation and hypocrisy actively contributed to the war and to the widespread confusion within Serbia and internationally about the nature of the Serbian national programme.

The international community can help by committing itself to long-term solutions throughout the region. This would mean developing a fresh and broad framework for democratisation and development. It would mean completely rethinking the problem of ethnic nationalism and mechanisms to resolve the overarching tension between sovereignty and minority rights. It would mean coming to clear conclusions in its own mind about the war aims and strategy, and maintaining a firm consensus on the issue of war crimes and justice--including the arrest of the many indicted still at liberty in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of these measures require the creation of a permanent international conference on the Balkans, to incorporate the viewpoints and support the strategies of a wide array of actors, not just the extremist leaders.

For Serbia, whether or not Milosevic is ever put on trial, the crucial requirement is to open an honest and deep debate over the indictment itself. That means a serious consideration of Serbia's responsibility for the events in the Balkans. The options are stark and the choice is dramatic. Serbia is cornered, and the society is in shock. The country can continue on the path towards isolation, destitution and continued war. Or it can look to new forms of politics and new relationships, within the region and with the West. In that task, the indictment of Milosevic is not just another Western attack but in fact a lifeline. To build a future, Serbia must come to terms with its recent and terrible past.

Sonja Biserko is director of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. She is now living outside the country. Anthony Borden is executive director of the London-based Institute for War & Peace Reporting.

**Location:** Balkans  
Macedonia  
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**Focus:** Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

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