

Croatia Faces Sanctions Over Bobetko

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Indicted general refuses to play along with ruse to keep both the international community and Croatian right-wingers happy.

Croatia could be hit by European Union sanctions over its failure to extradite General Janko Bobetko to The Hague.

In a harsh letter last week, the EU warned Racan that the issue seriously jeopardised Zagreb's chances of closer ties with Brussels.

Britain has already postponed ratification of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Zagreb, which was planned for this month. If Brussels suspends the accord, Croatia stands to lose 60 per cent of its export market.

Prime Minister Ivica Racan is trying to persuade the tribunal that the 83-year-old general is far too old and frail to stand trial - but Bobetko, considered a war hero by many here, is refusing to play along with this ploy, insisting that it amounts to effective recognition of the charges against him.

Bobetko's wife of more than 50 years, Magdalena, has told journalists her husband will not accept the indictment, "as it is not an indictment against him, but against Croatia".

Interpol, acting on a request by the tribunal, has now issued an arrest warrant for the Croatian general, who is accused of command responsibility for war crimes allegedly committed against Serbs in the 1993 Medak Pocket operation.

Zagreb has so far refused to hand over the indictee, claiming that his actions were entirely legal.

Racan faces a dilemma, though. If the premier fails to extradite Bobetko, the international community will come down heavily on Zagreb. And if the general is delivered to The Hague, it could provoke a wave of right-wing anger that might topple the government.

The prime minister visited Bobetko at his villa in the exclusive Zagreb suburb of Tuskanac on October 14, but two hours of private talks failed to convince the indictee to play along with his strategy.

Health minister Andro Vlahusic also spent time with the general in an attempt to bring him on side, but met with little success.

Bobetko thus appears to be robbing Racan of an opportunity to get around the extradition dilemma, and may also be trying the patience of tribunal chief prosecutor Carla del Ponte, who is looking to the general for signs that he is willing to compromise.

"It is not even necessary to extradite Bobetko to The Hague, but it is important that he accepts the

competency of the tribunal and receives the indictment," one western diplomat in Zagreb commented.

Del Ponte is due to visit Croatia on October 23. There is speculation that the tribunal may be ready to allow Bobetko to enter his plea by video link from Zagreb, thus sparing him the humiliation of detention in The Hague.

So far, Racan's tactic of arguing that Bobetko is unfit to stand trial appears to have kept the right-wing quiet.

Three parties - the late president Franjo Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union, the Liberal Party of Drazen Budisa and the Democratic Centre led by former foreign minister Mate Granic - have withdrawn their demand for parliament to discuss amendments to its law on cooperation with The Hague.

This would have made Racan's position almost untenable, and Croatia's relations with the tribunal would have been strained severely as a result.

But Bobetko's stubborn refusal to play along with the ill-health strategy means that if Zagreb does not find a solution by the time Del Ponte arrives, sanctions may be unavoidable.

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