

## **Croatia Gets Tough in Hunt for Gotovina**

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Search intensifies as Brussels makes it clear the general must be caught before accession talks start.

Croatia's government has been in a quandary since the European Union made it clear talks on its admission to the EU will not start March 17 as scheduled, unless the fugitive general, Ante Gotovina, appears before The Hague war crimes tribunal by that date.

Although the prime minister, Ivo Sanader, has made several strong statements stressing his determination to apprehend the general, he is increasingly aware that words alone will no longer satisfy Brussels.

On February 1, Sanader and President Stjepan Mesic signed a joint statement explicitly demanding the establishment of General Gotovina's whereabouts and his immediate arrest.

A warrant issued to the secret services, the police and the state prosecutors office instructed all three to apply maximum measures and activities necessary to accomplish the task.

It marked the first time that Sanader had clearly and unambiguously asked for the arrest of Gotovina, on the run since The Hague indicted him of war crimes against Croatian Serbs in mid-2001.

Immediately after issuing the warrant, Sanader and Mesic called a session of the Defence and National Security Council a body convened only in emergency situations to reiterate their demand for Gotovina's arrest.

The same day, the website of the interior ministry, MUP, posted a warrant with the general's photograph on it. The actual warrant for his arrest and a reward of 350,000 kuna (around 50,000 euro) was issued in June 2003.

MUP had previously refused to post the warrant and the photograph on its website, saying Gotovina's face was so familiar that it was unnecessary.

The change in tempo follows a number of signals from Brussels that Croatia needs to be more pro-active over the general if it wants to start EU accession talks on time.

Ollie Rehn, the EU expansion commissioner, spelled this out in late January, saying talks on Croatia's admission to the union would not start on March 17 as scheduled unless Gotovina is extradited.

Sanader appeared shocked, as he had hitherto reassured the public that Croatia's cooperation with the tribunal was seen as exemplary.

Sanader's most important foreign policy goal has been to get talks on admission to the EU underway as early as possible, with a firm belief that negotiations will start on March 17.

Some analysts say the general's whereabouts are clearly known to the Croatian authorities, as the tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, has claimed for some time.

The champions of Croatia's rapid admission to the EU are now being more cautious in their statements, after their long-standing support for Zagreb's stance that Gotovina can't be arrested because he is out of reach, political analyst, Davor Gjenero, told IWPR.

Documents appearing in the media show that the Croatian government has had contacts with Gotovina in its efforts to persuade him to surrender, Gjenero added.

Such comments refer to articles published in the weekly Globus, which say Sanader's government sent Jure Kapetanovic, a former flight control official at Zagreb airport, to negotiate Gotovina's surrender with him.

According to Globus, Kapetanovic, a person trusted by both parties, met Gotovina at a location in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

The government denied this, saying the article in Globus was the work of secret services of those countries that don't want negotiations on the country's admission to the EU to start on schedule.

However, Kapetanovic did little to cast away the clouds of doubt by declining to comment on the claims.

"Sanader is determined to apprehend Gotovina, because he will be in a difficult position if the [EU] talks don't get underway owing to the general's failure to appear in The Hague," a Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, parliamentarian told the IWPR.

"Getting Croatia close to the EU is the best thing Sanader has done in his 15 months in office, and the entire achievement is now in serious jeopardy."

Ivica Racan, leader of the left-wing opposition Social Democrats and a former prime minister, did little to apprehend Gotovina during his own term in office, fearing a right-wing backlash.

On February 5, however, Racan told the Slovenian daily Delo that Sanader's failure to secure talks with the EU on March 17 would cause a political crisis, even triggering early parliamentary elections.

According to Gjenero, "If Sanader fails to arrest Gotovina, talks with the EU won't start and his government, with only a slim majority in parliament, will crumble."

However, if the premier does apprehend Gotovina, he risks a backlash in his own party, from nationalists who will see this act as a betrayal.

Observers in Zagreb believe events over the next month or so will be crucial for Croatia's admission to the EU.

If there is substance in the rumours that talks on accession will be put off until autumn, with Gotovina's

extradition still a condition, Croatia will not only lose its stride in trying to join the EU, it will also sail into turbulent and uncertain political waters and a new election may be on the horizon.

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**Location:** Croatia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/croatia-gets-tough-hunt-gotovina>