

Croatia: Rewriting History

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Could a new Hague indictment finally make it safe for Croats to speak out about crimes they know were committed in their name?

If Hague prosecutors manage to prove the charges they have laid out in a recent indictment against six high-ranking Croat military officers, Zagreb may be forced to rewrite its account of modern Croatian history.

In October 2000, the Croatian parliament adopted a Declaration on the Homeland War, which stated that between 1991-1995, Croatia waged "a just and legitimate defence... to defend its internationally-recognised borders against Greater Serbia's aggression". The war, parliament ruled, was one of "liberation" not one of "conquest".

However, the Hague indictment alleges that six officers - Jadranko Prlic, Bruno Stojic, Slobodan Praljak, Milivoj Petkovic, Valentin Coric and Berislav Pusic, all of whom turned themselves in voluntarily earlier this month - were part of a "joint criminal enterprise" that included the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and the late former defence minister Gojko Susak and had the specific aim of permanently removing Bosnian Muslims and other non-Croats who lived in Herzeg-Bosnia so that Tudjman could create Greater Croatia.

Although these unprecedented charges blatantly contradict Zagreb's official version of events, Croatian prime minister Ivo Sanader announced that he would cooperate with the tribunal and pave the way for the officers' transfer to the tribunal. He justified his cooperation by claiming that Croatia needed to defend itself against The Hague's "unacceptable political classifications".

However, if the indictment had been issued several months earlier, while former prime minister Ivica Racan's Social Democratic Party was still in power, Sanader's Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, might have been leading street protests against the officers' extradition.

"Had indictments with such classifications arrived in Zagreb during Ivica Racan's mandate, our government would have fallen within a few days," a former minister in Racan's government told IWPR.

"They called us traitors when we issued a warrant for the arrest of runaway General Gotovina, and organised large scale protests when we began the trial of General Norac," he said, referring to the Croatian general tried for war crimes relating to the murder of Serb civilians in Gospic in 1991. Norac was tried in Rijeka and sentenced to 11 years in prison.

"You can imagine what they would do now when Croatia is being held responsible for the war in Bosnia and for organising a joint criminal enterprise with Tudjman and Susak at the helm," the source said.

When Croatian politicians such as Vesna Pusic of the Croatian People's Party and Damir Kajin of the Istrian Democratic Alliance (both of which were in coalition with Racan's party) spoke openly about Croatia's aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Croatian parliament, they came under attack and were branded traitors by the HDZ.

In October 2001, Sanader attacked Pusic in parliament saying that her statement that Croatia used

aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina is “completely unacceptable” and that “the Declaration on the Homeland War should serve as a document to finally put a stop to the lies about the country’s history and reinterpretations of Croatia's modern history”.

Sanader’s willingness to cooperate is clearly motivated by his aim of bringing Croatia into the European Union.

“You have to understand Sanader now,” said one of his close associates, who insisted on anonymity. “The priority in his foreign policy is getting the European Union's positive assessment of Croatia's candidacy for membership in 2007. Without full cooperation with the Hague tribunal, this assessment, that is to arrive in Zagreb by April 20, definitely won't be positive. And the EU's negative stance would be a disaster for the country. This would mean that Europe's doors would remain closed to Croatia for quite a while longer, with all the consequences that would follow.”

The adviser said Sanader was aware that Tudjman had left much evidence of his involvement in Bosnia’s war behind.

Some of the evidence was published in six pages of the April 9 edition of the Feral Tribune. This consisted mainly of apparent minutes and transcripts from Tudjman's meetings with his closest associates, Herzeg-Bosnia chiefs and the Croatian state leadership, most of which the public had not heard of or seen before.

They showed that at a Supreme State Council meeting on 8 June, 1991, before the war broke out in former Yugoslavia, Tudjman allegedly described Croatia's borders as “absurd” because they were “unsustainable” both administratively and economically and could not be protected by the army.

He is said to have advocated Bosnia-Herzegovina's division, and referred to it as an “historical absurdity” and a “colonial entity” that was created between the 15th and the 18th century.

Later, speaking at a meeting with a delegation of the HDZ from Bosnia-Herzegovina on December 21, 1991, Tudjman allegedly stated, “Just as we used a moment in history to create an independent Croatia, I think it is now time we assembled together the Croatian national being within the widest possible borders.”

At the same meeting, he is said to have defined what he meant by “widest possible borders”.

“This Croatian state, as it is now, does not have the necessary living conditions, but a Croatian state even with the Banovina borders does, especially with improved borders,” its claimed he remarked.

The alleged transcripts also show that Croatia was assisting Bosnian Croat troops. At a meeting between Tudjman, Croatian Defence Council, HVO, and other Herzeg-Bosnia representatives on March 8, 1992, former defence minister Susak is said to have made it clear that Croatia was financing military operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The following year, at another meeting with HVO representatives, Tudjman left no doubt about Bosnia’s fate. “I said before this war that there are two possible solutions to the crisis in Bosnia. The first is the formation of a confederation because, if Yugoslavia was unable to survive in any other way, how could Bosnia-Herzegovina cope where differences between peoples are even greater. The other is division. That is no secret. Finally, these are the only two possible solutions,” he said.

The abundance of such statements apparently implicating Tudjman and other high-ranking Croatian officials in the war in Bosnia will no doubt form a significant portion of the evidence tribunal prosecutors will use against the six indicted Croatian officers. And many in Croatia think this may finally make it safe for Croats to speak out about crimes they know were committed in their name, even though the government has long denied them.

“The crimes that the indictment [against the officers] speaks about are something that the public in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia have always known about,” said Croatian newspaper columnist Ivan Lovrenovic. “There isn’t a single person who wanted to know but was unable to learn about these crimes. The indictment merely recapitulates them thoroughly and in a systematic manner. This systematisation is so shocking that it even made Praljak and Coric say that, well, crimes did happen, but they never committed them personally.”

Still, recognising this buried truth is likely to be a painful process for many.

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