

Croatia: Wartime Strongmen Flaunt Their Freedom

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The spectacle of former paramilitary leaders openly defying war crimes investigators poses problems for Croatia's rulers

Any foreign tourists venturing back to Croatia's Dalmatian coast this summer might have been in for a shock had they taken a trip inland in search of local colour.

In Knin, only an hour's journey from the old Roman port of Split, day-trippers might have encountered a one-time warlord who openly flaunts his freedom from prosecution for the atrocities he makes little attempt to disavow.

Srecko Bilic, a former paramilitary commander, holds court at the Bar Goldfish, a place he owns just opposite the town's sprawling railway station. Bemused customers are liable to hear him freely admit killing an elderly woman in 1995. "I just panicked," he shrugged, claiming he was later punished with a six-month prison spell in Split for a lesser charge.

The Goldfish does a roaring 24-hour trade, unlike most other businesses in this economically depressed outpost. But the people who frequent the bar are not your typical customers.

Regular drinkers are one-time followers of Bilic and his notorious HOS, Croatian Defence Forces, the forerunners of the army, which was blamed for atrocities during the 1991-92 conflict. The black-uniformed HOS modelled itself on Croatia's Second World War Ustasha fascists, along with their political ideology. A portrait of Nazi-puppet ruler Ante Pavelic is proudly framed above the bar, a sight to chill any Serb who might drop in.

The late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, a fanatical nationalist, revered the ancient fortress-town. It was here a decade ago that Serbs sought to establish their ill-fated and illegal breakaway republic.

Croatian forces drove out 200,000 local Serbs in the 1995 Operation Storm. Today Knin is uneasily calm, shared by Croats expelled from central Bosnia and a slow but steady intake of Serbs who used to live there.

Bilic subjects visitors to recitals from his published poetry collection, entitled Sorrow. Surprisingly, some verses dwell on the theme of reconciliation. "I need to ask forgiveness," said a confused Bilic, whom some in Knin suspect of involvement in the killing of 12 mainly elderly Serbs in the village of Varivode, in September 1995.

Bilic receives a war pension that is twice the average wage of 1000 German marks - and hopes this money will fund his plan for a new fish restaurant. The IMF has told Zagreb's government it must prune back this contentious and costly benefit awarded by the former nationalist regime, even though this means risking the veterans' wrath.

Bilic, like others with a murky history lurking in Croatia's backwaters, seems to have eluded this autumn's war crimes dragnet.

In the eastern city of Osijek, which ten years ago narrowly avoided the

annihilation suffered by neighbouring Vukovar, a more prominent figure

still trading on past glories and infamies, was in defiant mood when IWPR

caught up with him recently.

Branimir Glavas, former county prefect and an outspoken parliamentary deputy from the right-wing HDZ opposition, is currently facing a series of legal probes into possible economic crimes. Sensing a swoop by Zagreb's centre-left coalition, Glavas describes himself as chief scapegoat in a witch-hunt supposedly led by unreconstructed communists. He may soon face serious allegations of past military misdemeanours.

Local journalists pursued lengthy investigations into the wartime activities of Glavas when he was Osijek's former crisis committee chief. Clearly

irritated by his profile in the non-nationalist press, Glavas is spitting

defiance at The Hague tribunal. "People are calling me a thief, even a killer, " he said. " I am not disturbed by all this Hague talk. They can come and get me if they think I'm guilty."

Glavas admits "he cannot be certain" that units nominally under his command may have committed " personal individual mistakes" - his euphemism for the murder of civilians in the nearby village of Paulin Dvor, where 18 Serbs were killed on December 12, 1991. He says that "any perpetrator should be brought to justice" but claims he had nothing to do with it.

Perversely Glavas declares he would " be proud to be charged with war crimes" and predicts that any attempts to arrest him would meet resistance from supporters in his hometown. But he admitted, " I don't know about the rest of the country."

Cautious of upsetting public opinion, and criticised for timidity in tracking down the killers in their midst, Zagreb's rulers could see their resolve strengthened by a recent opinion poll. The telephone survey followed an unprecedented documentary detailing human rights abuses screened on national television last month. A significant majority supported criminal proceedings against individuals suspected of wrongdoing, regardless of ethnic background.

The cases of these two men, who by their own admission may have much to

answer for, pose serious questions for Croatia's prosecutors. If Croatia wants to be seen as a functioning, healthy state, governed by the rule of law, it must first establish credibility at home before it can hope to win over future partners in Europe.

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