

## **Croatian Support for Gotovina Remains**

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However, observers say general's imminent trial could help country face up to its role in war. As court proceedings against the most highly ranked Croatian ever to go on trial for war crimes start next week, many Croatians continue to deny that they were anything more than victims during the Balkans wars of the early Nineties.

However, some observers say that General Ante Gotovina's trial could be an opportunity for Croatians to face up to their role in the conflicts and accept that there were villains on all sides.

Croatia's HTV television will show proceedings live, raising hopes that the Croatian public might engage with proceedings at the International Criminal Court for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY.

"I think it is really good that HTV will directly transmit the trial," said Professor Ivo Josipovic, the foremost expert in international law in Croatia.

"If Gotovina's trial is followed properly, then this can contribute to a better confrontation with the past."

Generals Ante Gotovina, Mladen Markac and Ivan Cermak are accused of conspiring to expel Serbs from eastern Croatia during Operation Storm which ended the war in Croatia in 1995. According to the indictment, troops under their control committed murder, torture and looting during the operation.

The indictment alleges that at least 37 Serbs were murdered in the operation, while the troops were also engaged in "systematically torching or otherwise destroying and plundering villages inhabited by Krajina Serbs".

Gotovina was in overall control of the army while fellow defendants Cermak and Markac were, according to the indictment, tasked with maintaining order, and controlling the police. Although the indictment includes other top officials, such as ex-president Franjo Tudjman, they are all now dead, leaving the three generals to stand trial alone.

But in spite of the lengthy charge sheets against the three, opinion polls show that the average Croatian believes the generals should be praised rather than censured for the operation. This could be seen in comments gathered by Radio Free Europe this week in the city of Zadar, where Gotovina has most supporters.

"The Croats only defended themselves and now they are on trial. That's not fair. There was no justice when the judgment in the Vukovar Three case was delivered and one of the accused was acquitted. So how can we expect justice now?" asked one man.

"I am disappointed with the way the Hague tribunal treats Croats. Why don't they arrest all those Serb generals who are still on the run? And they keep forgetting that Croatia was attacked by Serbs, not the

other way around. Still, they treat us as if all sides were equally guilty," said another.

This belief that Croats were merely defending their territory against Serb aggressors has been given additional weight by the very nature of Operation Storm, during which Croatian government forces restored control over large chunks of eastern Croatia that had been held by Serb rebels for four years.

For Croats, the operation signaled a successful end to their war of independence, while for many of the Serb civilians who were driven out or who fled before the advancing army it was the start of a nightmare.

While the Operation Storm trial could shed more light on what happened during the conflict, it is not clear if Croatia will follow the televised proceedings.

Josipovic is not overly optimistic, pointing out that even the trial of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic failed to garner much interest in the country.

Many attribute Croatia's lack of interest in the Hague tribunal as resulting from the fact that most people convicted there thus far have been Serbs. This, say experts, has also reinforced the belief among some Croats that they were merely victims during the wars of the Nineties.

Goran Mikulcic, president of Croatia's Law Centre and one of the defence lawyers representing Gotovina, Cermak and Markac, underlined this in a recent interview with RFE.

"The fact is that out of those tried and convicted by the Hague tribunal - the majority are Serbs. Some Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats have been processed as well, but this is the first case involving Croats from Croatia," he said.

The tribunal has made attempts to engage Croats ahead of the trial, and sent a public relations team to "to brief journalists on upcoming trials, as well as the Tribunal's achievements so far".

"Today's meeting was part of the tribunal's consistent efforts to ensure transparency of proceedings and to facilitate fair and unbiased reporting," said tribunal representatives in a statement.

Olga Kavran, spokeswoman for the Office of the Prosecutor, OTP, said the press in the country published too little information about the victims and focused too much on their own citizens.

"The same is in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia... the voice of the victim is rarely heard," said Kavran.

But according to Josipovic, the decision to send the PR team to inform people about the court came too late to engage the people of Croatia.

The tribunal has also met with some criticism in the country. Many were disgusted by what they felt were lenient sentences passed last year against three Serbs accused of war crimes against Croats in the

Croatian town of Vukovar.

"We said after the 'Vukovar Three' verdict that all the trials in the tribunal should be abolished because there was no sense in them," said Ivan Pandza, president of the Zagreb branch of the Croatian Disabled Veterans of the Homeland War association, one of the largest veteran groups in the country.

He said that veterans were not even going to bother protesting the start of the trial, in spite of their continued support for the three generals.

"We didn't organise anything because it doesn't make sense any more. The last action we took was a march to The Hague by our members in 2006 and [the tribunal officials] didn't let us in," he said.

Goran Jungvirth is an IWPR journalist in Zagreb.

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