

Current Bosnian Serb Leader Denies Wartime Ethnic Cleansing Policy

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Milorad Dodik rejects prosecution's claim that there was a plan to separate communities.

The current president of Bosnia's Serb entity told the trial of Ratko Mladic this week that there was no policy of ethnic cleansing during the 1990s war.

Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, was giving evidence for the fourth time at the Hague tribunal. Most recently, he appeared as a defence witness for former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic.

Dodik was a member of the Bosnian Serb assembly during the war. He served as an independent rather than as a member of the ruling Serb Democratic Party (SDS), founded by Karadzic. Dodik later established his own Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) party, which became rivals of the SDS.

Dodik told defence lawyer Branko Lukic that the Bosnian Serb leadership had no ambition to pursue ethnic division. He described a referendum held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in early 1992 to decide whether the republic should separate from the Yugoslav state as a "manifestation of the political will and the arrogance of the Muslims and Croats".

He said that many Croats now told him they regretted taking part in the referendum, as in effect it had marked "the beginning of the majority rule of Muslims over Croats".

"Alija Izetbegovic stated in parliament that he was prepared to sacrifice peace for an independent Bosnia-Herzegovina, and thus ushered the people into war," he said. Izetbegovic was chairman of the Bosnian presidency before and during the war.

"The term 'ethnic cleansing' is something that I heard only later, primarily from the media," Dodik said. "It was something that appeared in the media while reporting on the situation from the region. The policy at the time was not a policy of ethnic cleansing."

Lukic asked him whether there were any discussions in the Bosnian Serb assembly "that would encourage warmongering".

Dodik noted that members of the assembly had been killed at the beginning of the war, and he conceded that after this "it was very difficult to control emotions".

Lukic asked him about the "six strategic objectives" adopted by the Bosnian Serb leadership at an assembly session in May 1992.

The prosecution has argued that these objectives are evidence of advance planning for crimes later committed against non-Serbs during the war, in particular a clause that "the Serbian people must struggle for complete separation from the Muslim people and Croat people and form their own state".

"How did you understand this and how was it discussed?" Lukic asked.

The witness said that Croats and Muslims already had their own institutions and that the concept of separation had been "just a matter of legalising the situation".

"It was never stated outright, and neither was it ever stated in any document, that the Serbian people did not wish to agree and have a consensus with the other two peoples," he continued. "I know what the discussions are about that, and all the back and forth, so as somebody who was politically engaged at that time, I would not wish to be part of a structure that was in favour of divisions, ethnic cleansing, killings and so on. That was not the intention."

Dodik said there was "no evidence that political decisions at that time were motivated by the desire for physical divisions".

In his cross-examination, prosecutor Alan Tieger looked at minutes from Bosnian Serb assembly sessions and statements from Dodik's fellow-members to back up the contention that there had been a pre-planned goal of separation.

These included an assembly meeting in January 1993 at which deputies voted unanimously to declare that Muslims were not a nation, and discussions of the need to transfer the non-Serb population.

Dodik said this did not reflect any strategy to create an ethnically pure state. Movement of populations was a natural part of any conflict, he argued.

“The war produced the same results on all sides, which was that people had to leave their original places of residence and move to some other locations,” he added. “If a calculation was made, you can see that the number of people [displaced] on either side is practically identical.”

Tieger turned to a speech given by the Bosnian Serb president in July 1993, in which Karadzic said, “Gorazde is ours. Perhaps we will have to make some concessions in Sarajevo for Gorazde to remain ours, because the Drina [river] is of enormous importance for Republika Srpska and for the Serbian people, and lastly it is one of the strategic aims for the Drina not to be a border – that is what we adopted here in this assembly.”

Tieger continued, “That’s a reflection of the fact, Mr Dodik, that Muslim-majority municipalities like Gorazde were embraced by the strategic objectives and considered to be Bosnian Serb, right?”

“I do not agree that it was primarily decided as such, and at the end of the war Gorazde remained on the other side,” the witness responded.

“I put it to you, Sir, that it is on the basis on this type of information that we’ve just looked at, some of which you heard directly because you were present at sessions, some of which was known to the other assembly members who were present and was readily accessible to you... on the basis of such info that you once accused the Bosnian Serb leadership at all levels of organised war crimes. And you did that publicly, right?”

Tieger then read out a BBC report from January 12, 2001, which said, “Outgoing Serbian Republic PM Milorad Dodik today accused the Serbian Democratic Party of ‘organising and committing crimes during the war’ in Bosnia Herzegovina. [Dodik said]‘It must be openly said that crimes have been committed in this region under the SDS leadership and this must be punished.’”

Dodik was asked about this report when he gave evidence in the Karadzic trial, Tieger read out his response from that trial where he said his comments were “political discourse”.

“You said, ‘Yes, that was the political struggle between me and the SDS in 2001, it was a time of transition of power,’” Tieger said.

The witness said he stood by those comments.

Asked both by the prosecution and by presiding Judge Alphons Orie to clarify whether the 2001 allegations had been true or made purely for political purposes, Dodik said, “There were people both at the local level of the SDS and at others who were involved in crimes and should be convicted, and I still think so today.”

Judge Orie asked whether by “others”, the witness meant people at “the top level of the SDS”.

“I cannot say that. That’s for the court to determine, but I believe that there was involvement even of the people who were part of the top leadership,” Dodik replied.

Prosecutors allege that Mladic is responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible population transfer which “contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory”. He is accused of the massacre of more than 7,000 men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995, and of planning and overseeing the siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead.

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