

Djindjic Facing Tough Decisions

Author: [Zeljko Cvijanovic](#)

Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic risks a political backlash if he presses ahead with the extradition of war crimes suspects.

When Hague chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte visited Belgrade at the beginning of the month it was clear she was trying to encourage Serbia to accelerate the extradition of war crimes suspects to The Hague.

Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic knows this will improve the country's economic prospects, but he is just as keenly aware that the arrest of tribunal indictees might hurt him politically.

Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica - who is opposed to cooperating with the international court - is likely to make political capital out of any arrests - which may further undermine Djindjic's popularity.

But the Serbian prime minister has to balance this against possibly alienating the West and jeopardising further financial aid should he not push ahead with extradition. "The speed of our integration to democratic Europe," Djindjic has warned, "depends on our readiness to break decisively with those who committed war crimes."

Yet while he has proved his mettle by delivering Milosevic to the tribunal in June, he is also under pressure to deliver further suspects to The Hague by the end of September.

Both Djindjic and Del Ponte said that they "forged a strategy of mutual cooperation" over their two days of talks.

The Hague's most pressing concerns are, apparently, that the extradition of war crimes suspects is speeded up; the border between Serbia and Republika Srpska, RS, is sealed to hinder indictees escaping to the Bosnian entity; access to potential war crimes witnesses is permitted; and access is granted to police and military archives.

Djindjic has agreed to the first three of these requests, in principle, but has not specified when he is likely to implement them. He's expressed a fear that the fourth would lead to further Hague indictments.

A source close to the government said that Del Ponte said she expected the extradition of 5 suspects, including Serbian president Milan Milutinovic.

According to an IWPR source, Milutinovic is The Hague's top priority, since his testimony could be used in the trial of Milosevic. He said tribunal prosecutors had already contacted Milutinovic and General Dragoljub Ojdanic - another high-ranking indictee - both of whom are said to be considering going voluntarily to The Hague to testify.

On the eve of her Belgrade visit, Del Ponte's spokeswoman Florence Hartmann said President Milutinovic would ultimately have to appear at The Hague, but the chief prosecutor had not insisted on his immediate transfer to the tribunal.

"She accepted Djindjic's argument that Milutinovic's extradition would destabilise the government and could jeopardise further cooperation between Belgrade and The Hague," a government source told IWPR.

As Serbian head of state, Milutinovic's transfer would naturally trigger fresh presidential and parliamentary elections in Serbia, with potentially serious consequences for Djindjic. Little wonder, then, that Del Ponte's concern for the "stability of the Serbian government" won special praise at the Serbian premier's press conference.

But Djindjic understands that he cannot afford to dawdle on the issue of extraditions. After the handover of Milosevic in June, Belgrade was granted a three-month moratorium on further transfers. But this political breathing space runs out at the end of September.

The four other indictees Del Ponte is thought to have prioritised are believed to be the "Vukovar Three" - former Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, officers Mile Mrksic, Miroslav Radic and Veselin Sljivancanin - charged with the killing of 200 civilians near the Croatian town in November 1991 and General Ratko Mladic, accused of genocide at Srebrenica in 1995.

A formal tribunal list of suspects handed to the Yugoslav ministry of justice six months ago, also includes the names of Vljako Stojiljkovic, Nikola Sainovic and General Ojdanic; Milan and Sredoje Lukic, accused of crimes in Visegrad, eastern Bosnia in 1992; and the "Dubrovnik Four", JNA officers believed to be responsible for the shelling the Croatian city in 1991.

The chief prosecutor also asked about the whereabouts of General Mladic, the tribunal's most wanted suspect after former RS president, Radovan Karadzic. She sought Djindjic's assurance that Mladic would be arrested if he turned up in Belgrade.

Djindjic agreed to her request. Though neither Karadzic nor Mladic are thought to reside in Serbia, SFOR officials have complained several times over the past few months that the two have evaded capture by jumping over the border from RS to Serbia.

Del Ponte has made it clear that she wants the two arrested soon since, as from November on, winter snows will make their suspected hideouts in RS inaccessible.

Whether Djindjic can deliver on his promises is a matter for speculation. He knows he must to get his hands on economic aid, but he also is well aware that he risks serious political damage if his opponents brand him a tribunal collaborator.

Zeljko Cvijanovic is a journalist with the Belgrade weekly Blic News

Location: [Serbia](#)
[Bosnia and](#)
[Herzegovina](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/djindjic-facing-tough-decisions>