

Haggling Over Bosnia

Author: [Judith Armatta](#)

Former aide to Croatian president gives inside story of Milosevic's hand in carve-up of Bosnia and Croatia.

When Hrvoje Sarinic, one of the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman's most trusted advisors, took the stand against Slobodan Milosevic last week, he gave the court the impression that during the wars that broke up Yugoslavia, Balkan leaders callously tried to cut deals over people and land as if they were playing a casual game of chess.

In 1993, Sarinic began serving as Tudjman's secret envoy to Milosevic and met him 14 times in all. The testimony he gave in court described Milosevic as a leader obsessed with power and seemingly indifferent to the fate of the people whose lives were being ruined by the wars he was waging.

Sarinic said that at various times, Milosevic offered to relinquish Knin in Croatia and Sarajevo and Bihac in Bosnia to Tudjman, because they were not Serb towns. For his part, Tudjman offered to give Milosevic control of a small piece of the Croatian coast, a proposal he made without ever consulting his own parliament.

According to Sarinic, even Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic got into the act by suggesting to Tudjman that he would have no objection if Croatia annexed Herzeg-Bosna.

This was not the first time the tribunal had heard of Milosevic and Tudjman agreeing to divide up Bosnia. Lord Paddy Ashdown testified that Tudjman told him about it, drawing the proposed border between Serbia and Croatia through the heart of Bosnia on a napkin. And Ante Markovic, former prime minister of Yugoslavia, told the court that both Milosevic and Tudjman admitted it to him.

However, Sarinic was able to shed more light on the rationale behind the two men's dealings.

Both of them, he said, ignored or made light of Bosnia's mixed, multi-ethnic population, as well as its equal status as a Yugoslav republic. But while Tudjman viewed it a historical absurdity resulting from Ottoman conquests in the fifteenth century, Milosevic viewed Bosnia and its Muslims as a great evil that constituted a demographic threat to both Serbia and Croatia.

After a meeting in spring 1991, Sarinic said that Tudjman showed him a note Milosevic had given him. "It said the Muslims were the major evil - actually, that one should be cautious about the so-called Green Transversal [axis of countries with substantial Muslim populations] from Turkey, Bulgaria, Kosovo, [to] Sandjak," said Sarinic.

The note alleged that Bosnian Muslims wanted "a unitary Bosnia where they would rule and the Croats and Serbs would be minorities", Sarinic said.

Sarinic added that in 1995, when he asked Milosevic why he would not recognise Bosnia, the accused replied, "Which Bosnia? Whose Bosnia? What kind of Bosnia?"

"He was absolutely denying the existence of Bosnia," said Saranic.

In the run-up to the Dayton peace accord in 1995, Sarinic said that Milosevic approached him, and once again suggested that Serbia and Croatia deal with the Bosnia problem without international involvement.

"Hrvoje, let's each of us take our part of Bosnia without the international community. The United States is cradling this bastard [Bosnia] without knowing what they're doing, nor are they familiar with our problems," Milosevic reportedly told him.

Sarinic said that despite Milosevic's and Tadjman's agreement over Bosnia, areas in Croatia taken by the Serbs early in the war remained a matter of contention and ongoing negotiations.

In 1991 at a meeting between the two leaders in Karadjordjevo, Tadjman referred to the Serb-controlled Krajina region as a "Trojan horse" which Serbs might use to stage further attacks against Croatia.

When Tadjman said that the Croatian Serbs in Krajina could not succeed without Milosevic supplying and standing behind them, the latter denied giving such assistance.

In his capacity as Tadjman's confidential envoy to Milosevic, Sarinic's primary task was to find out whether the Serbian president would agree to the reintegration of Serb-held Krajina into Croatia. He said that Milosevic did agree to this, but never followed through with his promises.

As a result, Croatia took back the region by force in 1995.

Sarinic told the court that as the Croatian assault was under way in May 1995, Milosevic called him and asked, "Why are you doing this? Why did we spend so many hours in discussion?"

In reply, he told Milosevic that he had not been able to make any headway negotiating with the Serbs in Krajina, and suggested that if the Serbian president could replace the region's leader, Milan Martić, and key military commander Milan Celeketić, the situation would improve.

At this Milosevic grew angry, claiming that since he had not appointed these men, he could not replace them, and slammed down the receiver.

In court, Sarinic cast doubt on Milosevic's claimed lack of control over the Krajina Serbs, pointing out that he negotiated with Zagreb to reopen a highway they had blockaded.

"You were involved up to your neck, that is absolutely certain," Sarinic said to Milosevic in court. "The Knin leadership could not do anything without you."

The witness also alleged that Milosevic tried to manipulate the Croatian Serb leadership behind the scenes, for example to engineer Milan Martić's victory over Milan Babić as president of Krajina. Despite this, Babić won most votes in the first round of elections.

When Sarinic joked with Milosevic about this loss, the president replied that there had been irregularities in the voting. When a second round of elections was held, Milosevic's man Martić won.

According to Sarinic, Milosevic went on to plot against the Bosnian Serb leadership in 1995, in particular president Radovan Karadzic. He learned this, he said, from Bora Mikelic, the Krajina representative appointed to negotiate with Croatia. Mikelic reportedly told him that Milosevic regarded Karadzic as a "lost politician".

The court heard that - according to what Mikelic told Sarinic - Milosevic wanted to get rid of Karadzic but remained loyal to Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladic. The general, Mikelic reportedly said, was "200 per cent Milosevic's man".

During his cross examination, Milosevic rejected this allegation by reading out a letter in which Mikelic denied such a conversation had ever taken place.

Sarinic also told the court that during one of his meetings with Milosevic, the Serbian president admitted that Zeljko "Arkan" Raznjatovic, the Serbian paramilitary leader notorious for his men's brutality in Bosnia, worked for him. When Sarinic asked him about Arkan, Sarinic said that Milosevic laughed and said, "I have to have someone, as well, who is going to do part of the job for me."

Milosevic denied having said anything about Arkan to Sarinic, and insisted that Arkan's Volunteer Guard was never more than a company, not an army of 5,000 men. "Where do you get such fantastic ideas?" he asked Sarinic.

"From our intelligence services," replied Sarinic coolly.

"You have no document which could link me to the activities of the Serbian Volunteer Guard," Milosevic went on.

"No, but you have a reputation for leaving very few traces," said the witness.

In response to Milosevic's charge that the authorities in Croatia made deliberate plans to provoke an incident to justify the campaign to recapture Krajina in 1995, Sarinic did not deny that his country initiated the attack, but said that staging a provocation was not necessary because it had the right to use armed force to liberate its own territory.

In cross examination, Milosevic claimed that the United States had sanctioned the Croatian operations, saying "They gave you the green light for the operation."

Sarinic responded diplomatically, "They saw the negotiations were not going anywhere. They never told us openly that we could launch an action, and they stopped the operation when it was moving toward Banja Luka."

Milosevic also questioned Sarinic about the Yugoslav army's shelling of Dubrovnik, and secured an admission from him that the Serbian president had denied sanctioning it.

"I didn't believe you organised it, but you certainly knew about it," countered Sarinic, adding that Milosevic told him that Yugoslav defence minister Veljko Kadijevic did not order the bombardment, but that General Blagoje Adzic, Kadijevic's successor, did do so.

Milosevic vehemently denied this.

While some of Sarinic's testimony repeated what other witnesses have said, it was important corroboration from a man who stood close to the centre of Balkan politics during the period critical to Milosevic's indictment for crimes in Croatia and Bosnia.

Not only did it point towards the former president being involved in those critical events, but indicated that he controlled many of them and attempted to control others.

Judith Armatta is based in The Hague for the Coalition For International Justice (<http://www.cij.org>)

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