

## **Karadzic Arrest Shatters Myth of Impunity**

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His detention in a Belgrade suburb suggests too many people were prepared to believe the story that he could never be caught.

The arrest of Radovan Karadzic will have many consequences for all the different actors concerned. For a start, international justice will celebrate this long-awaited victory and welcome a chance to try a man seen as a top architect and instigator of bloodshed in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995.

Around the world, Karadzic is recognised as probably the most significant and most vilified war crimes suspect in Europe since the Second World War.

Yet the impending trial in The Hague will not consist of a straightforward confirmation of “what we all know” about the former Bosnian Serb leader. The process of criminal law has well-established rules and timelines which may drag the case out for much longer than an impatient public is expecting.

There are many lessons to be learned from the trial of the late Slobodan Milosevic, and even more to be derived from the current trials of Serbian nationalist Vojislav Seselj and the Croat leaders of Herceg-Bosna.

It remains to be seen whether the Hague tribunal, and the prosecutor in particular, will hit the ground running when the Karadzic case starts.

I am fairly certain that Karadzic will pursue the same tactics as Milosevic, who frittered away the first few weeks of his trial by fielding questions about the “Greater Serbia project” – a theme which played very well with the public at home. This line of questioning was misconstrued, and meant an opportunity was missed to confront Milosevic from day one with dead bodies, burnt-out villages, or the refrigerator truck turned into a monumental coffin and dumped in the Danube.

The new prosecutor has a chance to avoid repeating this mistake and get straight to the point – raw evidence of indiscriminate shelling, sniping at civilian targets, the siege and starvation of half a dozen or more Bosnian towns, massive ethnic cleansing, and other atrocities committed by the Army of Republika Srpska and associated paramilitary units.

The peaceful and unspectacular circumstances of Karadzic’s arrest, right in the heart of Serbia, exposed a few myths which the international community had convinced itself to believe. The first of these was built around the theory that he was hiding out in impenetrable mountainous terrain in adjoining parts of Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro. This was heightened by the often theatrical raids carried out by NATO forces in Pale and eastern Bosnia in pursuit of the fugitive.

The fact that in the end Karadzic was detained in a Belgrade suburb says a lot about the level of competence, coordination and political will of the international community.

Everyone involved in protecting Karadzic’s identity must have laughed at the ease with which the international community bought their tall tales and lies. The regime in Serbia made a fool of the European Union, in particular, by offering up fabricated, misleading theories and ostensibly thorough investigations “proving” that the fugitive was not in Serbia. Further “proof” was offered by the occasional reports of sightings in some remote monastery such as Mount Athos in Greece.

The nature of the arrest is also something of an embarrassment for those who laboured to uncover the behind-the-scenes campaign to protect Karadzic.

The immediate reactions from European politicians and EU officials in praise of the Serbian authorities have an inappropriate and hypocritical ring to them. Doris Pack, head of the European Parliament’s delegation for south-eastern Europe, said we “should be grateful to Serbia for this success”. In reality quite the opposite is true – Serbia’s “success” lay in harbouring and protecting Karadzic for over a decade.

It is a pity the Serbian establishment will send the EU the political bill for this painless arrest, and reap the benefits despite having misled the democratic world and international justice for years. It is easy to forget that this is President Boris Tadic’s second mandate as a pro-western and democratic head of state.

In addition, the arrest finally deflates the great conspiracy theory sustained by Bosniaks over many years – that American negotiator Richard Holbrooke struck a secret deal with Karadzic to facilitate the Dayton Agreement and end the Bosnian war. The arrangement allegedly provided an unspoken amnesty for the Bosnian Serb leader, ensuring he remained untouchable. This conspiracy theory was wheeled out whenever it was politically expedient to undermine Dayton Agreement and the constitutional foundations

of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina.

It goes without saying that many people now look forward to seeing Karadzic in the dock, and rightly so, since it means one of the ugliest chapters in Balkan history can now be fully investigated, and ultimately brought to a close.

But that will not happen any time soon. This word of caution is necessary because expectations are so high among victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These people feel let down by the international justice system because they have not seen a complete and timely revelation of all the evidence relating to their suffering.

At the same time, many Serbs – the post-1980s generation in particular – deserve to be liberated from the stigma of Karadzic, so that they can draw a line under their recent history.

Last but not least, politicians on all sides will now be watching the Karadzic trial closely, in the hope that it will afford them opportunities to exploit the hopes and expectations of those who suffered most in the Yugoslav wars.

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