

Krajisnik a Moral Man

Author: [Helen](#)
[Warrell](#)

Deposed Republika Srpska president gives defendant a glowing reference.

Former Republika Srpska president Nikola Poplasen, the latest witness to testify in defence of top Serb politician Momcilo Krajisnik, this week described the accused as a “moral” and “religious” man whose diligence and humility had attracted widespread respect.

Poplasen was elected president of the Bosnian Serb territory known as the Republika Srpska in September 1998, but lasted only four months in office before being removed by Carl Westendorp, the High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia. Westendorp said that Poplasen had “abused his power” and obstructed the implementation of the peace agreement.

Poplasen’s main contact with Krajisnik, however, came during the early stages of the war in Bosnia, when he was a political advisor to the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, of which the accused was a key member.

When asked by defence counsel David Josse to give a description of Krajisnik’s personality and work ethic, Poplasen was initially reluctant.

“You’re always on slippery ground where you have to answer a question like that, you might insult someone or misinterpret their character,” said the witness.

But Poplasen soon overcame his uncertainty to give a detailed analysis of Krajisnik’s character, stating that he was a man of “great energy” who was dedicated to his job single-minded in his purpose.

“This is a man who can lay aside all other considerations including work and family issues in order to carry out a task which he has been given or considers important,” said Poplasen.

The witness added that, as president of the Bosnian Serb assembly, Krajisnik had been concerned with the interests of “the whole assembly”, and not just the Serbian parliamentary members. In particular, said Poplasen, the accused had “understood the Muslim mindset and way of life”.

Krajisnik was due to take the stand himself this week, but due to the amount of time needed to prepare him to give evidence, his testimony looks set to be delayed until the beginning of April.

The former speaker of the Bosnian Serb parliament is charged with two counts of genocide, five of crimes against humanity and one of violations of the laws or customs of war for his alleged involvement in a joint criminal enterprise to expel thousands of Muslims and Croats from Bosnia in 1991 and 1992.

According to the indictment, other members of the joint criminal enterprise include former Bosnian Serb presidents Biljana Plavsic and Radovan Karadzic, as well as the vice-president Nikola Koljevic. Prosecutors argue that these three, along with Krajisnik himself, were members of a so-called “expanded presidency” of the Bosnian Serb republic which met to hold war councils during the height of the Bosnian conflict. It

was allegedly through this ad-hoc body that the co-perpetrators exercised control over the Bosnian Serb forces which implemented the ethnic-cleansing campaign.

When asked about the existence of the expanded presidency, Poplasen dismissed it as an “invented” concept.

“It is like saying that if you are having lunch and you have a second helping of dessert, it is an extended lunch. It is not – it is still a lunch,” said the witness.

He added that an expanded presidency would have been “counter-constitutional”.

Even when the presiding judge Alphonse Orié said that the trial chamber had seen many different documents alleged to be minutes from meetings of war presidency during the “imminent threat of war” in Bosnia, Poplasen continued to deny that such a formal body had ever existed.

Judge Orié quoted one document in which it seems that Poplasen, who was present at an extended presidency meeting, was appointed War Commissioner of the town of Vogosca, in the municipality of Sarajevo. In response, the witness suggested, “Perhaps we were having coffee and someone took minutes.”

Earlier in the proceedings, the judges effectively took over Josse’s examination in chief to question the witness about whether local war commissions participated in military activity. The prosecution argue that it was these regional groups which helped to coordinate the actions of Bosnian Serb forces on the ground.

Poplasen became head of the Vogosca commission in June 1992. According to the indictment, there were two separate incidents between May and December of that year in which “a number of Muslim detainees” were killed during forced labour activities and while being used as human shields on the front line.

Under questioning from Judge Orié, Poplasen admitted that the Vogosca commission did have an officer among its staff, but this was “a colonel who was close to retirement age” who only had a “coordinating role”.

He then said that the war commission had helped to obtain “food and materials” for the military population in Vogosca, but did not have anything to do with “fuel, ammunition or weapons”.

When Judge Orié read out from a prosecution exhibit which stated that part of the work of war commissions was to “create conditions for military organs and units in defence of Serbian people”, Poplasen became visibly agitated.

“When war operations are going on then everything is to do with the war. You can interpret this ad infinitum,” he said.

The trial will continue with a new defence witness starting on March 14.

Helen Warrell is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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