

## **Mladic Media Frenzy**

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False start in media race to break the arrest of the Bosnian Serb fugitive.

Vladeta Jankovic, an adviser to Vojislav Kostunica, the Serbian premier, dismisses the fevered reports about General Ratko Mladic's arrest, which have engulfed Serbia over the past few days, as little more than unwarranted speculation.

But whether he is arrested today or tomorrow - or maybe never - the fate of the entire Serbian people is mortgaged to that of the fugitive general. And that's not lost on Belgrade leaders. Indeed, Jankovic has been saying over the last few days that the Serbian authorities were close to apprehending Mladic, indicted by the UN's war crimes tribunal in The Hague for crimes against humanity and genocide for his role in the Bosnian war of 1992-95.

"A political decision has been taken," Jankovic told radio B92 in Belgrade. So, he explained, the question of actually getting the bull-necked, ruddy-faced Mladic to the tribunal was now simply a "technical and not a political issue".

Notwithstanding this there is a large political issue at stake here. Serbia is currently negotiating its first steps towards EU membership. But diplomats have been suggesting that that these talks could and perhaps should be suspended because of Belgrade's failure to deliver the general to the Hague court. A determination on that question is due to be made at the end of the month.

Given the high level of expectation, it seems news media across the region are itching to be break the story of the general's arrest.

Some years ago a small television station in Bijeljina, in the Serbian part of Bosnia made its name with the scoop about Alija Izetbegovic, the wartime leader of the Bosnian Muslims. It reported that he was dead. It was a great story, and it was soon to be right, even though they had jumped the gun a bit. By three months.

Perhaps determined to repeat this feat on Tuesday BN television reported that Mladic had been arrested. Within hours "reliable sources" were being quoted as confirming the story. Tanjug, the Serbian news agency ran with the story quoting BN. Then Reuters picked it up and Britain's Sky News ran with the Reuters story. Once Sky was reporting it, Serbian television reported that Sky was reporting that Reuters was reporting that Tanjug was reporting that BN was reporting that Mladic was under arrest.

The only problem was that no one actually knew if it was true. "Reliable sources" now began saying that, well, no, Mladic was not actually on his way to The Hague, but he was "definitely under arrest" and negotiating with the Serbian government. Which would have been fine, and a great story to boot, except that the Serbian government said it was untrue.

In that case, retorted the "reliable sources" including one quoted in the tabloid Kurir, the government's spokesman, Srdan Djuric, must be lying. Djuric, said Kurir's secret police source, "does not dare to confirm the report because there are fears of unrest in Belgrade. However, it is quite true that Mladic has been arrested and is on his way to the The Hague".

The slight problem with this was that no one had informed the tribunal, which would then have rushed to have a bed made up for their long-awaited indictee.

By now several theories were circulating. One was that Mladic was indeed in detention but that Kostunica did not want to be the Serb who sent Mladic to jail. He either wanted Mladic to give himself up, except that the truculent general was refusing, or he was going to have to try and spirit him over the border to Bosnia, so that it could look as though the police or international forces there had arrested him.

Another theory doing the rounds was that there had "definitely" been an operation to arrest Mladic on Mount Cer, close to the border with Bosnia, but that he had escaped.

Of course the symbolism of this was obvious to everyone in the region. It was at Cer that Serbia had defeated the mighty Austro-Hungarian army in 1914. Mladic, who famously declared that he had avenged the 1389 Battle of Kosovo when he seized Srebrenica in 1995, could hardly have chosen a symbolically better place to escape, or, perhaps, be arrested!

On the morning after Mladic's "arrest" had been reported around the world, Serbia's newspapers could not agree on how to cover the story. Some front pages screamed "Mladic Arrested" while others went for the more cautious "Arrested?"

But, despite all of this, the moments of high media drama and the farcial, discreet briefings to all and sundry by Serbia's most "reliable sources", Braca Grubacic, one of Serbia's best-connected analysts, says it is clear that something really is happening or, at least, is about to happen.

Whereas in the past, he says, Mladic has lived in army barracks and had tight links to Serbia's security establishment, Kostunica's government - determined not to have talks with the EU suspended and also to create some positive PR just at the moment that talks on the future of Kosovo have begun - has finally managed to "break Mladic's relations with the army". "I believe he is on his own now," said Grubacic.

If it had not been for the Mladic story, then another one might have been leading the news in Serbia - the on-going trial of members of the infamous Scorpions militia, who were filmed executing captured Muslims from Srebrenica in 1995. This week one of the accused told the court, "It is certain that I am guilty before God, but whether I am guilty for executing my orders, it is up to you to assess."

More than ten years after the crime, it is high time for the man who gave the orders to face justice too and not just the men who pulled the triggers.

Tim Judah is the author of *Serbia: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* and *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, both published by Yale University Press.

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