

## **REGIONAL REPORT: Croatia Faces Bobetko Extradition Dilemma**

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Prime Minister Ivica Racan faces electoral disaster next year if he gives in to Hague demands for the extradition of a national hero.

The indictment of General Janko Bobetko has caused uproar in Croatia, uniting the government and its rivals.

The tribunal demand for the 83-year-old national hero to appear at The Hague has caused more fury than the earlier row over the indictment of General Ante Gotovina.

More than 60 per cent of respondents in an opinion poll conducted by the most popular daily Vecernji List said Croatia should not extradite Bobetko under any circumstances, even if this incurs international sanctions.

Ever since the 2000 elections, when the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, lost power after a decade in office, the new left-of-centre ruling coalition and the opposition have rarely seen eye to eye on economic and war crimes issues.

The issue of cooperation with The Hague, in particular, has always provided the latter with the chance to portray the former as weak, indecisive and too compliant with Hague requests. Now, though, they appear to be singing from the same hymn sheet.

The indictment – which the Zagreb authorities on September 19 – charges General Bobetko with war crimes during a Croatian army operation in the Medak Pocket in September 1993.

Only made public in response to probes by the authorities, it accuses him of command and personal responsibility for the deaths of at least 100 civilians and prisoners of war, while Croatian army chief-of-staff and advisor to then president Franjo Tudjman. The indictment says he failed to prevent the crimes or punish the perpetrators.

Goran Granic, the deputy premier with the brief of managing cooperation with the tribunal, said the army action in Medak had been "necessary" and "in accordance with the constitution". He said the government would start a legal battle with the tribunal to protect the general.

The opposition, meanwhile, wants a referendum on further cooperation with The Hague. At present, legislation, adopted under strong international pressure during Tudjman's reign, obliges Zagreb to comply with tribunal extradition requests.

"I thought that all my battles were behind me. (Now) it has befallen me to start a new fight at 83, probably the last one and against another aggression against Croatia," Bobetko remarked on hearing of the indictment against him.

He insisted that he would not surrender to the tribunal alive, "Please have no doubt that I am able to do it!" he said, referring to the fact that he would not hesitate to commit suicide.

General Bobetko was born in year 1919. With his three brothers and father, he joined the Partisans under Josip Broz Tito in the fight against German occupation and fascism. He lost both his father and all three brothers in the war.

During Tito's Yugoslavia, he rose through the ranks, building a military career to become a general in the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA. He fell from grace in 1971 after joining the Croatian Spring, a movement within the ruling communist party that advocated greater rights for Croatia within Yugoslavia.

He retired but became politically active once more after the first multi-party elections in Croatia and the victory of Tudjman's HDZ.

After the Homeland War - the popular name for the war of independence - Bobetko published a controversial book *All My Battles*, detailing in more than 800 pages his role in the battlefields of Croatia and Bosnia.

The appearance of the book, which contained many sensitive military documents, led some analysts to conclude that it might take him to The Hague.

The reason why the Bobetko indictment has drawn such criticism is two-fold. He is widely regarded as a war hero and the tribunal has long been seen as anti-Croatian by much of the public.

Under Tudjman, the official position was that Croats could not be charged with war crimes because they conducted a defensive campaign. That is why every Hague indictment was considered unjust, since it suggested the aggressor, the Yugoslav army, was morally equivalent to the victim, Croatia.

The government of Prime Minister Racan generally supports cooperation with the tribunal, but would be committing electoral suicide if it agreed to hand over Bobetko.

With only a year to elections, and with modest results achieved cutting unemployment and economic reforms, the ruling coalition would not stand a chance in the polls.

Racan, therefore, faces dilemma. His government is likely to fall if he extradites Bobetko. But his country could find itself facing international isolation, exacerbating an already difficult situation in the country, if he fails to deport him

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