

Serbia Angered by Indictments

Author: [Milanka Saponja-Hadzic](#)

Government's tough stance appears designed to win votes in the short term, and leave extradition to others.

The Serbian government has reacted defensively and angrily to the Hague's demand for four top generals to be handed over to face Kosovo war crimes charges.

Analysts in Belgrade say the government is defending the indicted men because it is betting on an early election as a result of the no-confidence motion now being debated in parliament. That would leave the problem of sending the four to The Hague for a new government to deal with.

They warn that while the current leadership is trying to score points with voters, the issue is more likely to boost the ratings of nationalist parties.

Former army chief of staff Nebojsa Pavkovic, former Pristina corps commander Vladimir Lazarevic, current deputy Serbian interior minister and head of the ministry's public security department Sreten Lukic and his predecessor Vlastimir Djordjevic have been charged with war crimes in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999.

Belgrade reacted with shock to the disclosure of the Hague indictments on October 20, even though some state officials knew about them several weeks beforehand.

Serbian interior minister Dusan Mihajlovic was furious, and said the country "will be left without any police and army" if it extradites the generals. He said Lukic had "made a great contribution to reforming the police" since 2000.

Four days after the indictment was announced, several thousand policemen attended a rally in central Belgrade in support of Lukic. Police interviewed by IWPR said they were there because they had been ordered to attend.

Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic gave the rally his backing, although the only major politician to attend was Vojvodina regional assembly chairman Nenad Canak, who normally supports the Hague tribunal. A similar rally in support of General Lazarevic was held the next day in southern Serbia.

Meanwhile, the former ruling Socialist Party set up a group calling itself Defenders of the Truth, which announced rallies across Serbia.

The prime minister said he expected the tribunal to let the four cases be tried in a Serbian court, because the men had been "defending the country" in the Kosovo war. Justice minister Vladan Batic also called for any trial to be held in Belgrade, suggesting that the tribunal was already busy with other work. "I infer that these cases will be transferred to Belgrade," he said.

The original indictment was delivered to the Serbian government at the start of October. It was sealed, but its contents were made known to senior figures so as to facilitate arrests. But with no arrests likely, the document was unsealed later in the month.

The announcement could not have come at a worse time for the government, with the no confidence motion in progress and the opposition demanding an early election. In addition, Serbia faces a presidential election on November 16.

Some observers believe the government's tough reaction is a front designed to score points ahead of the expected election, and to abdicate responsibility for the unpleasant but inevitable task of handing the generals over for trial.

"The Serbian government obviously plans to leave the extradition – a hot potato – up to the new cabinet that will be formed after the elections," said political analyst Ognjen Pribicevic.

But lawyer Slobodan Beljanski believes that the government's adoption of rhetoric reminiscent of the Milosevic era is a high-risk strategy which could encourage support for nationalist groups. He said such an approach provides a "tailwind" for the Socialists and the Serbian Radical Party. "The anti-West language of government members can never be as convincing as that of the Socialists and Radicals," he said.

Beljanski thinks the government has wasted a lot of time by not preparing the country for Hague extraditions, "The government has let the past three years slip by without preparing the public for cooperation with The Hague."

Nor has the government worked on creating the right atmosphere to start its own war crimes process, says lawyer Dragoljub Todorovic, "Even the opportunity created by [prime minister Zoran] Djindjic's murder to change people's attitude to crime – the attitude of a people poisoned by Milosevic's propaganda – has been missed."

Natasha Kandic, one of Serbia's leading human rights figures, would like to see Serbs looking at the reasons behind the indictments – the crimes that took place in Kosovo.

"Why isn't anyone raising the question of whether General Lazarevic was responsible for Djakovica, the village of Meje, and other places where crimes were committed?" said Kandic, who is director of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre. "These generals are being defended, yet there is no mention of the crimes they are charged with."

"What kind of state sets the interests of indictees up against the rule of law? It [the state] is obliged to punish perpetrators of crimes, not to defend them."

Kandic says that the international community can do little more than continue to exert pressure on Serbia. More time needs to pass before Serbia is ready to face up to its past.

Other observers are more optimistic. "Things will quieten down, and the view that the state must meet its international obligations will prevail," said analyst Budimir Babovic.

Milanka Saponja-Hadzic is an IWPR contributor in Belgrade.

Location: [Serbia](#)
[Kosovo](#)

Focus: [International Criminal Tribunal for the former](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/serbia-angered-indictments>