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Serbia: Culture of Secrecy Persists

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Hague requests for secret documents fall on deaf ears as Yugoslavia's political rivals seek to shore up their positions.

Yugoslav and Serbian leaders are reluctant to hand over secret files to The Hague for fear of providing incriminating evidence against some of their closest associates in the military and police hierarchy.

Senior personnel in both institutions survived the overthrow of Milosevic largely unscathed and have realigned behind the country's present leaders, Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica and Serbian premier Zoran Djindjic.

Their reluctance to possibly compromise their new allies by opening police and military archives is reinforced by a 50-year-old information monopoly enjoyed by both.

The tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, and US ambassador at large for war crimes issues, Pierre Richard Prosper, both made explicit requests for the archives to be opened in April and May, hoping they contain vital information on the Milosevic regime's wartime activities. Belgrade's response has been ambiguous.

Despite promises of cooperation from Serbian interior minister Dusan Mihajlovic and Yugoslav foreign minister Goran Svilanovic, no concrete offers of support have been forthcoming.

In April, federal interior minister Zoran Zivkovic said access would be granted to those documents that do not endanger state interests, but he did not say who would decide on what constituted the latter.

Article 11 of the recently approved law on cooperation with The Hague tribunal stipulates that access to military and police archives is at the discretion of federal and republican governments.

Kostunica and Djindjic are currently locked in a battle for political supremacy and are heavily reliant on the support of the military and police.

Kostunica is in charge of the Yugoslav Army, VJ, which remains the least reformed institution in the country, both in terms of personnel and ideology. Djindjic, meanwhile, has control over the Serbian police. Both institutions are believed to be implicated in crimes committed in former Yugoslavia over the past decade.

The Yugoslav president is particularly dependent on the VJ secret service - a stronghold of opposition to The Hague - and would consider it a state interest to preserve their loyalty. Kostunica has used it to cast doubt on Djindjic's patriotism: service officials arrested Momcilo Perisic, Serbia's deputy prime minister and a member of Djindjic's cabinet, on suspicion of passing confidential military information to the United States.

But political rivalry between Kostunica-Djindjic is not the only reason behind the reluctance to open up the archives. For 50 years, the Yugoslav police and military have exercised a monopoly on information relating to their activities. A reality bewailed by every historian in the region.

Yugoslav Army's Institute of Military History guards army archives and the contents of these files are beyond the reach of the tribunal and ordinary Yugoslavs alike.

Unlike most democratic countries, Yugoslavia has no system in place to ensure archives are opened after a set time has passed. Hence even those relating to events as far back as World War Two remain under lock and key.

But it is not beyond the military's power to make available documents if it so chooses. After all, the VJ did publish a collection of documents entitled "The Yugoslav Army and Kosovo and Metohija 1998-1999 - Application of International Law" after that conflict.

The chief-of-staff and 1999 army commander in Kosovo, Nebojsa Pavkovic, said the publication would show that under his command, the army was careful not to apply excessive force and avoided committing crimes in Kosovo.

Likewise, the interior ministry has been selective in the documents made public since Milosevic's fall. The government has partly opened up Serbian State Security, RDB, files on Milosevic's opponents. Information on methods of surveillance and the names of informers were kept back, however, to protect the integrity of the service operations.

Both army and police officials blame the secrecy on politicians and claim they would grant access to all documents if only parliament would give its consent.

As far as the military is concerned, this is a rather lame argument as all its files have been labelled confidential. The same goes for the police, since a number of interior ministry and army records no longer exist.

The former communist leader Josip Broz Tito is thought to have purged the state archives after he dismissed the country's vice president and head of secret services Aleksander Rankovic in 1966, on charges of abusing the service.

Files were probably also destroyed when Milosevic came to power in the early Nineties and during the NATO bombardment of the Serbian interior ministry in 1999. More are likely to have disappeared during the four-month-long transition period following Milosevic's election defeat in the October 2000.

But there is also the real possibility that the former Belgrade leader did not commit some of his most incriminating conversations or decisions to paper at all. His closest cronies claim he preferred to communicate verbally. He also restricted detailed information to a small inner circle.

Given this habitual secrecy, the nature of the present political battles in Serbia and the probable gaps in the written record, The Hague's best bet for securing vital information lies in getting former close allies of Milosevic to speak out. The desk drawers of some may even hold private archives, kept to justify their roles or secure their futures.

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