

Serbia: Politicians Rubbish Milosevic 'Insider'

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Serbian politicians round on former Milosevic associate who implicated top officials in Kosovo war crimes.

Belgrade's political establishment sought to discredit the first Serbian insider to give evidence at the trial of Slobodan Milosevic, after he accused senior state officials of complicity in crimes committed in Kosovo.

Giving evidence over the past two weeks, Ratomir Tanic alleged that the former president of Yugoslavia plotted acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing against Kosovo Albanians and that current senior officials participated in the planning or were acquainted with the alleged crimes.

Tanic, though, has a somewhat controversial political past, belonging to a number of political parties, who today deny he had anything like the access to power he claims.

The Hague witness, whose testimony lasted three and a half days, claimed that through his involvement with the New Democracy, ND, party - then a member of the ruling coalition led by Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia - he aided "discreet political dialogue" between Belgrade and Kosovo Albanian leaders in the years 1995 to 1997.

He says his role was authorised by Dusan Mihajlovic, the ND leader and now Serbia's interior minister, but talks were suspended in early 1998 when, according to Tanic, Milosevic opted for "excessive use of force" against Albanian civilians.

Prosecutors at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague have placed high hopes on the evidence of Tanic, who was at first announced as the protected witness K3 but ultimately gave evidence under his own name, though with his face hidden.

Tanic accused Milosevic of resorting to a "private chain of command" over Yugoslav army and police units, because the Serbian secret police and the army's general staff opposed his actions.

The witness said close associates of Milosevic - including senior state officials Nikola Sainovic, Milomir Minic, Zoran Andjelkovic and Dusan Matkovic together with the then Yugoslav army commander in Kosovo and current army chief of staff General Nebojsa Pavkovic, were involved in the ruse.

Of the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, Tanic said that Milosevic and his colleagues had actually been "hoping for a small-scale bombing" to give them an excuse for the expulsion of Kosovo Albanians.

But his most serious accusation against Milosevic was the claim that the former Yugoslav president had been planning genocide and ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians ever since 1997.

Tanic also said that former Serbian secret service senior official Zoran Mijatovic, now serving at the Yugoslav embassy in Skopje, told him that Milosevic was responsible for mass graves of Albanians throughout Serbia.

The Hague witness said Mijatovic told him that Sreten Lukic, currently assistant to the Serbian interior minister, was directly responsible for these mass murders.

He went on to say that Mihajlovic, a former Serbian deputy prime minister, Momcilo Perisic, who was Yugoslav army chief of staff at the time, as well as current Serbian deputy premier Nebojsa Covic were familiar with Milosevic's plans.

During cross-examination, Milosevic attempted to challenge the credibility of Tanic's testimony, calling him "a false witness".

Back in Belgrade, the ND put out a press release saying that Tanic had only been a "sympathiser", not a party member and denied he was involved on its behalf in negotiations over Kosovo.

Then Mihajlovic told state television that Tanic could not be described as "an insider" given that he had not taken part in the events about which he was supposedly giving a testimony.

"The Hague tribunal is a serious institution and we should not have witnessed this. We should not have ended up in this laughable and ridiculous situation where the prosecution announces as a key witness a person who cannot possibly be that," he said.

Mijatovic also dismissed allegations that he told Tanic that Lukic was responsible for mass killings of Kosovo Albanians. Mijatovic, speaking to the Belgrade daily Blic, said Lukic was one of the most honourable people he had ever met. The latter declined to comment on Tanic's accusations.

The Civil Alliance of Serbia, GSS, the liberal party of Yugoslav foreign affairs minister Goran Svilanovic, has also denounced Tanic who was one of the party vice-presidents in 1993. "We are indeed surprised that he presented himself as a member of GSS given that his membership was only for three months," party spokesman Ivan Andric told Radio Free Europe.

While the Serbia's politicians rounded on Tanic, allegations that he collaborated with the Milosevic's secret police and its chief Jovica Stanisic also began to emerge.

An IWPR source, who was a member of the secret police in the early 90s, says Tanic was in regular contact with the service's then head, Zoran Mijatovic. The former regime's infiltration of opposition political parties to undermine and sometimes split them was a well-known ploy of the time.

This source further alleged that Tanic left the Civil Alliance of Serbia for the ND, where he was a member of the party council and a foreign policy advisor, after a dispute with a GSS official over a large debt.

The secret service discovered that Tanic was secretly cooperating with The Hague tribunal, and this led to his arrest in October 1999, the source claims.

Speaking about the arrest in court, Tanic claimed that he and his wife were "kidnapped" and tortured for two days in two "private prisons" to try to force him into confessing that he was part of a "a British secret service conspiracy against Milosevic".

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