Serbia Unlikely to Open Army Archives Soon

Author: IWPR ICTY

Despite increasing pressure from legal experts and human rights groups, Serbian officials say military documents will remain confidential for many years to come. International scholars, legal experts and rights activists have stepped up efforts to persuade Belgrade to open up the archives of armed forces and let them study the 1990s transcripts of its Supreme Defence Council, SDC, the highest military authority.

Some of those transcripts have already been handed over to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, where they were submitted as evidence in the trial of former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, but most documents remain unavailable to historians and researchers.

Experts believe that without these documents it is impossible to make any real conclusions on the role of Serbia in the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia.

At the SDC sessions in the Nineties, top officials mainly discussed security issues, but experts believe they also talked about helping Serb rebels in Bosnia and Croatia. Although many would like to get unimpeded access to these documents, Miladin Milosevic, director of the Archives of Serbia and Montenegro, says the files would not be thrown open any time soon.

“Those documents are available to the Hague tribunal, but not to researchers.... Documents that belong to the highest national institutions cannot be available before the legal deadline has expired, which is 30 years,” he said, drawing comparisons with many countries where confidential documents are not released for decades.

“In many countries, national institutions’ documents, including those relating to defence, security and foreign affairs, are not available for much longer periods of time, for 50 years and even longer.”

Belgrade, for example, refused to hand over the documents to the International Court of Justice when it was trying the accusations Bosnia made of genocide against Serbia.

Sonja Biserko, president of the Helsinki Committee in Serbia, believes the Serbian government had very close ties to Serb rebel forces in the other countries of the former Yugoslavia, and thus must share some of the blame for their crimes. She claims that the documents could well show that.

“The Hague tribunal prosecution and the Serbian government made a deal not to show those documents to experts and the public, because those transcripts clearly show that Serbia was deeply involved in the war in Bosnia,” she said.

The existence of such a deal between Chief Prosecutor Carla del Ponte and Belgrade has long been rumoured, but the spokeswoman for the ICTY denied it was possible.
“That is not and cannot be the responsibility of the tribunal or one of its bodies, including the prosecution. In accordance with the rules on procedures and evidence, only tribunal judges can make decisions on protection measures which would prevent the public display of documents, so any claim that the prosecution is involved in hiding evidence is completely false,” said spokeswoman Olga Kavran.

The Milosevic trial ended when he died in detention in The Hague in March last year, so those documents are no longer being used. Since Serbia was acquitted of genocide charges in the case brought to ICJ, rights activists wonder why Belgrade still insists on their confidentiality.

Biserko said many members of the current Serbian government were involved in the activities of the 1990s, when led by Milosevic, and suspected that was a main reason why the documents are still held hidden from the public eye.

“Slobodan Milosevic was removed from power... but his ideas survived, which is evident from the situation in which Serbia is today,” she said.

“The Serbian government still hasn’t given up on Republika Srpska or Kosovo, which shows it has not given up on Milosevic’s aspirations either, only now they are trying to reach them without open conflicts with the international community.”

Slobodan Kostic is a reporter with Radio Free Europe and IWPR journalist in Belgrade.

**Location:** Balkans
- Serbia
- Kosovo
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