

## **Serbia: War Crimes Row**

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A conflict between the independent media and NGOs highlights Serb politicians' disdain for war crimes debate.

Leading non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and the Serbian independent media are rowing over the country's responsibility for war crimes.

The NGOs claim newspapers and broadcasters ignore or downplay war crimes, while the latter accused the former of wrongly pushing an idea of collective national guilt.

The debate - which has raged between the Humanitarian Law Centre and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights on one side and Radio TV B92 and weekly newspaper Vreme on the other - has attracted significant public attention, and has underlined the failure of Serbia's leading politicians to address the war crimes issue and the lingering social tension it causes.

This split in the non-governmental sector is unprecedented. Over the past decade, NGOs and the independent media have avoided public arguments among themselves and reserved their energy for the fight against common enemy Slobodan Milosevic.

But after Milosevic's fall on October 5, 2000, Serbian civil society gradually divided into two groups. The first advocates a fast and uncompromising split with the legacy of the former regime, while the second favours a somewhat moderate approach.

The differences have become more and more obvious, finally coming to a head in August this year over the issue of who is and who isn't ready to come to grips with the war crimes issue.

The debate was thrust onto the public stage on August 1 by an article in the Croatian magazine Feral Tribune in which Belgrade journalist Petar Lukovic accused B92 and Vreme weekly of turning a blind eye to Serbian atrocities over the last decade.

In his article, Lukovic claimed the Serbian independent media had received foreign donations amounting to 30 million US dollars in the course of 2002, yet refused to have a proper debate about the past and Serbia's role in it.

In the same article, Serbian Helsinki Committee head Sonja Biserko accused the country's independent media and intellectual elite of "making efforts not only to minimise the crimes, but also to de-ethnify them".

"The manner in which this new truth is presented, especially through the so-called independent media such as B92 or Vreme, is as totalitarian as the nationalism that set off the war machinery not so long ago," said Biserko.

However, the media rejected the accusations and returned the attack in kind.

B-92 editor-in-chief, Veran Matic, the strongest and most influential anti-Milosevic media in Serbia for an entire decade, replied to Lukovic in the following issue of Feral Tribune. "The request for life to come to a standstill until the graves are exhumed is simply insane," Matic wrote.

Matic was soon joined by Dragoljub Zarkovic, editor-in-chief of the Belgrade weekly Vreme, who criticised Biserko for advocating the idea of collective responsibility for war crimes. "A way of thinking that accuses an entire people of being responsible for a crime is a totalitarian one," he wrote.

This conflict is partly a result of Belgrade's leading political circles failure to address the war crimes issue. Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic and Yugoslav president Vojislav Vojislav Kostunica have taken few serious steps towards facing the problem of atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia.

Djindjic, known as a pragmatic, pro-reform politician, did extradite Milosevic to The Hague, but many believe he only did this in response to Washington's hesitations over approving aid to Serbia.

People who once led operations in Kosovo in which war crimes were committed still occupy major posts in the Serbian police. The post-Milosevic authorities have launched no investigations into such matters.

Almost a year ago, the bodies of Kosovo Albanians were discovered in several mass graves at police training grounds in Batajnica, near Belgrade. However, the authorities have not released the results of any investigation, and not a single indictment has been issued.

According to some observers, President Kostunica has downplayed war crimes by claiming that all the nations of former Yugoslavia committed such offences. On one occasion, the president was quoted as saying that cooperation with The Hague makes his stomach turn.

The two political rivals are preoccupied with the upcoming presidential elections set for September 29 and are avoiding the issue - each perhaps fearing their adversary could accuse them of a lack of patriotism that could then affect their performance at the polls.

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