

Seselj's Last Stand

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Serbian nationalist's litany of complaints against The Hague masks seriousness of charges he faces

Vojislav Seselj has always enjoyed being in the spotlight. When he held political office, the former paramilitary leader and founder of the Serbian Radical Party got into brawls in parliament and at least once threw a glass of water over another deputy.

So it came as no surprise that when Seselj was indicted by The Hague on 14 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, he would make a spectacle of it.

He immediately announced his intention to travel to the Netherlands, declaring, "I will not let anyone arrest me. I shall go when it pleases me." A few days later, after a farewell rally attended by some 10,000 supporters, he bought his own plane ticket and boarded a flight to the Netherlands, promising to "blast The Hague to pieces".

The indictment issued on February 14 accuses Seselj of commanding paramilitary units known as Chetniks or Seseljevci who tortured, beat, sexually assaulted, expelled and killed thousands of Croats and Muslims in Croatia and Bosnia. After pleading not guilty on all counts he demanded that he be allowed to represent himself before what he said was an "illegal" tribunal in order to defend "Serb nationalism before the whole world".

The judges presiding over his case agreed to allow him to defend himself, but fearful that he would try to emulate the former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic by mocking the tribunal and making political speeches, they appointed him a "stand-by counsel" who could take over if his behaviour become unruly.

Seselj wrote a letter of protest and threatened to go on a hunger strike.

Since then, the former paramilitary commander, who holds a PhD and was once a lecturer in political science at Sarajevo university, has since bombarded the court with hundreds of pages of letters in an effort to focus attention on his case. They paint a picture of a disturbed man.

Seselj has written all the letters by hand because he says he fears the laptop computer given to him by the court is intended to harm him with electric shocks.

In one of his letters, he vowed not to allow his defence counsel to aid him in any way, not even to "wash my laundry or clean my shoes". In another, he claimed that he didn't understand the 30-page indictment that was read out in his pre-trial hearing because the court translator was speaking Croatian, not Serbian.

"During both my appearances to date before the court, interpretation into Serbian was poor and incomprehensible because one of the interpreters used too many artificial linguistic expressions, these so-called Croatisms, which do not adhere to the spirit and sense of the Serbian language," he said.

As an example, he cited the word "count", which Serbs pronounce as "tachka" while the Croatian form is "tochka". He also referred to the word "pagan". In Serbian, the word is "paganin" but the court translator reportedly used the Croatian "poganin".

Seselj wrote that being forced to listen to such translations exerted unbearable pressure on him and showed the “very pronounced Croatian and Muslim bias” of the tribunal.

He has asked for every document relating to his case to be translated into Serbian and has lashed out at the court for providing him documents in English and French, saying that this “constitutes a violation of my civil and human rights”. He has also demanded that the tribunal security guards speak to him only in Serbian - a language most of them don’t speak.

In other letters, he complained about the tribunal’s security procedures which require that the accused wear bullet-proof vests when they are being transported to court. Seselj readdressed the issue in a 13-page letter in March, in which he claimed that since the vest would not protect him from a sniper or rocket attack, the measure was clearly “a rather efficient means of physical torture”.

In the same letter, he also complained that the security guards’ methods caused him to become sexually aroused, which prevented him from concentrating on his defence.

“I have a special problem with security guards who, during the search, touch the erogenous zones in my groin with their sensitive fingers, and so when I enter the courtroom I look around for women instead of concentrating on pre-trial matters,” he wrote.

Most recently, Seselj demanded that the tribunal dismiss the judges presiding over his trial. As grounds for removing Judge Schomburg, Seselj cited the fact that he is German, a nation he says is biased against Serbs. “Whenever I see Wolfgang Schomburg, I remember Auschwitz, Mauthausen and Jasenovac. The smell of crematoria and gas chambers comes into the Hague courtroom with him,” he wrote.

He requested that the other two judges, Florence Ndepele Mwachande Mumba of Zambia and Judge Carmel A. Agius of Malta be removed because they are Catholics. In his eyes, the Catholic church is one of the “most dangerous criminal organizations” and has perpetrated many crimes against Serbs.

The tribunal has refused most of his requests, but he had to spend a considerable amount of time and money translating and responding to the letters – a fact Seselj no doubt enjoys.

But if Seselj thinks his letters are playing well to the Serbian public back home, polls show otherwise. Six months ago, Seselj won 36 per cent of the vote in Serbia and Montenegro’s presidential election. A newly released poll by the Skan agency shows that fewer than 4.6 per cent of Serbia’s voters now have a favourable opinion of the former Chetnik leader.

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