

## **Srebrenica's Unfinished Business**

**Author:** [Daniel Serwer](#)

The arrest of the two top war crimes suspects in Bosnia would have a positive impact locally and internationally.

The key point about the tenth anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica, commemorated last month, is what is still missing. Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, the men accused of being the chief perpetrators of the ensuing massacre – the greatest war crime in Europe since the Second World War – are still at large.

Mladic led the Serb forces at Srebrenica, allegedly working under Belgrade's command, while Karadzic, as the Bosnian Serb political leader, issued a directive calling for the attack.

In the aftermath of the assault, Serb forces captured and murdered more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys. More than 2,000 of them have now been positively identified.

Karadzic and Mladic are thought to be hiding out in the Serb-controlled parts of Bosnia, in Serbia, and in Serbian monasteries in Montenegro.

Indicted years ago by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, both men are still celebrated figures in their chosen places of refuge, even though they are reviled in the rest of the world.

What difference does it make? The answer to this question looks rather like the concentric circles formed when a pebble is dropped into still water. As each circle spreads, the size of the wave is smaller, but its reach is wider.

Obviously, the issue makes a difference to those whose loved ones were killed. Their lives will never be the same, but they expect justice to be served. They also expect compensation from Serbia, which to date has not accepted responsibility for the crime, despite the profoundly expressed regrets of its current president.

It also makes a difference to those who supported Karadzic and Mladic ten years ago and who continue to harbour them.

Virulent Serbian nationalism thrives on defiance of the Hague tribunal, but once its heroes go on trial, it will be neutered politically in both Serbia and Republika Srpska, RS, the Serb-controlled part of Bosnia. That is what has happened to former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic during his long trial in The Hague: while many people still root for him and his political party helps maintain the current government in Belgrade, he himself no longer counts as a serious political factor there.

The failure to arrest and try the two most prominent war crimes suspects of the Bosnian war has fostered a culture of denial, hatred and distrust in many Serb communities, including the diaspora. If future generations in Bosnia and Serbia are to be free of this burden, those who are accused of the greatest guilt for the crimes committed at Srebrenica have to be held to account. Serbs as a group are not guilty, but there are specific individuals who are.

For the territories in which Karadzic and Mladic are thought to be hiding, how and where they are arrested will make a difference.

If Montenegro's security forces make an arrest, the republic will highlight that it is distinct from Serbia and that it is prepared to accept its international responsibilities – thus strengthening its claim to independence. If Serbian security forces arrest Mladic - or if he surrenders “voluntarily”- Serbia will quickly find its relations with both the United States and the European Union vastly enhanced.

If RS forces arrest either suspect, the entity will find its relations with both the US and EU improved, but if NATO makes an arrest inside Bosnia, RS will get no credit. If Karadzic gives himself up, as his wife has now publicly requested, he will enhance his own reputation in RS, but little credit will go to the authorities there.

The sad fact is that many in RS - including the governing parties - think little wrong was done at Srebrenica, the argument being that any crimes were retaliation for attacks on Serbs. A fair and public trial will do a great deal to disabuse Serbs of the notion that premeditated mass murder is justifiable as self-defence.

The Balkans region as a whole would benefit from the capture of Karadzic and Mladic. Many in Croatia, Macedonia and Kosovo will regard it as justice if those accused of responsibility for crimes against humanity at Srebrenica go on trial. It will become far easier for Kosovo Albanians, Macedonians and Croatians to accept trials of people from their own groups - some of whom are already in The Hague - if the top Serb indictees are also there.

Croatia is particularly important since it has failed so far to deliver the indicted General Ante Gotovina to The Hague. If Mladic, the Serbs' war hero, is on trial, Croats will be more willing to accept that their own wartime commander should face judicial proceedings.

More broadly, holding Karadzic and Mladic to account will send a clear signal to those who take up arms against fellow-citizens that they will be held accountable for their actions, whatever they say to justify their cause.

Armies and paramilitaries that are supplied or controlled from a neighbouring territory are common in our post-Cold War world: think of Nicaragua, Democratic Republic of Congo, and East Timor. All too often they are unaware of their responsibilities to protect civilians, and in fact they often target them to displace them from their homes. The rules of war are not just for wars between sovereign states, but also for armed forces everywhere, including self-proclaimed freedom fighters.

Finally, the arrest of Karadzic and Mladic will greatly enhance the credibility and prestige of the United States and the European Union.

Accountability will help prevent future crimes, while impunity will only encourage wrongdoing. The fact that Karadzic and Mladic are still at large is a sign of the international community's impotence. Their long overdue arrest and transfer to The Hague will signal that justice, though delayed, cannot be denied.

Daniel Serwer is Vice President and Director for Peace and Stability Operations at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are his own.

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/srebrenicas-unfinished-business>