

Surprise at Babic Indictment

Author: [Milanka Saponja](#)

Former president of breakaway Croatian Serb republic is accused of war crimes, despite testifying against Milosevic.

The news that a war crimes indictment has been served against former Croatian Serb leader Milan Babic has taken the Balkans by surprise.

It had been expected that Babic, an insider witness who has given crucial evidence against former Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic, would possibly avoid prosecution.

Babic was indicted on November 17 for alleged crimes against humanity and violations of the laws and customs of war, including the persecution and killings of Croats in Knin and the destruction of property.

It's the latest controversy surrounding Babic. Once a respectable provincial dentist, he became a nationalist politician who enjoyed Milosevic's greatest confidence - but was later one of the first Serb leaders to publicly oppose him.

Babic, 46, has often been described as "ambitious, cunning and inflexible". As Krajina Serb leader, his controversial decision in August 1991 to block the Knin-Zagreb road to stop Croatian police entering Knin - the so-called "log revolution" - foreshadowed the region's descent into war.

Babic was a prominent member of the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, in Croatia when it was founded in February 1990, and two years later he became party leader, following the death of the incumbent Jovan Raskovic.

In May 1991, Babic became prime minister of the self-proclaimed Serb Autonomous Region of Krajina, which sought independence from Croatia, and ultimately wanted to join with Serbia. By the end of the year, the rebel entity had declared itself a republic, with Babic as its president.

He remained in this post until February 15, 1992, after Milosevic declared a presidential there election null and void.

The conflict with Belgrade was caused by Babic's refusal to accept the Vance peace plan for the deployment of peacekeeping troops in Krajina, which Babic claimed would make it possible for the Croats to achieve their "genocidal plan for an ethnically cleansed Croatia".

Political analysts note that Babic had a history of conflicts with authority figures, citing disagreements with his former party leader Raskovic and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, as well as with Milosevic.

Once his conflict with Milosevic cooled, Babic became the interior minister in the Krajina government, and a year later prime minister, a post he occupied until July 1995.

Babic came to Serbia with his family a month before the Croats launched their offensive, Operation

Storm, in July 1995. In Belgrade, he lived the life of an ordinary man trying to provide for his family, and reportedly produced and sold decorative eggs to make a living.

Milanka Saponja Hadzic is a regular IWPR contributor in Belgrade.

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