

## **Tadic Car Accident Exposes Divisions in Serbia**

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Contrasting interpretations of the presidential motorcade incident reveals a society able to agree on almost nothing.

An apparent road-rage attack on the Serbian president's motorcade has once again exposed the deep divisions in Serbian society, torn between nationalist opponents of the Hague court and those who see cooperation with the tribunal as the only way to Europe.

The former instantly dismissed the attack on the president's car as a political stunt, while the latter were equally quick to claim he had been the victim of an assassination attempt, similar to the one that killed former prime minister Zoran Djindjic in March 2003.

A black audi with Belgrade number plates followed the convoy carrying President Boris Tadic from the centre of Belgrade, repeatedly attempting to hit his car at around 9 pm local time on November 30. The convoy was clearly marked with rotating lights.

The attack was foiled thanks to swift action by Tadic's bodyguards in the Cobra elite anti-terrorist unit, who swerved a vehicle towards the assailant's car, hitting it on one side. Having temporarily lost control, the driver of the audi escaped.

He was later revealed as Miroslav Cimpl, a longtime employee of the US embassy.

Initial reports that there had been an attempt to assassinate the president spread like a wild fire, raising fears of a repeat of the events of 2003 when Djindjic was shot dead in the middle of Belgrade.

Twenty-four hours after the dramatic incident involving Tadic, Dragan Jovic, the police minister, announced it had, after all, been a "traffic accident".

Cimpl turned himself in to the police as the driver of the audi, minister Jovic said. He added that Cimpl had been returning home after driving his children to a birthday party and "simply did not know what was going on when he came across the presidential escort". Jovic explained, "He had never encountered such driving and became irritated and started manoeuvring with his car."

While some sections of the Serbian media used the revelation to pander to anti-American sentiment, one newspaper blaming the whole affair on an "aggressive employee of the American embassy", many Belgraders still do not accept the police version.

They continue to believe Tadic was attacked deliberately for his outspoken pro-western and pro-European stance and for his calls for the extradition of war crimes indictees to The Hague.

"This is a warning to Tadic," said one passer-by interviewed by IWPR. "The man involved in the accident worked as security for the American embassy. I find it hard to believe he couldn't recognise the flashing lights of a presidential motorcade."

Summing up many people's ingrained scepticism about information from official sources, another man told IWPR, "If they think we are stupid enough to believe their stories, they should remember we lived under Milosevic for ten years."

Callers jammed the website of radio B92, the media outlet of choice for liberals and centrists, with over 400 messages, most expressing distress and dismay over the incident.

"I hope Cimpl was not too traumatised by the rotating lights, which he saw for the first time in his life," one sarcastic message read.

The President of Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marovic, has also said he remains unconvinced that Tadic was a victim of a simple traffic accident. Marovic is another outspoken supporter of co-operation with the Hague court.

Marovic told the media earlier this week he had received threatening letters from opponents of the tribunal, saying he would be killed for supporting the hunt for former Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladic.

Other high officials who support cooperation with the Hague court also said they had been threatened in recent weeks. The Serbia and Montenegro ambassador to Austria said on November 24 that an unknown body, the Serbian Patriotic Organisation, sent a fax to the embassy, threatening to kill Tadic and Vuk Draskovic, the state's foreign minister.

However, as the story of Tadic's car accident has unravelled, a third group of commentators has begun to suggest that the president's staff blew the incident out of all proportion to whip up political support.

Two popular tabloids, Balkan and Kurir, openly dismissed the accident as an attempt by Tadic's cabinet to score extra points for their man.

The well-known political analyst, Bratislav Grubacic, took a similar line. The move to portray the event as a failed assassination bid was "an ugly attempt to play on Djindjic's tragic murder", he told the media.

Grubacic said on the night of the accident, the president's cabinet, instead of calling the police, had called a press conference at 1 am to announce that Tadic had been the victim of an assassination attempt.

"Having in mind public fears since Djindjic's assassination, Tadic's advisers behaved quite irresponsibly," Grubacic added.

Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the hard-line nationalist Serbian Radical Party, SRS, said he believed Tadic's media team had "spun" the incident for their own political advantage.

The incident came at the time when the war of words between Tadic's Democratic Party, DS, and the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, has intensified, amid signs that Tadic wants to pull out of his earlier agreement for mutual cohabitation.

On the day of the incident, Tadic had sharply criticised Kostunica's government, saying that its failure to

cooperate with the tribunal, the lack of a political consensus over Kosovo and the disastrous economy all posed massive problems.

Stung by the criticism, the DSS on November 30 accused Tadic of being a political “poser”. Throwing all the responsibility for these failures back into the president’s corner, the party said, “Serbia does not need another poser but a president who is capable of doing his job.”

Analysts say the DS appears to be preparing the ground for a parliamentary vote of no-confidence against the Kostunica government, counting on the support of deputies from the ruling coalition who are unhappy with its progress.

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