

## **VIEWPOINT: Serbia's New Capital**

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Serbian citizens are still in denial over war crimes and continue to reject the tribunal. But the engine of change in Serbia - and its greatest hope - is The Hague.

The new Serbia has no will to confront war crimes - not its officials, nor its citizens. Although there are visible signs suggesting the opposite, these are a result of western pressure for cooperation with The Hague, based on the international community's clear message: you give us the criminals, we give you the money.

Although many things in Serbia have changed - Slobodan Milosevic is in prison, his Socialist Party is practically destroyed, and every day brings new evidence of the corruption of the old regime - the attitude of Serbian citizens towards the atrocities carried out by the state over the past decade in their name is unchanged. The same firm resistance remains to confronting the most terrible of all truths, the dark cloud of crime and massacre shadowing the deeds of the Serbian military and paramilitary.

Even today, the majority of Serbs is bitter that Milosevic lost all his wars and much territory: Srpska Krajina, Eastern Slavonia, a large slice of Bosnia, Kosovo. It doesn't cross anyone's mind to accuse Milosevic of having started those wars in the first place.

As confirmed in a recent opinion poll carried out by the Strategic Marketing agency, Serbs accept that Milosevic may be guilty of corruption, treason, and electoral fraud, yielding to the international community, lack of patriotism, etc. But only 10 per cent of those polled believe he is guilty for war crimes.

Two-thirds of respondents oppose extraditing Yugoslav citizens to The Hague, while one-fifth reject any cooperation with the tribunal. Only 12 per cent believe Serbia should cooperate with The Hague as part of a process of taking responsibility for war crimes.

Among the 27 per cent of respondents who support cooperation, one-third does not believe this should extend to the extradition of former president Milosevic. Half believe Serbia should cooperate only for practical reasons - for the sake of financial credits and international economic assistance.

The plan of the current Belgrade authorities to try Milosevic in domestic courts on charges of financial misdeeds thus corresponds precisely to the majority view of the population. But it is also a farce and a tragedy.

Such a trial, placing war crimes at the margins or not mentioning them at all, is only another way to avoid giving answers to too many questions: Why was Vukovar crushed? Who ordered the attack on Dubrovnik? What were Zeljko ("Arkan") Raznatovic's troops doing in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Why did Radovan Karadzic shell Sarajevo for years? Who was responsible for the concentration camps? Under whose ultimate authority were 7,000 Bosniaks killed in Srebrenica? These matters are simply too heavy for Serbian citizens to deal with.

Paradoxically, even while such a climate prevails, The Hague is being increasingly discussed. Part of this is attributable to the few energetic independent supporters of the war crimes tribunal. But a large part is also due to the international blackmail attempts to blackmail the authorities into cooperating. As such, breakthroughs may be important, but still remain only symbolic.

In late April, for example, TV station B92/ANEM showed a documentary film about Srebrenica; the station reported its strongest listener reaction ever (albeit most harshly critical).

Serbian crimes in Kosovo are also spoken of more frequently. Even a Yugoslav Army spokesperson stated at a press conference that 250 as yet unnamed soldiers and officers are to go on trial, indicted for misuse of authority, killing or harassing civilians and plundering property. However, the seriousness of these procedures remains to be seen.

The Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre, HLC, has also called for an investigation into allegations that the Serbian police and the Yugoslav Army were instructed to remove at least 800 bodies of Kosovo Albanians, including women, children and elderly people. According to HLC, the bodies were transferred from original burial grounds to secret locations in Kosovo and Serbia.

The detail being made public in Serbia by the HLC about war crimes is graphic. On the night of May 17-18, 1999, 87 bodies of Kosovo Albanians freshly killed and buried in a cemetery in Djakovica were exhumed. Bodies of 130 men executed in the village of Izbice were dug up from a mass grave and taken to an unknown location. Bodies of 107 men killed in Velika Krusa on March 26, 1999, have never been found.

According to data recently published by Timocka Krimi Revija, a local paper in eastern Serbia, during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, a freezer lorry containing around 50 bodies was pulled out of the Danube. The lorry had licence plates from Pec, in western Kosovo and a white freezer container. The bodies were then taken in the direction of Gornji Milanovac, in eastern Serbia. Local authorities were informed about the event, and the case was proclaimed a state secret.

Now the secret is out. Although media widely reported on the story, no official action was taken. But for many ordinary Serbs the lorry case was not big news. For years, those interested knew what the Yugoslav Army and the Serbian police were doing in Kosovo. During the NATO bombing we heard terrible stories but only in private: how Albanians were forced to give up their identity cards, how they were murdered or forced into exile with no documents in order to ethnically cleanse the province. We knew that all this was conducted with the approval of Milosevic in the name of lunatic, fascist ideas.

Today, faced with increasing war crimes indictments and fresh evidence, Serbia is trying to buy time and make the problem seem relative. The formation of a State Commission for Truth and Reconciliation - following the South African example - is a plan not to confront the truth but to avoid it. Developed by Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica, the idea is not to discuss war crimes but to apportion blame for the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Two distinguished members, writer and publisher Latinka Perovic and law professor and human rights activist Vojin Dimitrijevic, resigned because they were not allowed to investigate the most important question: Serbia's culpability for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia.

Cooperation with The Hague is also the cause of disagreement within the ruling coalition, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, which is split into two factions, one led by President Kostunica, the other by Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic.

Pro-Kostunica media have informed us that any form of cooperation with the tribunal must be justified by a new law. Renowned experts confirm that implementing such legislation is not necessary - the state's cooperation is codified through its membership in the United Nations, of which the tribunal is a part. But Kostunica's aim is clear - the process of passing a new bill will slow down cooperation for at least a few months.

Kostunica's nationalist bloc goes further, insisting variously that Serbs committed no war crimes because

they were acting in national defence; that Serbs are the victims; that Milosevic only made political decisions and therefore cannot be guilty for war crimes; and that a civil war took place in ex-Yugoslavia and that therefore all parties were equally culpable. As Kostunica told journalists in Cacak in August 2000, "There is no solid evidence suggesting that Serbs committed any war crimes."

In the circumstances, media coverage of the question is chaotic. Just as the Yugoslav Army is itself acknowledging war crimes in Kosovo, the Serbian journalist who first broke the ground on the subject, Miroslav Filipovic (writing for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting) renounced one important fact in his articles. Writing to the Belgrade daily Danas - which was then serialising a text about his reporting - Filipovic denied that he had had access to an internal report testifying to crimes.

Putting aside that he was convicted under the old regime for "espionage" and that his access to this report would have formed a key part of the prosecution case, it seemed clear and utterly logical to observers that this retraction was motivated by Filipovic's continuing connections with the Yugoslav Army, especially his friendship with Chief of Yugoslav Army General Staff Nebojsa Pavkovic, who was for the first time directly linked to the report in the article serialised in Danas. If war crimes charges must be made, it seems the army certainly prefers to make them itself.

Nevertheless, the pro-nationalist NIN magazine seized on the affair to argue that accusations against Serbs have always been exaggerated and suggested that Filipovic was a liar set on bringing shame on the entire nation.

"I have interviewed reservists and I never came across such stories [as Filipovic]," Liljana Smajlovic the author of the NIN article, told IWPR. She said this only ten days before the Humanitarian Law Centre released its explosive findings about 800 missing Albanians.

Just how many other stories of atrocities the Serbian nationalist press core failed - or refused - to uncover we will see over the coming months and years.

Kosovo remains a cancer within the Serbian consciousness, but it is only one of several. Forthcoming indictments against Milosevic by The Hague for war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia will create another shock within Serbia, and can be expected to unleash the same emotions of denial and anger, confusion and resentment.

The simple truth is that Serbia cannot become a normal country until it is able to face its terrible past. The trickle of reports about atrocities must become a shower. The occasional controversies over war crimes must become a central part of regular debate. The state and the nation must realise that some Serbs are guilty of crimes and have to face the consequences of their actions.

The surest way is to send Milosevic to The Hague. And it doesn't stop there. Radovan Karadzic, Gen. Ratko Mladic, Col. Veselin Slijivancanin, and dozens of second- and third-rate killers whose names we do not yet know - they all need one-way tickets to The Netherlands. Milan Milutinovic, indicted for war crimes in Kosovo and still president of Serbia, Nikola Sainovic, a senior Socialist Party official, possibly even Gen. Pavkovic - they, too, must be brought to account.

For now, such moves have been adamantly ruled out by the authorities in Belgrade. But extradition is not only a question of The Hague's success. It is in the first place a question of Serbia's future.

Serbia is on the move, but six months into democracy, an honest and stable future - one based not on lies, crimes and corruption but on truth and the rule of law - has yet to begin.

That is why, whether Serbs like it or not, The Hague has become the capital of the new Serbia. And as long as this is the case, Serbs - at least theoretically - have something to hope for.

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