

## **Vladimir Lazarevic**

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Hawkish Pristina Corps commander's by-the-book attitude took him to the top – and kept him there through war and revolution.

General Vladimir Lazarevic, who is expected in The Hague next week to face war crimes charges relating to the Kosovo conflict, was a prominent military man well known for his hawkish views.

He agreed to travel to The Hague after discussions with Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica on January 28, some fifteen months after the tribunal indictment against him and his fellow Serb generals Nebjosa Pavkovic, Vlastimir Djordjevic and Sreten Lukic was unsealed.

The four generals are charged with individual and command responsibility for crimes committed in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, and face four counts of crimes against humanity and one count of violations of the laws and customs of war – murder.

Lazarevic was born in the southern Serbian town of Gricar on March 23, 1949, and chose a career in the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA.

Army sources told IWPR that Lazarevic is viewed as a man who made a career for himself with a rigid and by-the-book implementation of military rules and doctrines, as well as bureaucratic regulations typical for communist bloc armies such as the JNA.

He first came to prominence in 1988 when he was appointed chief of staff of the JNA's Pristina corps, which had responsibility for the entire territory of Kosovo. On December 25 of that year, then president Slobodan Milosevic signed a decree promoting Lazarevic to corps commander. He reported to his fellow indictee Pavkovic, who was the JNA's Third Army commander at the time.

During the 1998-99 Kosovo conflict, the Serbian media built a cult of personality around Lazarevic and Pavkovic, who were portrayed as the heroes of Serbia's defence from NATO and the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA. The official army gazette went as far to publish poems glorifying the two generals' combat skills and accomplishments.

Lazarevic remained the head of the Pristina corps after the Serb security forces pulled out of Kosovo in June 1999. He was promoted to chief of staff of the Third Army in December 1999 and became its commander in March 2000.

He has a reputation of being a modest man who commanded great respect from his fellow officers and common soldiers alike, because of his candid manner and frequent trips to the frontlines.

However, he is also known as a close political and ideological ally of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, himself now standing trial at the Hague on charges including genocide for the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo.

Lazarevic became infamous for his hawkish stance on a number of issues, most notably Kosovo and the international community.

After Serb forces withdrew from the region, Lazarevic was one of several Milosevic supporters who spoke at length about the Serbian army's eventual return to Kosovo.

"With God's help ... this people and this army of ours will return to their ancient cradle, the sacred Serbian land of Kosovo," Lazarevic said in December 1999.

But such statements were pure propaganda and had no weight, as Milosevic did not dare to re-commit his forces in the now United Nations protectorate after such a decisive defeat there.

Lazarevic was still commander of the Third Army when the Milosevic regime was overthrown on October 5, 2000. Many of the top brass immediately approached new president Kostunica and offered him their loyalty in exchange for keeping their posts, with the result that little changed in the army hierarchy.

Kostunica's relationship with the generals complicated the resolution of a security crisis in southern Serbia in December 2001, when Serb security forces clashed with local ethnic Albanian guerrillas of the Liberation Army of Presvo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, UCPMB.

Many politicians such as Nebojsa Covic, head of the Serbian government's coordinating body for southern Serbia, advocated a peaceful solution to the crisis with a limited use of security forces. But Lazarevic's hawkish nature came to the fore once again, and he advocated a strong military response.

The world saw this as yet another sign that the new democratic authorities in Belgrade had failed to impose full civilian control over the army and shake off the legacy of the Milosevic regime.

The south Serbia crisis was later resolved by Covic's conciliatory methods, and the international community began to lobby hard for Belgrade to clear out its Milosevic-era army general and start afresh. However, these pleas fell on deaf ears, and Kostunica resisted all calls for reform.

Lazarevic kept his post with Kostunica's support, although he cut down his public appearances and stopped making inflammatory statements.

Early in 2002, Lazarevic was promoted once again when he was appointed General Staff Assistant for Ground Forces. His active military service ceased in August 2003 but his retirement only became effective some months later.

When the Hague tribunal indictment against him was unsealed, Lazarevic began to appear in the media more regularly.

He often stated that he performed his duty in Kosovo honourably and followed orders, and made a public appeal to the Belgrade authorities to support him. He also said from the outset that he would deem a war crimes trial in Serbia to be far more acceptable than one in the UN court in The Hague.

IWPR has learned that Serbia and Montenegro defence ministry officials held talks with Lazarevic in an attempt to persuade him to turn himself in. While these were unsuccessful, the negotiations with Kostunica that followed them appear to have offered the general the guarantees he was looking for.

Belgrade has been under increasing pressure from the international community to be seen to cooperate with The Hague. However, fears that the arrest of the four would lead to a backlash from an angry public appeared to be overstated (see “Public Underwhelmed by Hague Transfer Furore” - [http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/tri/tri\\_370\\_2\\_eng.txt](http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/tri/tri_370_2_eng.txt))

Lazarevic’s strongest support comes from the local population in southern Serbia, in the region of his birth. The association of 1999 war veterans also voiced support for the indicted Serb generals through a series of protest rallies in Serbia strongly condemning the tribunal.

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