

Death Poses Challenges as Serbia Faces Past and Future

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BELGRADE, Serbia and Montenegro, March 12 — The death of [Slobodan Milosevic](#) just as his long war-crimes trial was nearing an end poses new complexities for Europe and the [United States](#), which both hoped to solve outstanding problems in the Balkans this year that are a legacy of Mr. Milosevic's role in the region's three wars in the 1990's.

The United States has been pushing to settle Kosovo's political future, while the [European Union](#) has given the Serbian government until April to hand over [Ratko Mladic](#), military leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the 1992-95 war, who is accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and other war crimes for the siege of Sarajevo and the massacre of thousands of Muslim men and boys around Srebrenica in July 1995.

The death of Mr. Milosevic, the former leader of Yugoslavia who presided over its disintegration, also throws doubt on the ability of the current Serbian government to move ahead of nationalist sentiments and make any compromises on either Kosovo or the handing over of Mr. Mladic or other indicted war crimes suspects to a [United Nations](#) tribunal in The Hague. The tribunal has in the past two weeks proved unable to prevent not only Mr. Milosevic's death but also the suicide of a convicted war criminal, Milan Babic, wartime leader of Croatia's Serbs.

Mr. Milosevic was just weeks away from completing his own defense in a trial that had dragged on for more than four years, examining the actions that earned him the epithet "Butcher of the Balkans" during the wars of the 1990's over Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. The United Nations said Sunday that an autopsy showed he died of a heart attack, but if there proves to be anything suspicious about the cause, which is still under investigation, his effort to be seen as a martyr for the Serbian cause could be enhanced.

In Belgrade on Sunday, the response from most Serbs to the death was publicly largely mute, although it stirred enormous interest both at home and among the large community of Serb exiles who have left the country during the past 15 years of warfare and economic ruin.

Several Serbian newspapers fueled speculation about the death. In three, headlines said he was murdered. "The Hague killed Milosevic," said one. Another said he was killed by his medical treatment.

There were few public displays of grief for Mr. Milosevic — indeed, Sunday was the commemoration, by the government, of the third anniversary of the assassination of [Zoran Djindjic](#), the prime minister and longtime opponent of Mr. Milosevic.

The most immediate controversy concerned whether Mr. Milosevic should be buried in Serbia and Montenegro, or in Moscow, where his widow, Mirjana Markovic, has been living. Any funeral in Belgrade would probably be a rallying point for Mr. Milosevic's supporters and nationalists, and it would bring his family back to Belgrade. Mr. Milosevic might more easily be cast as a martyr, and any appearance by Ms. Markovic would pose a fresh quandary for the Serbian government, because there is an international warrant for her arrest on charges of abuse of power in the 1990's.

The Socialist Party, which Mr. Milosevic led, has asked the government to waive all charges against the family and requested that he be buried in a corner of Belgrade's main cemetery that is known as the "Alley of the Great."

"It's the way he's buried and where he's buried that is the issue," said Zoran Korac, a former deputy prime minister and opposition politician during Mr. Milosevic's rule. "You cannot prevent a man from being buried in his own country," Mr. Korac said, but added that he "would be dead set against" any recognition of Mr. Milosevic as leader.

Mr. Milosevic fell from popular grace after his ouster in 2000, when his popularity ratings dropped to 10 percent, according to Strategic Marketing Research, a polling company that monitors the popularity of Serbian politicians. But the sight of Mr. Milosevic on television single-handedly taking on the Hague tribunal, which many Serbs believe is biased against them, doubled those ratings, said Srdjan Bogosavljevic, head of Strategic Marketing Research.

Some Serbs have apparently forgotten the hyperinflation, economic and diplomatic isolation associated with Mr. Milosevic's rule. "My salary is less now than it was then," said Zoran Mihajlovic, 47, a hotel manager in Vranje, a town in southern Serbia. If there were problems during Mr. Milosevic's time, added Mr. Mihajlovic, who stressed that he did not support the Socialists, "I'm sure he didn't know about 60 percent of all the things happening in Serbia."

But some analysts said the death of Mr. Milosevic could signal the beginning of the end of a burden that had been weighing down Serbia even after Mr. Milosevic was sent to the Hague tribunal in 2001.

"Slowly, the long shadow of Milosevic might now start fading," said Danijel Pantic, director of the European Movement, an independent research group in Belgrade. "Now there is a chance of a younger generation to emerge which could even stabilize the government."

The first big test for the Serbian president, Boris Tadic, and his prime minister, [Vojislav Kostunica](#), is whether they can still persuade Mr. Mladic and the Bosnian Serbs' wartime political leader, Radovan Karadic, to surrender to the Hague tribunal. Both men have been fugitives for more than 10 years; security officials confirmed last month that negotiations were under way with Mr. Mladic over his surrender.

But Olli Rehn, enlargement commissioner for the European Union, has said talks on an association with Serbia will be cut off on April 5 if Belgrade has not handed over Mr. Mladic or Mr. Karadzic by then.

While some European Union countries prefer to keep the door open to give Serbian reformers some hope of reaching their goal of bringing the country closer to the rest of Europe, the United States and [Carla Del Ponte](#), the tribunal's chief prosecutor, are insisting that the European Union should not start any formal talks for a "stabilization and association agreement," a step toward eventual membership, until the two men have been handed over.

Meeting in the Austrian town of Salzburg as word of Mr. Milosevic's death spread on Saturday, European Union foreign ministers delivered a mixed message to Serbia.

Ursula Plassnik, the Austrian foreign minister and chairwoman of the Salzburg meeting, insisted that "European unification is incomplete without the Balkans." But she also warned Serbia that "it must come to terms with the legacy of the past."

Nicholas Wood reported from Belgrade for this article, and Judy Dempsey from Berlin.