

Milosevic's Body Returns to Serbia

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BELGRADE, Serbia, March 15 — The body of [Slobodan Milosevic](#) was returned to Serbia today, providing a test for a government loath to give their former president anything resembling a state funeral.

As it was flown from the Netherlands, the coffin was covered in black polythene and masking tape. On arrival in Belgrade, after a flight on Yugoslav airlines, it sat for awhile on a conveyor belt outdoors under a sheet while some required paperwork was completed. Noticeably missing was Mr. Milosevic's widow, Mira Markovic, who is wanted by the Serbian courts for abuse of power. The tone was lacking in grandeur.

But Mr. Milosevic's supporters quickly acted to reverse that and begin what may be three days of very public mourning.

Hundreds gathered around the coffin, now draped with the Serbian flag, throwing roses on it as it was driven slowly out of the airport and to a hospital morgue in the city center.

Members of the Socialist Party, the group formerly led by Milosevic even while he was facing war crimes charges in The Hague, said they hoped to erect a tent in front of Serbia and Montenegro's federal parliament, in which people could pay their respects to Mr. Milosevic's remains.

Socialist Party officials said they expected thousands supporters to gather there before Saturday when the funeral will take place in Pozarevac, their former leader's home town, 30 miles south of Belgrade.

But it is scenes like these that the Serbian government, part of which had helped to remove Mr. Milosevic from power in October 2004 is hoping to avoid. For the last six years, Serbia has struggled to convince the west that it wants to integrate with European and Atlantic institutions after years of war. Most recently it has begun negotiations on closer trading and political ties with the [European Union](#).

The government is also under substantial pressure from the European Union to hand over the former commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, [Ratko Mladic](#), as condition for its talks on admission into the 25-member bloc.

A mass outpouring of grief for the man widely blamed for the destruction of Yugoslavia, at the cost of up to 250,000 lives, would be the worst message to the West, in the minds of many government officials. It would seem that in death, Mr. Milosevic, a onetime

Communist Party apparatchik who provoked three Balkan wars, is still causing controversy and riling his opponents.

Political analysts here say they fully expect the Socialist Party to try to capitalize on any sentiment for Mr. Milosevic, though the party commanded barely 5 percent of the vote in the latest parliamentary elections, after dominating Serbia through out the 1990's.

Serbia's ultranationalist Radical Party, a former Milosevic ally and now holder of the largest number of seats in the Serbian parliament, has also lent its weight to the funeral preparations. The party's leader in Serbia, Tomislav Nikolic, called on retired members of the police and the army to pay their respects to the Mr. Milosevic and wear their uniforms.

"They will bring people in from all over Serbia," said Bratislav Grubabic, editor of the VIP news agency and a political analyst. "And with coverage from all the foreign TV networks, we shall look like complete idiots," he added, by pining for a leader whom the vast majority of Serbs voted against.

Still, this evening it was not clear if and where the government would allow the body to lie in public. Socialist Party officials warned there was nothing the government could do stop its preparations. "The government cannot interfere with people freely expressing their respects for the late president," said Vladimir Krsljanin, the former foreign policy adviser to Mr. Milosevic.

Since Mr. Milosevic was found dead in prison on Saturday, it has been far from clear that a funeral would take here at all. His family vacillated between a burial in Serbia or in Moscow, where his widow and son live.

Terse negotiations took place, in which Milosevic family lawyers sought guarantees from the government that it would not arrest Ms. Markovic. While an warrant was withdrawn on Tuesday, government officials said she would still have to appear before court on charges involving the illegal sale of apartments. The Milosevic family said that in those circumstances, the funeral could take place only in Moscow. On Tuesday, the family evidently changed its mind, agreeing to the funeral in Mr. Milosevic's hometown, without his widow's presence.

Mr. Milosevic's death appears to have reinforced the already strong hostility to the [United Nations](#) war crimes tribunal in the Hague.

Even President Boris Tadic, Serbia's leading reform politician, said in an interview on Tuesday with The Associated Press, that he held the court responsible for Mr. Milosevic's death. He said, however, that the death would not affect the country's cooperation with the tribunal.

President Tadic's views appeared to be backed up by a Russian doctor reviewing the results of an official autopsy conducted by Dutch doctors who said Mr. Milosevic's death could have been prevented.

"That's my opinion, that his death was preventable. Absolutely. Because he had a pathology which is treated at any place in the world at the moment," Leo Bokeria, director of the Bakulev Cardio-Vascular Center, told reporters in The Hague before returning to Moscow.

The Russians, with an affinity for the Serbs, agree. In Moscow, the Russian Parliament passed a declaration dismissing the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and requesting that its operations halt immediately.

But over time, "Milosevic's death won't change the direction of the government," predicted Mr. Grubacic, the editor in Belgrade. "You'll see in two weeks' time you will have the same pressure to hand over Mladic," he said, referring to the Bosnian Serb Army commander.

"Everything will have gone back to normal," he added.