

# The End of Greater Serbia

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BELGRADE, [Serbia](#), March 17 — As Belgrade girds for the funeral of [Slobodan Milosevic](#) on Saturday, the vision that he used to propel himself to power also appears to be dead.

He waved the banner of a Greater Serbia, which would unite Serbs across a crumbling Yugoslavia. But the Serbian-inhabited areas in Bosnia and Croatia are long separated from the government in Belgrade, after the deaths of close to 250,000 people in the Balkan wars of the 1990's.

Now, possibly by year's end, as the former Yugoslavia enters its final throes of disintegration, Montenegro and Kosovo are likely to be severed as well.

The question is: After Mr. Milosevic's death, will Serbia — where nationalism dominates political life — move on at last and embrace the opportunities of growth through a connection with the rest of Europe? Or will it fester in a sense of defeat, now epitomized by the specter of a former president languishing for years before a foreign court until his mysterious death?

After the wars of the 1990's, Serbia embarked on a lurching transition that has yet to resolve itself. Elections show that close to 60 percent of voters favor reform and integration into Europe, yet xenophobic nationalist parties drive politics here. Neither side has the upper hand.

Serbia's current, generally pro-Western leaders denied Mr. Milosevic in death any state honors, yet many thousands of Serbs filed by his coffin during its two days on view. His death, so far, has seemed a moment for many Serbs to revisit the past and its sorrows, and to reimagine conspiracies against them, rather than move forward.

"He was a czar for us," said Ceda Ristovic, a Serbian refugee forced to flee Kosovo after the conflict with the province's Albanian majority in 1999. He was one of 1.5 million people displaced by the wars that Mr. Milosevic helped to ignite. "No mother will give birth to another man as good as him," Mr. Ristovic said. "He could take on the whole world and everyone respected him."

It may seem strange that his loyalty to Mr. Milosevic has lasted so long. Once a waiter, Mr. Ristovic now lives as a refugee in a crumbling bungalow in central Serbia — along with thousands of Serb families who fled the southern province of Kosovo.

Other Serbs are similarly forgiving of Mr. Milosevic. "As a person he didn't have any role in this," said Rados Dobric, a former textile machine engineer from Klina in northwestern Kosovo. "I think he wanted to solve things in a peaceful way."

Mr. Dobric, 37, remembers Mr. Milosevic famously promising his kinsmen that he would never let the Albanians beat them again, a resonant comment in 1987 that tapped into a long history of grievance. The saying became his political mantra.

Mr. Milosevic, Mr. Dobric is sure, was trying to defend the Serbs and should not be held responsible for what happened afterward. In fact, refugees here say that like themselves, Mr. Milosevic was a victim of foreign powers, a theme that is an obsession for Serbs and has been repeated throughout their history.

That sense of victimhood was reinforced last week when Mr. Milosevic died in his cell in The Hague, with newspapers and even Serbia's president holding the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia responsible for his death. Either the authorities denied him proper medical treatment or he was poisoned outright, many here believe.

"He was killed in Hague," said Milorad Marjanovic, 53, one of those who crowded to pay respects at Mr. Milosevic's coffin. "Yesterday it was him, and tomorrow it is all the Serbs."

That is bitter talk for those who favor democratic reform, who are numerous, if polls are to be believed, but small in political influence. In a riposte to the numerous laments of Mr. Milosevic's death, unknown opponents of his rule placed a sarcastic death notice in Serbia's conservative daily newspaper, Politika, on Friday.

"Thanks for all the deceit and theft, for every single drop of blood that thousands shed because of you," read the black-bordered notice, printed below a somber photograph of the former president. "Thank you for our fear and uncertainty, for lost lives and generations, dreams that were never fulfilled, horrors and wars that you led on our behalf without asking, and the burden you have put on our backs."

The death notice reflects not only the disdain of Mr. Milosevic's opponents, but also their frustration as the changes they counted on have slipped away.

Their politicians have squabbled, and watered down their plans with concessions to nationalists.

The leading hope of the reform movement, [Zoran Djindjic](#), who was prime minister, was killed three years ago by assassins linked to a criminal and paramilitary underworld that thrived during Mr. Milosevic's rule, leaving behind him an even more fractured democratic movement.

"We really had great expectations," said Milenko Bereta, the director of the Serbian federation of nongovernmental organizations. "We thought our leaders were true democrats, but they were not."

For the last six years Serbia's international relations have remained strained, most notably over its reluctance to arrest war crimes suspects, a condition of entry to the [European Union](#). Its isolation and lack of substantial economic growth have left a new generation of voters frustrated and dissatisfied, and many no longer vote, Mr. Bereta said.

But it is possible that the nationalists will at last prove to be a spent force.

Kosovo's future, and Montenegro's relationship with Serbia, will make for uncertain times. But some optimists feel that after those issues are finally settled, the nation may be better able to grapple with the reforms that most of its former Communist neighbors began 16 years ago.

Indeed it may be able to decide once and for all whether to cooperate fully with the tribunal in The Hague. The key test is the European Union demand that Gen. [Ratko Mladic](#), the former top Bosnian Serb military commander, be handed over to the tribunal by April, unless Serbia wants to jeopardize its talks to join the Union.

"This is a peculiar type of transition," said Danijel Pantic, the secretary general of European Movement in Serbia, which is campaigning for Serbia's membership. "Serbia will move on when these issues are resolved."

*Ian Fisher contributed reporting for this article.*