

Milosevic's Death Kindles Old Tensions

The former Serbian leader, on trial since 2002, dies in prison. Backers suspect foul play, but victims say justice has been denied.

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BELGRADE, Serbia and Montenegro — Former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was found dead Saturday in the prison cell where he had spent his final years facing trial on genocide and war crimes charges for his role in the nationalist wars that racked the Balkans in the 1990s.

His death in the Netherlands before the long-running trial could end is certain to haunt the region: His victims believe that justice has been thwarted, and his fellow Serbs are divided between those who want to forget the past and those who think Milosevic was himself a victim of an unfair international court.

Within hours of his death, apparently of natural causes, Serbian radio and television aired an interview with his lawyer, who said that Milosevic believed he was being poisoned.

The assertions made it all but inevitable that the Serbs' sense of victimhood will continue to shadow the region and make unlikely any full reckoning with the past.

Milosevic, 64, had been on trial since 2002 at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague on genocide charges for the "ethnic cleansing" campaign in Bosnia-Herzegovina and on charges of crimes against humanity and other war crimes for his role in the conflicts in Croatia and Kosovo.

Chief United Nations war crimes prosecutor Carla Del Ponte said she regretted Milosevic's death because she believed she would have won a conviction.

"I also regret it for the victims, the thousands of victims, who have been waiting for justice," Del Ponte told the German-language Swiss Television DRS.

Milosevic had a history of poor health, including high blood pressure and a chronic heart condition. His four-year trial was often interrupted by his illnesses, and the trial schedule had been sharply curtailed because of his health. Court officials said that there was no evidence of suicide and that an autopsy had been ordered.

"Milosevic was found lifeless in his bed in his cell," the tribunal said in a statement. "The guard immediately alerted the detention unit officer in command and the medical officer. The latter confirmed that Slobodan Milosevic was dead."

The Russian news agency Interfax quoted Borislav Milosevic as saying that the tribunal was "entirely responsible" for his brother's death. Fearing the former leader would not return to the court if he sought treatment abroad, the tribunal last month denied him permission to see doctors

in Russia.

Milosevic's widow, Mirjana Markovic, who was a close advisor to her husband, is under indictment in Serbia and lives in Russia, as does their son, Marko, who faces corruption charges. The couple's daughter, Marija, lives in Montenegro.

Milosevic rose to power through the Communist Party, becoming leader first of Serbia and then of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As the republics sought independence, Milosevic rallied support among Serbs, who are Orthodox Christians, and the security forces. He skillfully manipulated the media and used military means to try to halt the secession of Croatia in particular, which was largely Catholic, and Bosnia, which had a large Muslim population.

Later, a rebellion broke out in the majority ethnic Albanian province of Kosovo that reignited centuries-old animosities between Serbs and ethnic Albanians. Milosevic ordered a massive crackdown that forced 800,000 ethnic Albanians to flee the province.

Today, the former Yugoslavia has splintered into five countries, with Montenegro likely to declare independence this year and become the sixth. Kosovo's status is still unclear, but eventually it too will probably become independent.

"If we want to define what happened in the 1990s," said Bratislav Grubacic, a political analyst in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and Montenegro, "the thing is not finished. It is still not entirely clear what happened in this region in the past 15 years.

"One question is: Can the Serbs face their recent past? I do not think Milosevic's death will help this to happen."

Milosevic's death underscored the difficulties of bringing justice through international tribunals, which often take years to set up, have trouble capturing their targets and face enormous difficulties proving that a leader, however brutal, had direct responsibility for atrocities.

Milosevic is the third wartime Balkan leader to die without being brought to justice. Croatian President Franjo Tudjman died in office in 1999, and Alija Izetbegovic, the Muslim leader of wartime Bosnia, died in 2003 as an indictment was reportedly being prepared.

"The general sense is that it's a pity that Milosevic passed away before he was sentenced, because instead of being seen as a war criminal, he will become a hero, a martyr who died in the jail of his enemies and was on the way to proving he was innocent," said Jakob Finci, a longtime Sarajevan and leader of the Jewish community in the Bosnian capital who is viewed as an impartial mediator by Bosnians of all stripes.

"It's an unfinished job by the tribunal, and it will never properly be finished," Finci said. "Milosevic is one of the lessons that you should be much faster."

Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his top general, Ratko Mladic, both alleged to be responsible for the 1995 slaughter of as many as 8,000 Muslim men and boys in the town of

Srebrenica, remain at large. Experts in the Balkans now believe it is less likely that the two will be turned over to The Hague.

The combination of Milosevic's death, which many Serbs believe was caused by the tribunal, either through neglect or murder, and a sense that the tribunal treated Serbs unjustly, will make it more difficult for the Serbian government to transfer Mladic to The Hague.

In February, rumors circulated that the Serbian government was on the verge of transferring Mladic to the Hague tribunal and apparently was working through intermediaries to persuade him to surrender, but nothing happened. It remains unclear whether the government has the necessary control of the security services to arrest Mladic.

"The ill feeling of the Serbian public toward the extradition [of Mladic] and toward the Hague [tribunal] in general will significantly increase. That is why I expect that ... this will further complicate the arrest and extradition of Ratko Mladic," said Djordje Vukadinovic, a political analyst in Belgrade.

The current, moderate nationalist government in Serbia, led by Vojislav Kostunica, is propped up by a precarious coalition. With ultranationalists almost certain to use Milosevic's death as a rallying point, it is unlikely that Kostunica will be able to push forward with the unpopular move of arresting Mladic or have the leverage to persuade him to surrender and go to The Hague.

The Hague tribunal has faced sharp criticism from all sides. Bosnian Muslims and ethnic Albanians who were the biggest victims of Milosevic's regime said the court moved too slowly. Serbs charged that it was biased against them, noting that three other Serbs had died in prison, including Milan Babic, the onetime leader of Croatian Serbs, who had been convicted and committed suicide last week.

Serbs also believe that ethnic Albanians and Bosnian Muslims accused of crimes have been treated more kindly than Serbs, most recently pointing to a court ruling handed down Friday to allow Ramush Haradinaj, a Kosovo Albanian accused of war crimes, to participate in politics.

In Belgrade, the onetime Yugoslav capital, the reactions were mixed. Some people were simply relieved to have Milosevic removed from the scene, and others were convinced that he had been killed by the court because it could not convict him.

Milosevic had dominated life here long after he was extradited to the Netherlands. Many Serbs followed his courtroom appearances, televised almost daily here, which he used as a platform for his nationalist ideas.

In Banja Luka, the capital of the ethnic Serbian region of Bosnia, supporters walked quietly to the main square carrying lighted candles. Some bore a sign that read, "To the Serbian Hero; for Serbian Justice; Let there be eternal glory for you."

But in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital that endured a 1992-95 siege by Serbs, the tone was at once philosophical and exhausted. An estimated 200,000 Bosnians died in the conflict, the vast

majority of them Muslims.

Ahmed Curevic, 45, an employee at a Sarajevo tourist agency, sounded weary as he spoke of Milosevic. "The whole process has lasted for too long. For me, he has been dead for quite a while. I do not think that his death will have any major impact on political processes in Bosnia and the region," he said.

But for Hatidza Mehmedovic, 54, whose two sons and husband were killed when Srebrenica fell to the Serbs in the summer of 1995 and the invading forces hunted down fleeing men and boys in the surrounding forests, there is only the sense that justice was cheated.

"I regret that we are not going to see the sentencing of Milosevic," she said. "I think that is what all of us, victims of his crimes, were expecting.

"He was the main culprit for all the crimes that happened in former Yugoslavia. He is the most responsible that my town is a ghost town now, and that I live alone without my boys and my husband."

In Kosovo, where news of Milosevic's death raced through Pristina, the provincial capital, on Saturday as people called one another and sent cellphone text messages, there was an overall sense of relief that he was gone. Milosevic was seen as responsible not only for the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians in 1999, but also for having stripped them progressively of their rights, education and any leverage in the local government during the 1980s and early 1990s.

However, in Kosovo, like Bosnia, there also was the sense of a process cut short before there had been a final ruling.

Gnim Shala, 42, who was standing outside a carwash in Pristina on Saturday, expressed regret and disappointment with the tribunal.

"I'm not very happy, because we did not see the end of it. A lot of procedures were left half finished, a lot of crimes will be forgotten now. I hope that they capture the others, Mladic and Karadzic, but if they don't do that, then the Hague tribunal will have completely failed."

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Times special correspondent Cirjakovic reported from Belgrade and staff writer Rubin from Vienna.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Milosevic's rise and fall

Aug. 20, 1941: Born in Pozarevac, in central Serbia.

1964: Graduates from Belgrade Law School.

1980: With the death of post-World War II leader Josip Broz Tito, dormant ethnic tensions begin to escalate, slowly tearing apart Yugoslavia.

1984: Milosevic is appointed party leader of Belgrade by Ivan Stambolic, head of the Serbian Communist Party.

1986: Succeeds Stambolic as leader of the Serbian Communist Party after Stambolic becomes president of Serbia.

April 1987: Delivers inflammatory speech to Serbs who were demanding protection from the ethnic Albanian majority in the autonomous province of Kosovo. His nationalist rhetoric catapults him to prominence.

September 1987: Accuses Stambolic and other officials of anti-Communist and anti-Serbian policies during a live telecast of a party meeting. They are later forced out.

1989: Elected president of Serbia. He strips Kosovo of autonomy. Ethnic Albanians protest, leading to clashes with police.

1990: Yugoslavia sends in troops to impose control. Serbia dissolves Kosovo's government.

1991: Croatia and Slovenia declare independence from Yugoslavia. Milosevic instructs his Yugoslav army to support Serbian paramilitaries, and encourages Serbs in Croatia to take up arms.

1992: A U.N.-patrolled cease-fire in Croatia takes effect in January. Bosnia-Herzegovina declares its independence. Milosevic bankrolls the Bosnian Serb rebellion.

1995: As many as 8,000 Muslim men and boys are massacred at Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb fighters. NATO bombs Bosnian Serb positions around Sarajevo. Milosevic agrees to settlement of the Bosnian war at U.S.-sponsored peace talks in Dayton, Ohio.

July 1997: Named president

of the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, comprising only the republics of Serbia and Montenegro.

February 1998: Milosevic sends troops to crush new ethnic Albanian uprising in Kosovo. Massive expulsions of ethnic Albanians begin, and thousands are killed.

October 1998: NATO authorizes airstrikes against Serbian military targets. Milosevic agrees to

withdraw troops, allow the return of refugees and unarmed monitors to verify compliance. But attacks continue.

March 1999: Kosovo Albanians sign a peace deal calling for broad interim autonomy and 28,000 NATO troops. The Serb delegation refuses and talks are suspended.

March 24, 1999: NATO airstrikes begin.

May 1999: Milosevic and four subordinates are indicted by the U.N. war crimes tribunal on charges of crimes against humanity — murder, deportation and persecutions — and violations of the laws and customs of war.

June 3, 1999: Yugoslavia's government accepts a plan for U.N. administration of Kosovo.

June 9, 1999: Yugoslav and Western generals sign pact.

September 2000: Milosevic calls elections. Supporters of opposition leader Vojislav Kostunica declare him the winner, but an election commission says a runoff is needed. Protests and strikes sweep the country.

Oct. 5, 2000: Milosevic is ousted after huge mobs rampage through Belgrade.

April 1, 2001: Arrested in his villa after 26-hour standoff.

June 28, 2001: Flown to The Hague to face trial on war crimes charges at U.N. tribunal.

Feb. 12, 2002: Trial begins on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

January 2004: Prosecution closes case after calling 294 witnesses.

June 2004: Milosevic, defending himself, names nearly 1,400 people he wants to call in his defense, including former President Clinton, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and ex-NATO chief Gen. Wesley Clark.

December 2005: Trial adjourned for six weeks because of Milosevic's ill health.

January 2006: Trial reopens, with tribunal urging Milosevic to wrap up defense by April, with a verdict to be issued later in the year.

February 2006: Tribunal rejects Milosevic's request to seek medical treatment in Russia.

March 11, 2006: Milosevic found dead in his cell at U.N. detention center near The Hague.

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Source: Associated Press

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