

## In Serbian Capital, Rites for Milosevic Draw Throng

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BELGRADE, [Serbia](#), March 18 — Well over 50,000 Serbs massed on the central square here on Saturday in a public wake for [Slobodan Milosevic](#), the large numbers representing, in this nation's deep divide, either his final victory or one last embarrassment for Serbia at his hands.

A week after Mr. Milosevic died of a heart attack in his jail cell in The Hague, his coffin was carried at midday to a stage in front of Serbia and Montenegro's Parliament, formerly Yugoslavia's federal assembly.

"We are bidding farewell to the best one among us," said Milorad Vucelic, deputy president of Mr. Milosevic's Socialist Party. "There is no better place than this square for us to say our goodbye. Let us do it in a dignified manner. Let us shout his name as one."

The square had heavy symbolism for his supporters: it lent an official setting for a funeral not recognized by the Serbian state, and it was where large opposition rallies forced him from power in 2000, opening the way for his extradition to The Hague on charges of war crimes.

Crowds in Belgrade of the mostly middle-aged, bused from Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Kosovo, chanted his nickname — "Slobo! Slobo!" — before the coffin was taken to his hometown for the funeral.

But even in Pozarevac, where he was buried at dusk under the lime tree where he first kissed his future wife, affection for him was far from unanimous. Many hoped that Saturday was merely a day to say goodbye, and that it did not mean a return to nationalist policies that isolated and impoverished Serbia in the 1990's.

"I can't believe what is going on here," said Iva, 41, who would not give her last name because she was speaking against Mr. Milosevic in his hometown on the day of his funeral. "It looks like it is collective amnesia."

And after Mr. Milosevic's body left the capital, a relatively small group of demonstrators, perhaps several thousand, held a counterrally in the center of Belgrade to remind Serbs of the miseries they say he inflicted on them and their neighbors. But, compared with the numbers at the wake, people who rallied there despaired at the poor turnout.

"It is humiliating that so many people appeared there," said Branislava Miloradovic, an English teacher. "If they forgot, they are idiots, and I hope there are more of us who still remember."

But while the mass display of defiance proved that Serbia's nationalist forces can still assemble large crowds, the long-term impact of this demonstration is harder to judge.

The Socialist and Radical parties who remain faithful to Mr. Milosevic clearly hope the turnout will bolster their nationalist and anti-Western policies, despite polls that show them with relatively little support. There is talk that it may be harder now for Serbia to hand over to The Hague [Ratko Mladic](#), the former top Serbian military commander, or that sentiment will be even stronger against any deal for the independence of Kosovo, the southern province dominated by Albanians.

"I can't even go to Pristina to visit my husband's grave," said Dostana Nikolic, 62, referring to the capital of Kosovo, as she waited for Mr. Milosevic's body to arrive in Pozarevac. She was among the thousands of Serbs who fled Kosovo amid Albanian reprisals there after the war in Kosovo ended in 1999.

But experts note that Serbia is not cooperating much with The Hague anyway, and that it was never likely to let Kosovo go easily. And contrary to the angry tone set by the speakers on Saturday, many in the crowd seemed less sure that Serbia should retreat from steps to join the [European Union](#).

"We are in Europe, and we need to stay in Europe," said Aleksandar Anastasovic, 66, who said he knew Mr. Milosevic in his hometown when the two were young Communist Party members. "But Europe needs to change its policies and find a place for the Serbs."

In the long drama of Yugoslavia's breakup, the return of Mr. Milosevic's body made a fitting chapter: After four years of trial on charges of genocide, he died last Saturday several months before its end — sparing him, and by extension Serbia itself, the stain of a guilty verdict.

Before his death, Mr. Milosevic, 64, who had suffered for years from heart trouble and high blood pressure, had said he worried about being poisoned. The accusation of poisoning is commonplace now, despite a coroner's report on Friday that there was no poison in his body.

His coffin arrived as cargo on Wednesday, and the crowds to see it the next day as it was laid out in the Museum of the Revolution were relatively small. But on Friday, the crowds grew to many thousands and hours of waiting, before the large rally on Saturday.

The pro-Western government here refused a state funeral for Mr. Milosevic, but many critics said Serbian leaders made enough concessions to give the proceedings all the frills of an officially authorized funeral.

After the coffin was paraded through the streets, speaker after speaker told the mass gathering in front of Parliament that the display of grief for the former president's death would indicate an end to Serbia's cooperation with the tribunal and forever change Serbian politics.

"As of today he will be one of the most powerful factors in the life of the Serbian state," said Vranko Radic, a member of Mr. Milosevic's legal counsel in The Hague.

Ramsey Clark, the former United States attorney general and counsel to Mr. Milosevic, and [Gennadi A. Zyuganov](#), the head of the Russian Communist Party, were among a number of

foreign delegates to address the crowd, all helping to reinforce the conviction that the former Yugoslav leader was the victim of a foreign conspiracy.

"It was not death, it was murder," said Mr. Zyuganov, a candidate for Russia's next presidential election in 2008.

Even if the funeral was not state-authorized, it was highly organized and carried many of the trappings of an official function. Supporters wore the same buttons and pins with his face, and the police lined the roads amid a well-calibrated arrival of buses from around Serbia. In Pozarevac, a municipal building was converted into a media center, with wireless Internet access and badges that journalists were required to wear also emblazoned with Mr. Milosevic's picture.

The coffin arrived in Pozarevac, about 50 miles southeast of the capital, in the late afternoon in a silver Mercedes hearse to a smaller and more local crowd than in Belgrade. People threw flowers in the path of the hearse and chanted slogans against the war crimes tribunal in The Hague during a second round of angry speeches.

The coffin was then taken to the Milosevic family house, a two-story building with a red roof behind a gate piled high with flowers. The coffin was lowered into a grave in a garden next to the lime tree, as a brass band played and messages were read from his absent wife and son.

"We two, we have always been on the same side of the world," said the message from his wife, Mirjana Markovic, who had been powerful here in her own right. "I'll fight on for our ideals."

His wife, who lives in Moscow, did not come, though Serbian officials had agreed to suspend an arrest warrant for her. Socialist Party members said they feared that the authorities would still confiscate her passport. Neither his son Marko nor daughter Marija were present.

*Nicholas Wood reported from Belgrade for this article, and Ian Fisher from Pozarevac.*