

Many Serbs in denial over 1990s war crimes ahead of Mladic verdict

Serb leaders claim UN court in The Hague is biased against their people



A woman walks past a mural of Bosnian Serb wartime general Ratko Mladic in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2009.
Photograph: Photograph: Marko Djurica/Reuters



Daniel McLaughlin in Belgrade

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A [United Nations](#) court may finally mete out a measure of justice to former Bosnian Serb general [Ratko Mladic](#) on Wednesday, but its ruling will be rejected by the many Serbs who staunchly defend and even lionise their nation's war criminals.

The tribunal at The Hague is set to decide whether Mladic (74) is responsible for the genocidal 1995 massacre of some 8,000 unarmed Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica and the 1992-6 siege of Sarajevo that killed more than 11,000 people.



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The mountain of evidence gathered by the tribunal, which will close at the end of this year, has failed to convince many Serbs that their ethnic kin were to blame for the vast majority of atrocities in the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Instead, they claim to be victims of a sprawling western conspiracy – first to dismember Yugoslavia and then to demonise Serbs and force them to bend to the will of the [United States](#) and its allies.



Bosnian Serb wartime general Ratko Mladic in Belgrade in 1993. Photograph: Petar Kujundzic/Reuters

It is a narrative that bodes ill for reconciliation in a region where one country's war heroes tend to be its neighbour's mass murderers.

"We know Mr Mladic will have to take a huge punishment, life in jail, but everyone who has watched this trial knows that no one has proved anything against him," said [Vladimir Djukanovic](#), a deputy from Serbia's ruling Progressive Party.

He insists, like many of his compatriots, that Mladic's forces were reacting to the atrocities of Bosnian Muslim militia that he claims killed some 3,500 Serb civilians around Srebrenica before the infamous slaughter of July

Djukanovic said that all sides in the Yugoslav wars had “paramilitary organisations, idiots and criminals who committed war crimes”.

“But there was no connection to Mr Mladic . . . He did not order any crimes, but on the contrary he gave orders to save people, to move the women and children from Srebrenica.”

‘Oath Keepers’

That opinion is shared by [Milica Djurdjevic](#), a senior member of [Zavetnici](#), a Serbian nationalist political organisation which she says has about 25,000 members and whose name translates as the “Oath Keepers”.

“We do plan to react to the [Mladic] verdict,” she told The Irish Times.

“We have organised protests in the last five years against verdicts from the tribunal in The Hague, which we consider to be extremely unfair and extremely biased against Serbs,” Djurdjevic added.

“Ratko Mladic is a defender of the Serb people. He is a true and honest soldier who showed his humanity by evacuating the civilian population from Srebrenica before those events . . . They [in the UN court] are not judging him as a soldier or commander but as a symbol of a people and its resistance.”



Milica Djurdjevic, a leading member of the Zavetnici Serbian nationalist organisation, who rejects the genocide charges against ex-Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic. Photograph: Courtesy of Milica Djurdjevic

Djurdjevic accuses the tribunal of belittling her people's wartime suffering by convicting relatively few Croats, Bosnian Muslims and [Kosovo Albanians](#).

She also believes that the number of Srebrenica victims has been exaggerated, bodies misidentified and dead fighters passed off as civilians to magnify the scale of the killing.

"We exclude genocide completely. We don't exclude the possibility that individuals used excessive force and committed crimes individually – but it was not genocide," she said.

"We respect all victims and condemn all those who committed crimes, but at the same time we believe the myth of Srebrenica has been propagated to this extent to be used as a political tool and to victimise only one side – the Serbs."

Such views are too prevalent among Serbs to be ignored as the marginal conspiracy theories of an insignificant few, especially when political leaders in both Belgrade and Republika Srpska reject a ruling from the International Court of Justice – the UN's highest court – that the Srebrenica massacre was genocide.

The Serbian government has never organised an event to commemorate the Srebrenica killings, the new Serb mayor of the blighted town denies that genocide occurred there, and [Milorad Dodik](#), the veteran president of Republika Srpska, will not let children in his region use history books that say otherwise.

"Here it is impossible to use schoolbooks . . . in which it is written that the



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Vladimir Djukanovic, a deputy from Serbia's ruling Progressive Party, insists former Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic tried to protect civilians around Srebrenica, where he is accused of committing genocide in 1995.

The UN tribunal indicted 161 people for alleged crimes committed in former Yugoslavia, 94 of them Serbs, and it has handed down 83 convictions.

Hero's welcome

Across the region, many people imprisoned for war crimes returned home to a hero's welcome.

"No one will ever be ashamed of these people," Serbian defence minister [Aleksandar Vulin](#) told a gathering of former Yugoslav army soldiers last month.

"The time of shame has passed, this is the time to be quietly proud."

In the front row, according to the Balkan Insight news service, sat [Vladimir Lazarevic](#) and [Nikola Sainovic](#), whom the UN court sentenced to 14 and 18 years in prison respectively for crimes committed during the 1998-9 Kosovo conflict.

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Gen Lazarevic and other officers from the brutal Kosovo campaign have been asked to give lectures to Serbia's military cadets, in what Vulin described as a way to "right the injustices that these men were subjected to in the past".

People who were allegedly beaten, tortured, raped and shot by Mladic's men, and the relatives of the dead, may draw a little solace from Wednesday's verdict.

Yet an important aspect of the Mladic case remains shrouded in mystery – how he managed to evade capture from 1995 to 2011, and who helped him do it.

He is believed to have spent much of those 16 years in and around Belgrade and at various army barracks, shielded by loyalists in the Serbian security services and a lack of political will to arrest him.

Serbian courts have acquitted at least 10 of Mladic's alleged helpers, and the only man found guilty was sentenced to just six months on parole. To prevent public scrutiny of the case, Serbia has now made the indictment a state secret.

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