

Milosevic's arrest dictated by the US

Chris Marsden
3 April 2001

The arrest of former Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic during the early hours of Sunday morning reflects the extent to which the US can wield its power and influence over the entire Balkan region.

His imprisonment is the price demanded by the Bush Republican administration for America's continued support for the Serbian regime of President Vojislav Kostunica, which ousted Milosevic's Serbian Socialist Party from power last October 5 with Western backing.

On Friday, March 30, Secretary of State Colin Powell said he was postponing a decision due the next day, on whether to impose an aid cut-off that would mean halting \$50m pledged to Belgrade last year and a further \$100m earmarked for this year, until Monday April 2. The decision would also determine whether hundreds of millions of dollars in loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund would be forthcoming.

Passing the aid bill was made conditional on whether the new government in Belgrade had proven itself amenable to the wishes of the US government. And particularly whether Kostunica was prepared to hand over Milosevic to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, to face charges arising from the 1999 conflict in Kosovo. Kostunica has so far refused to do so, given his own Serbian nationalist politics combined with a recognition that Milosevic still enjoys a certain amount of support in the population having secured 30 percent of the vote in 2000. Kostunica also fears that the armed forces would react badly to such a move because it would set a dangerous precedent regarding the possible trial of other alleged war criminals.

Washington was not prepared to tolerate any opposition, however. Powell said his decision on whether to suspend aid would "reflect all actions that have been taken by the government in response to the requirements of the legislation... We'll see what happens over the next two days, and we'll take that all into account as I make my judgement as to whether or not I can certify in accordance with the law." For his part, President Bush said that Milosevic "ought to be brought to justice... We're watching it very carefully."

With the Yugoslav economy in ruins following the NATO bombardment and its isolation from Western investment and trade, Kostunica was effectively presented with an offer he could not refuse. Thus began the tense 36-hour standoff. Kostunica dispatched elite armed units to make the arrest, but they were met by several hundred Milosevic supporters gathered in front of his Belgrade residence, vowing to prevent the arrest of their leader.

On Saturday, Milosevic made a public statement rejecting the arrest order against him as invalid as it had been issued by the

"lackeys of NATO and the USA".

An initial attempt to break into the residence was thwarted by private security guards; with Milosevic threatening that he would not be taken alive. In the end, however, late-night negotiations between the government and the Serbian Socialist Party led to a bloodless end to the siege. Milosevic was taken into custody for 30 days. He is charged with corruption and abuse of power, to which he has pleaded not guilty, and faces trial in a Belgrade court. The charges are related to embezzlement, financial misdeeds and misuse of public funds and are not directly connected with the Kosovo war.

However, this falls short of the demands of the US and European powers for Milosevic to face trial at The Hague, for alleged atrocities in Kosovo, with the possibility of further charges of responsibility for Serb war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia. The hours following the arrest saw numerous demands along these lines by European politicians.

"It is another important step toward bringing Milosevic and his cronies to book for their crimes against humanity," said British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

"We have waited for this day for a long time. Justice must now be done," said French President Jacques Chirac. The Bush administration has not insisted that Milosevic be transferred immediately to The Hague, but rather that it expects Yugoslavia to "ultimately co-operate".

Russia was the only dissenting voice, with representatives of the Putin government remaining neutral about Milosevic's arrest, but insisting that he should not be handed over to The Hague. Dmitri Rogozin, chairman of the State Duma's Committee for International Affairs, warned this would "play into the hands of the US, which would like to see him in The Hague and thus legalise the spring of 1999 and justify NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia." Also alluding to the US, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko warned, "Any pressure from outside on the leadership of Yugoslavia in connection with these questions would not only be interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state but could weaken the position of the democratic forces of the country."

It is not necessary to make common cause with the nationalist politics of Milosevic or those of the Putin regime in Moscow to recognise that Washington's insistence that Milosevic be brought to trial owes nothing to concerns for justice. Rather it is considered essential in order to legitimise American imperialism's past actions in furthering its predatory interests in the strategically vital Balkan region.

There is no doubt that the Milosevic regime was corrupt, and that

the Serbian forces under his command committed atrocities against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and against Croats and Muslims in Bosnia. But to attribute all the suffering of the Balkan peoples to him alone only serves to conceal the fundamental responsibility of the imperialist powers for unleashing more than a decade of bloody ethnic conflict, and so paving the way for further social disasters.

The origins of the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts lie in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the impact of the severe economic dislocation fuelled by IMF and World Bank structural adjustment plans. The deepening economic calamity—soaring inflation and huge job losses—saw the outbreak of a wave of strikes and protests by the Yugoslav working class. Seeking to divert the rising class struggle, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats and nationalist demagogues throughout the former Yugoslav republics began to promote nationalist sentiments, vying for support from Western governments.

The imperialist powers concluded that support for various separatist movements and the ensuing break-up of the Yugoslavia into its constituent parts would serve to ensure their own economic and political domination of the Balkans. Germany's recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in late 1991 set in train the disintegration of Yugoslavia and opened up bitter ethnic fighting. Backed by the US and other major powers, Bosnia Herzegovina and then Macedonia followed suit.

Though there was nothing in principal to differentiate the Serbian nationalism of Milosevic from other rival groupings—his Croatian, Muslim, Slovenian or ethnic-Albanian counterparts—the Serbian bourgeoisie had the greatest interest in preserving a unitary state in which it played the dominant role. Milosevic's regime, previously viewed as a crucial force in preserving stability in the Balkans, was recast in the role of regional oppressor.

Even following the Bosnian civil war in 1995, the Western powers considered maintaining Milosevic as an ally in the Balkans. He was regarded as the main guarantor of the Dayton accord, which established a NATO protectorate over Bosnia. It was only when he resisted the further break-up of Serbia—due to America's cultivation of the ethnic Albanian separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)—and rejected Washington's demand during the Rambouillet talks in March 1999 that NATO have complete military access to Serbian territory that Milosevic was declared a war criminal.

The indictment of Milosevic by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was first drafted in May 1999. Its aim was to reinforce support in the US and Europe for a war against Serbia. It was cited as proof that, like Germany under the Nazis, the Serbian people were supposedly complicit in the war crimes of their leader and deserved to be bombed into submission.

The ICTY indictment is of dubious legality. It charges Milosevic with responsibility for the deaths of 340 Albanians, allegedly killed by Serb forces during the conflict with the KLA. However, Belgrade has always insisted that this was a legitimate policing operation inside Serbian territory. It is a matter of record that ever since the Bosnian war of 1995, the KLA had pursued a strategy of destabilising the Serbian province of Kosovo by acts of terrorism,

in the hope that the US and NATO would intervene, and that in its latter stages the KLA received training and assistance from the CIA.

There was, moreover, no proof of a campaign of systematic ethnic cleansing—the main justification for NATO's declaration of hostilities—prior to the West's bombardment of Serbia. Subsequently, figures for the total number of Albanians killed during the entire war have been subject to constant downward revision, to less than a tenth of the figure originally claimed.

Such considerations counted for nothing at the time, because NATO's propaganda machine was intent on portraying the KLA as heroic freedom fighters suffering cruel repression by Belgrade in order to legitimise war against Serbia.

The Bush administration clearly believes that if Milosevic is not brought before a court (whose agenda they have set and whose verdict they can largely determine), then questions will continue to be raised about the American-led military adventure in 1999. Therefore Washington is insisting that “closure” be reached on the entire sordid chapter.

Ironically, this is lent greater urgency due to the shift in US Balkan policy in face of the growing danger posed to regional stability by ethnic Albanian separatist forces. The KLA “freedom fighters” of yesteryear are today—in their Macedonian guise of the National Liberation Army—routinely described as terrorists by the US and European powers. Serbian troops are patrolling the Kosovo border alongside NATO units, in order to prevent military incursions into neighbouring Macedonia and southern Serbia, which have resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of non-Albanians. Thus with their every justification for the war of 1999 lying in ruins, it has become all the more imperative that Milosevic be made the scapegoat for what are ultimately the depredations produced by US and Western policy.

See Also:

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