

The Milosevic Trial: Last prime minister of Yugoslavia breaks 12-year silence

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The last prime minister of Yugoslavia has broken his 12-year long silence to speak in public about events during the breakup of his country in the 1990s.

Ante Markovic was prime minister of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) between March 1989 and December 1991. He recently appeared as a prosecution witness in the trial of former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at The Hague. For the last two years, Milosevic has been on trial on charges of war crimes and genocide in Kosovo, Bosnia and Croatia.

Markovic was the latest in a line of former Yugoslav leaders to appear at the ICTY, all of whom have denied any responsibility for the civil wars that erupted as the former Yugoslavia disintegrated. They all blame Milosevic entirely. Of all those who have appeared at The Hague so far to absolve themselves, Markovic could be truly said to have laid the seeds for the break up of Yugoslavia.

He told the court he had started his career as an electrical engineer and entered politics in 1982 after becoming a successful businessman. For 24 years he was head of one of Yugoslavia's largest companies, Rade Koncar. He became a leading figure in the Yugoslavia Bank of Economic Cooperation and then President of the Republic of Croatia. In 1989 he was elected Prime Minister of the SFRY, a country saddled with debts of \$21 billion and inflation at thousands of percent. In 1990 he formed his own political party, the Alliance of Reform Forces of Yugoslavia.

Markovic said the whole federal government was committed to his "reform" programme—stabilisation, privatisation and democracy. He told the court how "thunderous applause" and ovations greeted his announcement at the Federal Assembly that the currency would become convertible. However Markovic noted that

some individuals complained in private that his policies "would enrich the richer parts of the country and would further impoverish the poorer parts."

He was a favourite of the West and features prominently in the memoirs of US ambassador to Belgrade Warren Zimmerman, who said Markovic was "a man of large ego, [who] saw himself as a messiah for Yugoslavia. After he became Yugoslav prime minister, his dynamism and supreme self-confidence impressed visiting Westerners. The financier-philanthropist George Soros, a shrewd judge of Eastern European politicians, told me after a visit to Belgrade that Markovic was one of the most remarkable leaders he had met."

Markovic told Zimmerman he needed the clear support of the administration of George Bush Senior and that "above all he wanted money. How much? 'Well', he said with his infectious smile, 'I'm playing a big game, and it requires big money. I think four billion dollars would be a good start to help a reform that's going further than anything in eastern Europe.'"

Reform in Yugoslavia did indeed go further than anywhere else in eastern Europe regarding efforts to dismantle the state-run economy and reintroduce capitalism. Within months half of the nation's industry was closed down, throwing two million workers out of their jobs. Nearly 65,000 companies were privatised. Money due to be paid to the individual republics was frozen to pay off the national debt to international creditors.

Markovic expressed surprise at the ICTY that his policies led to the "struggle of everybody against everybody else". When Milosevic (who is conducting his own defence) suggested he played a significant role in events having as prime minister "de facto and de jure control over the federal government" for several years, Markovic insisted his office had "very modest competencies" and that he was unable to do anything

about Yugoslavia's disintegration. In one telling episode he pointed to the form the disintegration took. He told the court how Milosevic demanded the post of Interior Minister and thus control of the federal intelligence services in Markovic's new government in 1989. Markovic said it was of little consequence since all the republics and the army had their own intelligence services and everyone was bugging each other.

Markovic produced in court a tape he had received from Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic in 1991, purporting to show Milosevic planning to send paramilitary units to Bosnia.

He described to the court how Yugoslavia descended into chaos as the leadership in each republic and the Yugoslav People's Army sought to protect its own privileges. The Serbian National Bank transferred some \$2 billion from federal funds to itself. The authorities in Slovenia and Croatia refused to pay taxes into the federal budget, 81 percent of which financed the army. With the working class out on the streets—600,000 workers were on strike in Belgrade—the army contemplated a military coup. The Army General Staff planned to arrest the Slovenian and Croatian leadership and looked to Milosevic. Chief of Staff General Veljko Kadijevic told Markovic, "Milosevic is the only one fighting for Yugoslavia and who would back this up if it wasn't for him?" and offered to install Markovic as president.

Now that his reform programme had indeed produced the "struggle of everybody against everybody else", Markovic resigned and flew to Austria in December of 1991. In his resignation speech he complained that his Federal Executive Council was "completely incapable" of preventing "the economic catastrophe" from "becoming deeper with the growth of hyper-inflation, millions of people unemployed, the production reductions, a great deal of poverty for millions of people—the citizens of this country who are not to blame for any of this—and which will necessarily lead to a social explosion of unprecedented proportions."



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