

Sweden: Anna Lindh's killer given life sentence

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A clearly disturbed 25-year-old man, Mijailo Mijailovic, has been sentenced to life imprisonment for killing Sweden's Social Democratic foreign minister Anna Lindh in a knife attack.

Anna Lindh, 46, was repeatedly stabbed as she shopped September 10, 2003, in a Stockholm department store. She died of her wounds early the following day.

The killing shocked the Swedish population and generated large memorial demonstrations against the murder of the popular politician. Her killing seemed to embody the political tensions brewing across Europe, reaching deep into even the wealthiest, and ostensibly most stable, of European nations.

Lindh's death occurred just days before a hotly contested referendum on whether Sweden should enter the euro-zone or retain the krona. Lindh was a euro-supporter, and the most visible figure in a pro-euro campaign that had the support of most of the media and the dominant sections of Swedish business.

Her murder also invited immediate comparison with the still unsolved 1986 killing of then Social Democratic Swedish prime minister and Lindh's political mentor, Olof Palme, also in Stockholm. Given the early arrest in the Lindh killing of a known right-winger, Per Olof Svensson, with distant connections to the royal family, deep divisions within the Swedish establishment over both the Palme killing and the euro seemed about to be exposed.

During the 1990s, Sweden saw a spate of killings and violent attacks against immigrants, trade unionists and state officials. In 1999, the murder of Bjorn Soderberg triggered the largest anti-fascist protests seen in Sweden since World War II.

The Swedish establishment moved speedily to close the incident following Mijailo Mijailovic's arrest,

confession, and Svensson's simultaneous release. Mijailovic, with a long history of both psychiatric problems and knife attacks, claimed to the police that unnamed "voices" and Jesus himself told him to attack Lindh.

The murder, the press claimed, was "motiveless," the result of a random attack. Other reports noted Mijailovic's Serbian origin, suggesting that he had retained a hatred for Lindh following the NATO attack on Serbia in 1999, which Sweden, and Lindh, supported.

After his trial in January, Mijailovic's legal defence moved that the charge of murder be reduced to manslaughter on the grounds that he was not in control of his faculties at the time of the attack.

"Mijailovic's perception of reality was so affected by the mix of medication he was taking that he had no idea about the consequences of his actions," said his lawyer, Peter Althin. Mijailovic, who has received repeated psychiatric treatment since his teens, testified that he was chronically sleep-deprived and under heavy medication.

Swedish law does not permit anyone who commits a crime while afflicted with "aggravated mental illness" to be imprisoned, although they must undergo compulsory psychiatric care. Mijailovic was required to submit to weeks of psychiatric evaluation to determine his mental condition at the time of the murder before being sentenced. But remarkably, given what has emerged about Mijailovic's mental state, the six weeks of tests concluded that he was not suffering from a serious mental illness and could therefore be jailed for murder.

Mijailovic's lawyer's request for Sweden's Board of Health to review the psychiatric tests was thrown out despite the fact that Agneta Blidberg, who led the

prosecution case against Mijailovic, supported the application. Blidberg wanted to remove any doubts about Mijailovic's mental condition. Swedish courts usually allow such reviews if requested, but Chief Judge Nilsson claimed that there were "no good reasons" for ordering a review.

Peter Althin described the court's decision as "deeply regrettable" and complained that psychiatric examination had "many weak points." "Now we will have a debate that will always be there, lingering on," he said. Athlin also warned, "If Mijailovic is mentally ill then he needs care ... he can't get that care in prison."

Judge Nilsson gave Mijailovic the maximum sentence for murder under Swedish law. In Sweden, life sentences usually amount to prison terms of 11 to 15 years. He was also ordered to pay 150,000 kronor in damages to Lindh's family.

Relief from the Swedish government and media at the outcome of the trial was palpable and made clear that political considerations have overridden concern for justice.

Sweden's justice minister Thomas Bodstroem told the *Dagens Nyheter*, "After the murder of Olof Palme, another unsolved murder would have been another open wound in democratic society."

The *Svenska Dagbladet* reassured its readers, "Unlike the Palme investigation, which collapsed, this did not become a national trauma. There's nothing here for private detectives and conspiracy theorists."

Another side to the case is the brutal example being set. Mijailovic was undoubtedly a severely troubled young man and his incarceration indicates a disregard for the well-being of the population as a whole.

The number of Swedes disabled by mental health troubles has soared over recent years in proportion to the deepening of social problems in the county. For example, those claiming disability from work for more than 90 days at a time due to psychological problems increased more than fourfold from 1998 to 2003.

"Work environments have gotten a lot tougher in recent years. There are not as many places where employees can go to take a break, and most jobs now demand very intensive work from their employees," said Urban Clareus, head of insurance firm Alecta's health and welfare department.

The problem is especially acute among young people.

Over the past five years, the number of Swedes under 35 claiming long-term disability increased more than sevenfold.

Sections of the press have also taken the opportunity to rail against the still relatively humane conditions Mijailovic can expect in Sweden's prison system.

Mihailovic's lawyers are appealing the decision. Judge Nilsson reported that defence attorneys had filed the appeal on April 12. No date for the hearing has been set, but the judge said it could take place within five weeks.



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