Sweden: Anna Lindh killer's conviction thrown out

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The Svea Court of Appeals in Sweden has overturned Mijailo Mijailovic's conviction for the murder of Swedish Foreign Minister, Anna Lindh. The court upheld an appeal on the basis that Mijailovic was "under the influence of a serious psychiatric disorder" at the time of the murder, rejecting the January 2004 verdict that had found the clearly disturbed Mijailovic guilty and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Anna Lindh was stabbed repeatedly in a Stockholm department store in September 2003. She died the following day. Mijailovic, who confessed to the murder, and was caught on CCTV at the crime scene, was convicted despite evidence that the 25-year-old Swedish Serb had repeatedly asked for psychiatric help. During his trial earlier this year, Mijailovic claimed that voices in his head urged him to "attack, attack" shortly before he stabbed Lindh. Mijailovic said he had been feeling bad and had not slept for days.

The murder—and the callous verdict—exposed deepening social and political tensions in a country once considered as among the most liberal. Lindh was killed at the end of a bitter referendum campaign on membership of the eurozone, which revealed a wide gulf between the pro-euro corporate and governmental elite, and large sections of the Swedish population. Lindh was the public face of the "Yes" campaign and it was immediately thought that her death had been organised by far-right opponents of the European Union. Mass demonstrations protested the murder, which recalled the still unsolved killing of Lindh's political mentor, Olof Palme in 1986.

Mijailovic's arrest was the source of considerable relief amongst Sweden's ruling layers, and intense pressure was brought to bear both to ensure a conviction and make sure that no political issues were raised by the trial. In March an investigation into Mijailovic's mental health continued with the view that the young man was sane and he therefore should serve his prison sentence.

But the killing brought the dangerous degeneration of mental health care in Sweden into international focus. The same day that Anna Lindh died a five-year-old child was killed by an inmate of a psychiatric institution. During 2003 at least five people were killed and many more injured by people suffering serious psychiatric conditions. In one incident, a 30-year-old man attacked passers-by at a Stockholm underground station with an iron bar—a 70-year-old man was killed, and seven others injured. In another incident, a man drove a car into the famous pedestrian-only tourist area of Gamla Stan, also in Stockholm, killing two people and injuring 28.

The Swedish Board of Health admitted in October 2003 that "care for people who suffer from serious psychiatric or personality disorders does not function satisfactorily," had "not been coordinated" and "an overall perspective is lacking." It accepted that patients with violent records were left to fend for themselves, after examiners concluded they did not require institutionalisation, while others were simply turned away because of lack of resources. Another report found that 25 percent of all homicides in Sweden were committed by people with psychotic conditions.

Underlying this is the policy, introduced worldwide and implemented in Sweden in the 1990s, of emptying large hospitals of mentally ill people without providing adequate support and care for those flung onto the streets—under the guise of a policy of "care-in-the-community".

Mijailovic, who had for many years been profoundly alienated from the society around him, had been receiving intermittent psychiatric care since he was 17.

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He had previously attacked his father. He is just as much a victim of Swedish mental health policy as those killed, injured, or left abandoned.

Mijailovic's appeal was strengthened in June, when a new psychiatric evaluation ordered by the Appeal Court found that he was suffering from "serious psychiatric disorders". At the appeal, he appeared dishevelled and refused to testify, merely shaking his head in answer to questions directed at him.

Althin's presentation to the court reiterated that Mijailovic had requested assistance and had been rejected. "Mijailo did not get the help he needed. One could say that society let him down."

Althin contrasted Mijailovic's sentence with that handed out to the perpetrators of less high profile, but equally serious attacks where the attackers had been recognised as being ill. He pointed to the media pressure at the trial and queried whether Mijailovic could ever get justice.

In the event, the court agreed that Mijailovic was "a traumatised person with a clear psychiatric problem".

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