

Rallying Serbs from The Hague

by Christine Spolar -- intro 'dragan' - Chicago Tribune Saturday, May 10 2008, 9:59pm
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"The only 'right' the Hague has, is the right to suck my cock" -- Vojislav Seselj.

The most strategically vital region in Europe has always been the Balkans -- even more so today for energy reasons. Often unstated but undeniable, the most powerful and enduring Balkan nation is Serbia! The world is about to get a taste of the indomitable Serbian spirit once again. The monumental mistake the West/America made in the region was to target Serbia as an enemy and install organised Muslim criminals as an (illegitimate) government in Kosovo.

All attempts to illegally appropriate Kosovo are doomed to fail; the elimination of all Serbia and its people must necessarily precede the theft of Kosovo! If it's war you want, then it's war you will get!

Remove all foreign occupation forces from the Serbian province of Kosovo, including all occupying military bases or we will remove them from OUR territories - who do you think you're fucking with? We have fought fascist forces on numerous occasions and prevailed and we will prevail again! How dare you attempt to steal our sacred Kosovo!

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BELGRADE, Serbia — If a war crimes trial seems an unlikely hit for late-night TV, think again. Behold the showmanship of Vojislav Seselj, propagandist extraordinaire of the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

In a Dutch courtroom, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party—expected to be the top vote-getter in pivotal parliamentary elections Sunday—has been captivating audiences with a now 7-month-old self-defense before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

The trial is broadcast three times a week on state-run television here, and the broadcasts have given Seselj a forum to challenge history and question whether the West can sit in judgment of Serbia for its role during the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia.

A law professor but never a practicing attorney, Seselj is waging a no-holds-barred defense against charges that he wielded hate speech, more than 15 years ago, that spurred Serb militias to rape, torture and kill Croats and Muslims. Prosecutors at The Hague have to show Seselj was directly accountable for acts attributed to his militia.

He routinely ridicules the charges — and never with such flair as the day he tossed out both Leo Tolstoy and "my friend" Saddam Hussein to dismiss the prosecutor's opening statement.

"I am especially grateful to the prosecution for enabling me to suffer for my ideology," he intoned. If prosecutors think they "can convict me, my nationalist ideology ... I have to laugh out loud: Ha! Ha!" he said, casting himself as a character from Tolstoy's epic novel "War and Peace."

Seselj quickly drew in viewers. His lust for combative exchanges has made him a kind of unlikely Letterman of late-night Serbia who dares to mock the vaunted institutions of the West and to use The Hague itself to stir nationalist sentiment at home.

"He's a kind of evil genius," said Dragan Ilic, a Serbian talk-show host and media critic. "He's not communicating to the judges. He's communicating to us. People have had two reactions to this: He's turned the trial into a reality show and he makes fun of the system. And, particularly for those who see the great conspiracy against the Serbs, he is defending Serbia.

"He is showing we are not stupid, we are intellectually superior. ... Even those who don't like Seselj politically have some feeling: 'Hey, we are winning there.' "

Battle for Serbia's future

Parliamentary elections Sunday offer voters a chance to choose how Serbia should move forward. The vote, a tug-of-war between pro- and anti-European impulses in Serbia, is also a battle over the country's economic future.

If Seselj's nationalists win and find a partner for a ruling coalition, they have threatened to distance themselves from the European Union and tighten ties with Russia. EU officials are working hard to prevent that, clinching a non-binding agreement recently with Serbia's president to bring Serbia closer to EU membership.

In this political scenario, Seselj is a predictable figure. He preaches a nationalist, extreme right-wing line that is not politically persuasive to the undecided.

But his deputy, Tomislav Nikolic, in charge since Seselj was indicted in 2003, has subtly tried to broaden the Radical Party's appeal, lowering its decibel of fear and focusing on unemployment and corruption—a vision that has won over new voters.

The Radicals are expected to reap a third of the votes this weekend, edging their toughest competition from President Boris Tadic's democratic coalition, according to the latest polls. Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia is predicted to come in third.

If the Radicals win, they likely will seek an alliance with Kostunica, an increasingly strident voice against Western pressure who was politically transformed by the loss of Serbia's southern province, Kosovo, which broke away as an independent state earlier this year.

Seselj was a celebrated figure in the last days of the political campaign. In the party's last big televised demonstration Tuesday, in the heart of Belgrade, loudspeakers thumped with a new ballad rejoicing in the sacrifices of the "Serbian hero: Voja, Voja Seselj!"

Seselj's trial was seen as so important to the Radical Party cause that the party persuaded state-run TV to run three weekly broadcasts of the trial, uninterrupted.

It is only the second time that a Hague prosecution has been given such coverage in Serbia. The trial of former Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was covered live by B92 TV. Milosevic died before a verdict was rendered.

B92 opted out of covering Seselj's prosecution, said Ilic, who hosts a popular call-in morning show at B92 radio, an influential station where callers remark on the "performances" at The Hague.

'Knight in shining armor'

Ilic and others at the station were struck by how democratic institutions in Serbia wavered since Milosevic's time at The Hague.

"During the Milosevic trial, we had a sense of social optimism," Ilic said. "Now there is a kind of apathy. ... And when you have a trial like Seselj and his performance, he becomes a knight in shining armor at The Hague."

Zoran Krasic, a member of parliament who has supplied Seselj with hundreds of thousands of documents for his defense, said Seselj studied the Milosevic trial.

"He has no illusions about The Hague," Krasic said. "The only thing he cares about is that these sessions are open. ... He has always said he will destroy the Hague tribunal."

Seselj's defense is extremely personal and startlingly profane. He has damned human-rights activists by name without so much as a rebuke by the judge. In an exchange couched in gracious concern for The Hague's propriety, he forced a witness to spit out his chewing gum.

Natasa Kandic is one regular viewer who is squeamish about the rising popularity of Seselj's show. The executive director of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade, she has been the target of his loudest diatribes. He has given out her home address in open court.

Kandic said she has been stunned at what the court has allowed Seselj to do and say.

"I imagine, if the trial continues this way, he will return to this country. ... People right now don't care about the crimes of the past," Kandic said. "They don't have jobs."

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