

## Sir Ivor Roberts: Milosevic was a pyromaniac and a firefighter – but he would never admit to being the former

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Sir **Ivor Roberts**, the British ambassador to Yugoslavia in the 1990s, speaks to EUROPP Editor Tena Prelec about his new book: *“Conversations with Milosevic”*.

**During your postings in former Yugoslavia you had multiple encounters with Slobodan Milosevic. Was he indeed the monster most people now view him as?**

There is a divergence between the way I worked with him – because my job was to be effectively non-judgemental, as I was there to try and achieve a breakthrough in the peace process. My remit from the British government and the European Union negotiator, David Owen at the time, was to try and unlock the secret to getting Milosevic to engage properly with the peace process and to help force the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiating table meaningfully and bring the Bosnian war to an end. So to that end, I ended up seeing him, I suppose, 40 or 50 times.

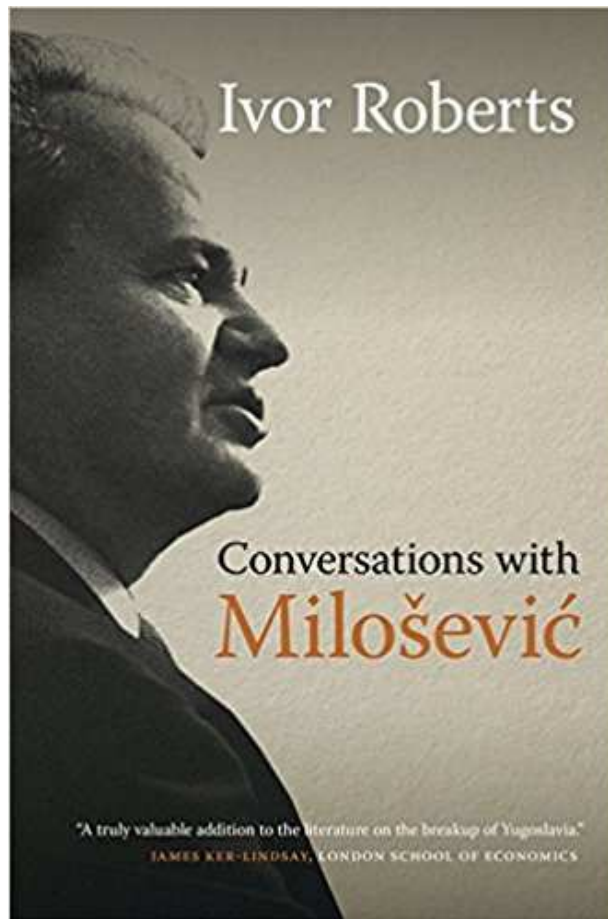
If I look at what he did, then yes, you could say that what he did was monstrous, but in my day-to-day interactions with him, he was actually easier to deal with, strangely enough, than the Bosnian Serbs were. He was very direct, he immediately understood the points you were making – very often I was delivering a strong message from the British government about how he should be helping to force the Bosnian Serbs to accept the Contact Group map, for instance – he never gave you the historical spin that you always got from Karadzic, and which made for exhausting negotiations with the Bosnian Serbs.

**Could you give us an example of this type of behaviour, to illustrate the difference?**

Karadzic would give you lengthy lectures on how the Serbs were acting as the guardians at the gates of Europe defending Europe from the Muslim hordes, that was the sort of thing. And he couldn't understand why the West wouldn't support him because he was the only bulwark between Christianity and the onslaught from Islam, completely failing to accept that what he did in Bosnia had actually awakened Islamism and jihadism, and unleashed precisely that genie from the bottle that he claimed he was trying to contain. So all that was extremely wearing, though he wasn't the most difficult Bosnian Serb to deal with – that was Momcilo Krajisnik.

Krajisnik operated on the basis that he would just wear down his opponent in a negotiation. He was constantly negative about everything. He enjoyed it, he enjoyed this whole game. I remember on one terrible occasion it was January or February, in a place called Mali Zvornik, just overlooking the Drina, on the Bosnian side of the border. It was freezing cold, as there was no heating because of the sanctions. The Americans had just sent Jimmy Carter to visit the Bosnian Serbs, to see if they would be willing to be flexible, and he hadn't got anywhere.

So the British government decided that I should go there from Serbia, across the Drina, to see Krajisnik. There was also Nikola Koljevic, the vice president of Republika Srpska. We sat in this freezing hotel. We would be



looking at this map on the table, which had been put there by the contact group, without ever making any progress at all. Occasionally I thought we would make a breakthrough, but in vain. He was the most difficult person to deal with.

### **What was Milosevic's relationship like with the Bosnian Serbs?**

Milosevic thought that we should not have anything to do with the Bosnian Serbs – he thought he should be the only one to negotiate with them. And I suppose he was right, as it eventually ended up being this way. At the Patriarch's meeting in the summer of 1995 – when Milosevic got utterly fed up with the Bosnian Serbs – he summoned them to this meeting in Belgrade and told them that they would have to accept that he would lead the negotiations from that point on, and that in the event of split decisions he would have the decisive vote. Later on, I asked Koljevic why they accepted, and he said 'well, we had no choice'. I interpreted this in such a way that Milosevic would have kept them there, all night long, until they would agree to his conditions.

That wasn't the first time Milosevic had threatened them. A couple of months earlier, when Bosnian Serbs took UN soldiers hostage, in the summer of 1995, I was sent to tell Milosevic that he must exert all possible pressure to get them released. Milosevic said 'it has nothing to do with me, I told these madmen that this crazy way to behave brings the Serbian people into disrepute'. At which point I said that my government held him responsible for the soldiers being released safely and promptly. A few days went by and I went to see if there was any progress. Milosevic said 'I am sending someone to see Karadzic to make sure the soldiers are released' and that was Jovica Stanisic, the head of the Secret Police. I asked him 'so what's the message to Karadzic?' And he said, 'if they don't release the soldiers I'll have him killed' – and coming from Stanisic, you could believe this.

### **Did Milosevic ever show any signs of regret? Some argue that he had an amazing capacity for self-deception – would you agree?**

Yes, absolutely. The very last time I was with him as ambassador, I asked him if there was anything at all he regretted. He said: 'Yes: I trusted people too much'. It was very hard to keep a straight face when he said that!

### **Did he hint at any people specifically whom he should not have trusted?**

I think he was quite resentful about the Americans. When Zimmerman arrived as ambassador, it was just before the anniversary of the battle of Kosovopolje, in 1989. The Serbs were preparing a big celebration, and Zimmerman boycotted it, as a result of which Milosevic refused to see him for a year. He said: "I regretted that. It was a stupid, stubborn thing to do". But on the whole, I had the impression that he expected the Americans to be more supportive. He knew America very well and thought they would have stood by him.

### **Would you say that this insistence on dealing with the Bosnian Serbs himself was his way of telling you that he was 'on your side' in the negotiations?**

In a way, yes. Given the failure of the Vance Owen peace plan (VOPP), and his failure to convince the Bosnian Serbs to accept it. Milosevic had gone to Pale and spoken to the Bosnian Serb assembly, (where he found Biljana Plavsic and Ratko Mladic), and tried to convince them to accept the plan, but they didn't. So he took the situation more firmly in his hands: I think that with the sanctions against Yugoslavia intensifying, he had to do something.

In my book, I describe him as a pyromaniac firefighter: having set the whole place on fire, he was the man who was going to put out the fire. So he had decided by then that he was going to be the man to save Bosnia. What he resented was our saying that we would deal directly with the Bosnian Serbs: he wanted it to be clear that he was the key to the resolution. This, in fact, actually happened: after the Patriarch's meeting, Karadzic and the Bosnian Serbs left with their tails between their legs, and a few weeks later, at the Dayton conference, they had been completely sidelined by Milosevic – they were just told what the outcome of the conference was. When Momcilo Krajisnik saw the map that had been agreed he was so shocked he fainted.

### **Was Milosevic conscious of being the pyromaniac as well – or did he only think of himself as the firefighter?**

Oh no, he would never accept it, that he was the pyromaniac. I remember Miodrag Lekic, who was then the Montenegrin Foreign Minister (and very much a 'good guy', certainly that is how we Westerners saw him), telling

me that at one of the meetings at an early stage of the negotiations Milosevic had said to Karadzic and the Bosnians: “I gave you these weapons to defend yourselves, not to engage in these crazy adventures”.

### **Who would you identify as the most important person in Milosevic’s ascent to power?**

Mira Markovic, his wife, was no doubt crucial. She encouraged him to stand up against his former protector, Ivan Stambolic. They had a very mysterious relationship, and a very close one. When you went to Milosevic’s office, it was almost completely empty, there were no official papers heaped up in a tray or anything like it. There were very few pieces of furniture, a very large clock (you got the point that time was important), and then there was Mira’s photograph towering in the room. She was hugely important to him, and she was full of contradictions herself. She was a university lecturer. When she was asked by David Owen about her husband’s nationalism, she adamantly denied it: “If he was a nationalist, I would never have married him”.



Sir Ivor Roberts with EUROPP’s Tena Prelec at the book’s launch. Credits: Aleksandra Stankova / LSE

There is a story which is quite telling about their relationship. The two of them went to a petrol station. Under the sanctions, it was very difficult to get petrol, but Mira managed to persuade the attendant to fill up the tank. Slobodan noticed that the two of them seemed to get along very well, and asked Mira if she knew him. She said: “He was my first love”. “So” he said: “if you had married him, you would have been a petrol station attendant’s wife”. “No”, she replied, “if I’d married him, he would now be President of Serbia”.

### **Do you think that had Croat wartime leader Franjo Tudjman lived long enough he would have ended up at the ICTY as well?**

Yes, I definitely think so. But he was protected by the Americans, who saw the Croats as the main arm which they had to beat the Serbs. So Tudjman could not be indicted for war crimes in spite of the fact that Carl Bildt and many others at ICTY thought he should be, due to the attacks on civilians during Operation Storm.

### **In terms of Tudjman’s relationship with Milosevic did you have any glimpse of it?**

I never saw the two of them together, but Milosevic told me about the conversations he used to have with Tudjman and with [Bosniak leader] Alija Izetbegovic. He used to refer to Izetbegovic as ‘The Grand Vizir’. He told me that Tudjman and he had spoken and they had agreed that if the international community got out of the way, they would have sorted out the situation between themselves quite quickly. This of course meant that Bosnia would have been divided up between them. I remember that Tudjman came to Britain and showed the Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown a map of Bosnia divided up between the Serbs and the Croats, and Ashdown was appalled, and surprised that Tudjman would be so brazen about it – it is not something that Milosevic would have ever done.

### **There has been some talk about parallels between Trump and Milosevic. Do you think these parallels are in any way justified and are they useful? Are there any lessons we can take from the Milosevic era to make more sense of the situation today?**

I don’t think any of us here would be able to tackle what is essentially an American question. As for the rise of Trumpism and its parallels with nationalism in the West generally, I think there are so many parallels we can make with the 1930s and 1940s – e.g. protectionism, which has been hugely damaging, a long time before Milosevic appeared. I think Donald Trump today is constrained by the rule of law, in a way in which Milosevic was not constrained. The opposition he received to the travel ban is one such instance: I don’t think Milosevic would ever have encountered any such opposition from the courts.

Sir Ivor Roberts was speaking prior to an [event](#) hosted by LSEE – Research on South Eastern Europe (LSE European Institute). His new book, *Conversations with Milosevic*, is available [here](#).

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*Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image via [slobodan-milosevic.org](#).*

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### About the interviewee

#### **Sir Ivor Roberts** – *University of Oxford*

Sir Ivor Roberts is the president of Trinity College, University of Oxford. He worked in the British Diplomatic Service for nearly forty years. Among his many accomplishments as a diplomat he served as Deputy Head of the Foreign Office’s Press Department and later its Head of Counter-Terrorism. He served as the British Ambassador at Belgrade during the Bosnian civil war and the descent into war in Kosovo. He was posted as Ambassador to Ireland, immediately following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and finally to Rome. After serving as Ambassador to Italy, Roberts retired from the Diplomatic Service in 2006. He served as Chairman of the British School of Archaeology and Fine Arts at Rome (2007-12).



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