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## Cascading Normalization in the 'Western Balkans'

LSE Ideas

By Karlo Basta

To a number of Western [observers](#), last month's arrest of Ratko Mladic brings to an end the long drawn out implosion of the former Yugoslavia. The arrest comes twenty years since the beginning of that country's break-up, and the wars that made the previously obscure local toponyms, from Srebrenica to Lazarevo, world-famous. In some sense, Mladic's extradition to the Hague might be cathartic both for those who seek justice, and to those who wish to forget. Yet sixteen years after the end of major hostilities (twelve in the case of Serbia/Kosovo) we still cannot say that people in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia have moved on.

### Clear about the future...

Of the three countries, Croatia is the one closest to becoming a truly post-conflict society. It has concluded its pre-accession talks with the European Union, and is poised to become a member in [2013](#). In part as a result of its EU accession efforts, it has made significant strides in strengthening the rule of law, and dealing with its minorities, primarily the Serbs who have opted to stay (or return, if they had fled during the war). Most importantly, unlike Serbia or Bosnia, Croatia has no outstanding territorial claims or secessionist minorities since restoring its territorial integrity in a set of military operations that ended the war in 1995.

Yet, it is precisely the nature of these operations that was condemned in the recent convictions of two Croatian generals, Mladen Markac (18 years) and Ante Gotovina (24 years), in the Hague. The most contentious part of the verdict is the judgement that there existed a joint criminal enterprise to rid Croatia of a significant proportion of local Serbs. The conspiracy reached as high as Croatia's first president, Franjo Tudjman. The official reactions suggested that most members of the Croatian political establishment had difficulty reconciling themselves to the possibility that one could commit crimes in a defensive war. Nevertheless, the emotionally charged response to the verdicts at no time presented a threat to law and order, to say nothing of the regime itself. This is in marked contrast to 2000, when a group of disaffected generals threatened the established order due to the government's cooperation with the Hague tribunal. Since the Gotovina/Markac case is the last high-profile trial of Croatian officials for crimes committed between 1991 and 1995, the recent [verdicts](#) are probably the punctuation mark that will close a difficult chapter in Croatia's history. War will most likely cease being a daily political topic, and will move permanently to textbooks and periodical commemorative TV reportages.

Not so in Serbia. Here, the current government has, indeed, extradited Ratko Mladic, and before him another 44 suspected war criminals, to the Hague. Some of the least savoury political parties from the 1990s have upgraded their image in a pro-European direction (the party of Slobodan Milosevic included), and only the much-weakened Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj remains as a potentially anti-systemic actor. Moreover, neither the Karadzic nor the Mladic extraditions produced serious challenges to the stability of the state. So even here strides have been made in moving beyond a wartime state of mind.

### ...not so much about the past...

Such optimism must be tempered by the realization that Serbian society has still not dealt decisively with its recent past. For example, 40% of Serbia's citizens believe that Mladic is a [hero](#). Moreover, unlike Croatia, Serbia has lost Kosovo, a symbolically significant part of its territory. The experience has been so traumatic that to this date, no Serb politician hoping to win and retain power has openly accepted the province's [independence](#). Some members of Serbia's political establishment continue to implicitly bargain with the international community over the amputated territory. If Kosovo can become a state, they ask, why not the Serbian entity in [Bosnia](#)? Conflicts of the 1990s, therefore, continue to feature in daily political debates in Serbia. On the other hand, the catastrophic economic situation in the country, combined with pervasive corruption, is providing greater worries to politicians than even the arrest of prominent war-criminal-heroes (a breed thriving not only in [Serbia](#)). Serbia has a ways to go before it reaches the EU's doorstep, so even though Germany will probably veto its accession if it fails to recognize [Kosovo](#), the government could still drag out the question. For how long is anyone's guess. But the longer the issue drags out, the longer the process of normalization will be.

### ...and then there is Bosnia

Yet despite its problems, Serbia is in better shape than Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, one can often hear the refrain that politics among the three constituent nations is simply a continuation of war by other means. Political institutions established at the end of the war were designed with an eye to protecting the smaller nations, the Serbs and the Croats, from domination by



*Shall we shake? Yes, let's shake*

the numerically stronger Bosniacs. However, the fact that each group can block political action means that Bosnian political process is rife with paralysis. Political impasse has done little to improve the lot of ordinary citizens of Bosnia. Because of this, the country's institutions are subject to frequent challenges from all three sides, as well as from the representatives of the international community. Yet, no agreement exists on the direction of reform. While Bosniacs and the international community want a more centralized state, the Serbs and Croats wish for status quo, or a return to an even more decentralized and veto-laden institutional formula.

In this conflict over the future shape of the country, each side buttresses its arguments by invoking wartime traumas. As a result, war is still part of every-day life for anyone following the news. Days without media reminders of massacres and other sundry crimes dragging their tails since the war are few and far in between. While commemorating victims is important, one wonders if any healing is possible for a society unable, or unwilling, to place the past in its proper place. Yet, as long as the constitutional question remains open, the past and the present will likely remain inextricably linked.

A Croatian diplomat said recently that Croatia and Serbia agree on most questions when it comes to the future. He also noted that their disagreements stem from the different views of the past. Stories about what had happened during the 1990s diverge so much from place to place that they at times seem to refer to different events altogether. Reconciliation is therefore hard to come by. However, for Serbia and Croatia, normalization is possible if only because conflict will slowly but surely recede from most people's minds. Unfortunately, this is largely due to the national homogenization each country has undergone over the past two decades, in part through ethnic cleansing, in part through secession. In Bosnia, current politics is still very much lived through what had happened during the war. Hopefully the country's citizens can show that the depressing wisdom that 'good fences make good neighbours' will not apply to them as well.

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