

Interview

INTERVIEW OF THE ISSUE:

THE ONLY WAY TO GAIN SOMEONE'S CONFIDENCE IS TO TELL THE TRUTH

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The ending of The Hague story will not make Serbia and Montenegro a land of milk and honey. Ahead of us there is still much of hard work to do and to fulfill the obligations. The Hague Tribunal is an obstacle because of which, if we do not remove it, we cannot move forward. An obligation that we must fulfill. This is like a millstone around our neck. Weight hanging on our legs. With them, we cannot run towards Europe.

This is how for Pravda u tranziciji speaks the Minister for Human and Minority Rights, and the President of the National Council for Cooperation with The Hague Tribunal, Rasim Ljajic.

- The public in the country is rather polarized in regard to cooperation with The Hague Tribunal. So, some opinion polls say that as much as 33 percent opposed any cooperation with this institution – even if the cost were introduction of sanctions. This is by no means a negligible percent! On the other hand, a part of the public, and first of all the non-governmental organizations, understand the importance of the cooperation with the Tribunal.

It is exactly this part of the public that was most against guarantees that the state gave to The Hague indictees for their temporary release from prison, claiming that these are people who are accused of the gravest crimes?

- Having in mind all the differences within the public, we have literally to seek for best solutions. The aim of the guarantees was to demonstrate state's interest for its citizens regardless of them being accused. Namely, each of them is innocent until the contrary is proven. Besides, we wanted to motivate also the voluntary surrenders.

Of course, at issue here are also our obligations in regard to the international community. But I would not say that the cooperation with The Hague Tribunal consists only of fulfillment of political obligations, it is also our moral obligation to cooperate with this court.

Therefore, I think that this principle has produced significant results to a certain extent. As you know, already after the first guarantees a number of voluntary surrenders followed. The result of all this was that the judges in The Hague Tribunal showed far more respect for our next guarantees, so that 12 indictees were allowed to defend themselves from freedom until the trial starts.

Of course, the condition under which the indictee could get guarantees was the voluntary surrender to The Tribunal. This was also the motive for some officers in Republic Srpska to surrender to the authorities in Belgrade, simply because it would be difficult for them to get such guarantees from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Because of all this, I think that looking for fallacies of such a form of cooperation is less important than that all the indictees find themselves in the court.

Did the cooperation with The Hague Tribunal and the confidence which this institution built in regard to the state community Serbia and Montenegro have a role in the fact that Milan Milutinovic and Dragoljub Ojdanic, whose demands were rejected several times, now enjoy temporary freedom?

- You are completely right. Voluntary surrenders and a better cooperation of Serbia and Montenegro with The Tribunal have greatly influenced The Tribunal to allow some of the indictees to remain in freedom until the trials start. Both Milutinovic and Ojdanic belong to this group. The key moment was exactly this – the fact that in a relatively short period 15 persons voluntarily surrendered to The Tribunal.

On the other hand, they were released also because all the names from the Kosovo indictment are linked. It would be unprincipled for the court to releases some of them and keep the others in Scheveningen.

What information do you have on the whereabouts of Ratko Mladic? How much of what the police and other organs are doing in order to find him does reach you?

- At this point nobody has relevant knowledge related to the whereabouts of Ratko Mladic. It is known that approximately until May 15, 2002, he was in military premises and that he left them at that time. It is supposed that from there he went to a holiday settlement near Valjevo, where from all his traces are lost. Everything else related to his hiding are speculations.

Thus, according to one of the stories he went to Russia, but at some point he feared that Russian mafia, which was guarding him, would sell him for money and deliver him to the Tribunal. According to unconfirmed information, after that he came back to this territory. This, I repeat, is a clear speculation, because our inspections did not lead to any evidence which would confirm this.

Since then there were dozens of inspections. Some of them lasted for many days. We had action on Zlatibor, we were searching for him also in the surroundings of Belgrade, in private clinics, in flats. The last inspection was conducted in November, upon allegedly confirmed information that Mladic was in this place. Unfortunately, the action was unsuccessful, because he was not there.



He was born in 1964 in Novi Pazar. He graduated from Medical School in Sarajevo. He has been in politics since 1990, when he was elected to the post of Secretary General of the Democratic Action Party for Sandjak. In 1994 he formed the Coalition „Sandjak“, which in 2000 transforms into the Democratic Party of Sandjak whose president he has been ever since. He was nominated as Minister in the federal government in 2000, and in the same year he became the vice-president of the Coordination Body for solving the crisis in the south of Serbia and vice-president of the Coordination Centre for Kosovo and Metohija. In 2001 his mandate as Minister in the Federal Government was renewed. He is also President of the National Council for Cooperation with The Hague Tribunal, which he sees as the country's highest priority. Faced with obstruction of this cooperation he was expressing the readiness to step out from the Council of Ministers in case cooperation with the Tribunal will not be approached in an honest and constructive manner.

How do your talks with Karla Del Ponte look like? She is often saying that she does not like to talk with our politicians, but that she does respect her colleagues, judges and prosecutors.

- I think that the War Crime Prosecutor and the Special Court are doing hard work and, I would say, a hell of a difficult work. These people certainly deserve recognition for what they do. And this is not only my opinion. I think I share it with the majority in the international community.

Unfortunately, I think their work is better evaluated and respected abroad, than here. First, people here know little about them, and therefore their work should be presented to the public so it could see that this work is not only difficult but also linked with many risks.

As regards talks with the Chief Prosecutor of The Hague Tribunal, the only way to gain somebody's confidence is to tell the truth, not to promise what you cannot fulfill, and to believe in what you are doing. I believe that the cooperation with the Tribunal is no doubt of primary interest for this country. Both in the political and every other sense. And I am completely convinced that if we bring this work to an end and if we put an end to The Hague problems, this country will have a very close European perspective.

Otherwise, it will be extremely hard to progress towards European integration. Then we would be the last pariah in Europe, and many other countries in the region would get ahead of us.

How do you see the state community after The Hague obligations are fulfilled?

- If we solve the case of Ratko Mladic, I predict that from June till October we could conclude the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, which would be huge progress.

Immediately after that, in this year, we could be admitted also to the Partnership for Peace, and in 2008, when the new NATO expansion is scheduled, we could, together with Croatia, become members of this institution. Thus would, practically, set the state's European road.

How does the National Council cooperate with the Army? After searching several times for Ratko Mladic's dossier, do you still have the impression that somebody does want to obstruct cooperation with The Hague, or is the military documentation really spread throughout Serbia so that it is difficult to find all the documents which the Prosecution is asking for?

- I think that things have considerably changed after Zoran Stankovic became Minister of Defense, and I think that he is fully committed to full cooperation with the Tribunal. He and I had a very successful meeting with the representatives of the Army at which we defined our duties and tasks related to the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. Since then there is complete readiness of the Army to transmit all the wanted documentation and in this regard it makes maximum efforts.

We now want to enable The Hague Tribunal's Prosecution to have insight into all these archives. This would remove all the dilemmas whether the Army or some other organ is hiding these documents. However, if we make them available, all accusations would be completely groundless.

Security

You said that you have bodyguards whom you often do escape. How do you accomplish this?

- Very often. I am a person which is not used to having guards. First, when I came here, I had the right to one bodyguard. Although I had signed the document by which he was appointed to me, I said I did not need him. However, now when I have two or three of them, it is all the more difficult. I usually do not contact them when I am going out in the afternoon or in the evening.

Lawyers or legal advisers of The Hague indictees often say that The Hague's Prosecution has primacy when it asks for certain documents. Is this true, or is it only a strategy of the defense?

- No, this is not true. The procedure for transmitting the documentation is identical for both the prosecution and the defense. Nobody must have preferential treatment, because if we would meet more the requests of the defense, then the state would be, in a way, party in the case.

Is the procedure a slow one? Yes, very often. Particularly if the request is not sufficiently precise. In that case contact is made with the party which filed it, and it sends a new request, and this is where time goes by. On the other hand, some documents are under protective measures, so that they have to be given away also under these very same measures. All this is equally applied to both the Prosecution and the defense.

When Jovica Stanisic and Franko Simatovic were temporarily released, some media speculated that they actually use the principle "bag on the head" to force other indictees to surrender. Is this true?

- This has nothing to do with the truth. Absolutely nothing. I spoke frequently on this subject also with the former Tribunal's president Theodore Meron. The Hague has no objections in regard to the way in which we observe The Hague indictees which are in freedom until the beginning of the trial. Really, the respective agencies are doing a very professional job, and in no case did we have bigger problems. At the beginning there was only the question how to organize the trip of Vladimir Lazarevic because he is not from Belgrade, but this was also solved.

I regret for the „Vukovar troika“

In The Hague Tribunal the trial against „Vukovar troika“ has started, a case over which both Croatia and Serbia were recently „fighting“. Are you sorry that Belgrade did not get this case?

- I am. I do see it somewhat like our failure, although realistically speaking at the beginning the chances were on the Croatian side. Namely, it is the practice of The Tribunal to delegate the case to that state in whose territory the crime was committed in order to bring justice closer to the victims. Therefore Zagreb's chances were bigger at the start. And yet, I do think that we had a convincing and good approach and honestly I was expecting to get this case. I see this also as my personal failure.

In The Hague there will soon be a hearing for Bosnia-Herzegovina's charges against Serbia and Montenegro. What are your expectations?

- The best solution would be to reach an extrajudicial solution. If this is not the case, the court will decide. In any case, I think that for the reconciliation process it would be better if there were a political agreement between Belgrade and Sarajevo. Since this did not happen, there is nothing else to do but wait for the decision of the court.

You once said that your accepting the function of the president of the National Council for Cooperation with The Hague Tribunal was your biggest political risk after joining DOS and that you always think of the question – what if you say something here, and someone in Sandjak would not be comfortable with this. You spoke similarly about Srebrenica – that on the one side you belong to the ethnic group whose victims are there, and on the other – you are defending the interests of the state in which you are living and which because of these events is under attack. Do you think along these lines today as well?

- Both in the political and every other sense this is the most sensitive matter. Because if I say that we do not know where Mladic is, probably a big portion of Sandjak will say that I am telling something that is not true. Or, that I talk in the language of Belgrade, which is hiding Ratko Mladic and that I am, in a way, instrumentalized because I say I do not know where he is hiding.

On the other hand, Srebrenica is a very special story, a horrible crime that was committed. There is no dilemma in this regard, no bidding, and I think that the marking of the tenth anniversary was a good opportunity for the public in Serbia to face a horrible crime which was committed there.

You graduated from Medical school, and yet you are a politician. Which therapy is the best one for the state?

- The people should be clearly told: The ending of The Hague story will not bring milk and honey to Serbia and Montenegro. We have ahead of us still much of hard work and fulfilling of obligations, like the other countries had if they wanted to become a part of the European family of peoples and states.

Objectively speaking, by macro-economic indicators related to the extend of reforms, we are a country much better ranking than Bulgaria and Romania and some other states which are closer to the European Union than we are. But, we have a problem that has not yet been solved. The Hague.

Ema Radosavljevic

Boxes from Busovaca

A part of the military documentation is really not filed in archives. There are bags with documents which have not yet been opened and we do not even know what is in them. Exactly at the meeting with Minister Stankovic one of the representatives of the Army said that since 1990 there were 397 boxes with various documents brought from Busovaca. Some of them relate back to the year 1945. In spite of that, they have been closed until today. The same happened when the forces were withdrawing from Kosovo and the former Yugoslav republics, when part of the documentation was brought to Belgrade, and part of it remained in gyms and other objects which are in no way intended for this purpose. Hence, it is necessary that all these documents be filed in archives in order to make them available both to us and the Tribunal.