SENATE SQUARE SOCIETY

Balkan Affairs Brief

The End of an Era: Bosnia's "Iron Lady," a Convicted War Criminal, Dies at 96

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Background

On October 1, 2026, Biljana Plavšić, former President of Republika Srpska, died at 96 years old. Called the “Iron Lady” for her fierce leadership of the breakaway state, she spent her tenure as a close personal ally to Republika Srpska President Radovan Karadžić. Plavšić was born July 7, 1930, in Tuzla, Yugoslavia (now Bosnia and Herzegovina). She grew up in an academic family, spending her childhood in Sarajevo while her father was the director of natural sciences at a local museum. She specialized in botany and obtained her PhD from the University of Zagreb. She then went to New York City as a Fulbright scholar and returned to Sarajevo as a faculty member at the University of Sarajevo.

Interestingly, she then switched her career track to politics, joining the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) in 1990, and rose through the ranks until the beginning of the war in 1992. She and other SDS politicians proclaimed the Serbian Republic of Bosnia in April 1992, where she then became the vice president under Radovan Karadžić. She vilified and campaigned against Bosnian Muslim and Croat movements, gaining the respect of fellow Bosnian Serb voices. She became an advocate for the US-brokered Dayton Accords in 1995, which formally ended the Bosnian war and created the current power-sharing structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her support for the Accords gained her respect with Western policymakers, including Madeleine Albright who commended her for being a voice standing up for the Dayton Accords. This moderation helped her become president on July 19, 1996 after Karadžić was indicted for war crimes. She broke with the SDS in 1997 after accusing Karadžić of corruption and an illegal smuggling ring. She then softened her stances on Bosniak refugees returning to Republika Srpska, leading to her defeat in the 1998 elections by a Serb ultranationalist.

Conviction

In 2000, she was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on crimes of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity after her role in the ethnic cleansing of non-Serb populations in Bosnia. In 2003, the Hague-based U.N. tribunal sentenced her to 11 years of imprisonment, though she was released in 2009, 2 years early on “good behavior”. She was the only woman out of the 161 people indicted by the ICTY. The Tribunal reported that she disregarded claims of

ethnic cleansing, and even rationalized her government's actions. At her 2002 sentencing hearing, she finally expressed an amount of regret. According to Balkan Insight, she stated "The knowledge that I am responsible for such human suffering and for soiling the character of my people will always be with me." However, just 2 years later she retracted that contrition and claimed she had done nothing wrong. Even that brief display of contrition for her actions has led her to be a controversial figure in Bosnian Serb history.

Death and Funeral

After her release, Plavšić lived a peaceful life in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. Her death follows the recent passing of fellow Bosnian Serb war criminal Ratko Mladić, who died in the Hague on August 27. Like Plavšić, he was convicted of war crimes after the Bosnian war by the ICTY, for his role in the genocide at Srebrenica and other war crimes he oversaw in his position of the head of the Republika Srpska military. His death was met with a large state-funded funeral in Belgrade, attended by dignitaries including the Russian ambassador. Biljana Plavšić's burial was a slightly more subdued affair. Her funeral on Wednesday, October 7th, was still attended by 1,000 people, including many former R.S. officials, including former president Milorad Dodik, however it was not the large state affair that Mladić received.

Both of their deaths mark the end of an era of Bosnian-Serb war criminals, and a time for the region of the Balkans to reconcile with past atrocities. Several R.S. officials are still alive and imprisoned, including Radovan Karadžić, the founding president of Republika Srpska from 1992-1996, as well as a handful of other military and police officials all convicted by the ICTY. As more of these convicts die in custody, their fates prove that justice can eventually be served, and stands as a warning to the region's current leaders that peace must be preserved.

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