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Playing to the audience: The televised suicide of Slobodan Praljak

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Croatian war criminal Slobodan Praljak's televised suicide at the ICTY has made him a hero in his home country and is seen as proof of his innocence. Unfortunately, Croatia's revisionist attitude towards the recent past has precedents elsewhere in Europe, writes Slavenka Drakulić.

The court rooms of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague have seen many a drama in the last twenty-four years, however nothing compared to the televised suicide of a defendant. And yet, this is what happened on 29 November 2017, at the end of the trial of six Bosnian Croats for crimes committed in Bosnia between 1992 and 1994. The judge, Carmel Agius, had just finished reading his verdict to the former general Slobodan Praljak, sentencing him to twenty years in prison, when the tall and imposing Praljak stood up, shouted at the judges and drank something from a small vial. One could see the other two defendants sitting next to him looking up in surprise, and the judge glancing over his reading glasses. At first, everyone took it as a typical case of the defendant causing a brief commotion before sitting back down or being accompanied out of the court room – like what happened recently with the Serbian war criminal Ratko Mladić. But soon a curtain was drawn and the court proceedings were interrupted. Live television transmission was suspended and Praljak was taken to hospital.

A few hours later, it emerged that Praljak had taken poison and died. What was left were two highly theatrical, yet iconic images documenting his



death. In the first, we see the face of elderly man with white hair and beard. His mouth is open, he is yelling, tense from the effort to make himself heard. His face is red and distorted, his eyes are bulging in the seizure of anger. If we look more carefully at his eyes, however, we also see something else, a hint of despair. We understand that what he is shouting is something terribly important to him, that if he is not heard the whole performance will be a failure, a disaster. Since we are now looking at his image post mortem, we also know that the despair in his eyes comes from the fact that he is about to commit the final act of suicide. He is convinced it is a heroic act, but that look betrays him. But since the hand with poison is already raised, there is no time for deliberation.

In the next image, he is drinking the poison. The movement of his hand is quick and decisive, his eyes are closed. There is nothing more to be said or done. His role is finished, the curtain literally falls for him. If we didn't know that at this moment he was taking his life, we would be indifferent to the image. It is our awareness of what it represents that gives his gesture a special value. We have seen death in front of a camera before. But not of a perpetrator, nor a suicide so carefully prepared and performed live. 'Judges! Slobodan Praljak is not a war criminal! I reject your judgment with contempt!' - he shouts before he sits down. 'I just drank poison', he says to his lawyer.

Before becoming a soldier, Praljak was - among other things - a stage and film director. His final performance was directed and played by him. His cry, his last words to the court, to the public and especially to Croats were calculated to get maximum attention. Being on the front pages of the international press is the ultimate dream of every theatre person. But to everyone who knows who Praljak was, it was clear that this act was aimed not only at the foreign media. His message was political, intended for political use in Croatia. Speaking of himself in the third person, his words attest to that. By committing suicide, Praljak managed to become a hero and martyr. In an instant, he turned himself into a national monument.

The task of the ICTY was to individualize crimes in order not to criminalize entire nations. Praljak, an educated and intelligent man, subverted that principle on purpose. By turning himself, the perpetrator, into the victim, he symbolically transferred his crimes onto the collective body of the Croatian people.



Reactions in Croatia to his ultimate performance were seismic: astonishment, anger, tears. The spectacle began with the prime minister Andrej Plenković expressing his dissatisfaction with the verdict, stating that Praljak's suicide 'speaks of a deep moral injustice towards the sentenced six'. It did not take long for the president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, to proclaim emphatically in an address to the nation that Croatia was not the aggressor in Bosnia and that the ICTY had demonstrated itself to be a political arbiter. 'Nobody, not even the ICTY, will write our history', she said. The next day the parliament held a minute's silence in honour of the deceased war criminal. Other politicians, Catholic priests, war veterans and ordinary people all took turns to express what was now the official truth: that Praljak took his life for moral reasons and that this was proof of his innocence.

As if this mass display of remorse were not enough, on the day of the official commemoration, organized by the Croatian Assembly of Generals and held in Zagreb's main concert hall, the traffic in the capital was regulated by the police and citizens were told to use free public transport to get to the event.

The international press watched the reaction of the Croatian government with bewilderment and horror. *The Guardian* wrote that the prime minister's statement was thought to be 'the first declaration by the head of an EU government in support of a convicted war criminal'. *Der Spiegel Online* wrote critically about the reaction in Croatia, as did *Le Monde*, *La Stampa*, *Jyllands Posten*, *Aftonbladet*, *Der Standard* and many others. The international image of Croatia has been tainted by this outburst of nationalist emotion - a parallel reaction to what had happen a short time before in Serbia, when Ratko Mladić's verdict came through. Not to mention that the voices of victims of the sentenced six could barely be heard in the noise produced by the crowd mourning the perpetrator.

This bizarre and shocking reaction to the public suicide of a war criminal has its roots in Croatia's troubled relation towards the past, beginning with WWII when Croatia was a fascist puppet-state. Franjo Tudjman, the first president of the newly established Republic of Croatia, stated in 1990 that the so-called Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was 'not only a quisling construction, but also an expression of the desire of the Croatian people for independence'. In the eyes of the far-right leadership of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the largest party in the current coalition government, the new Croatia was a continuation of the NDH. According to



the HDZ, a country that is defending itself can not commit war crimes. Franjo Tudjman's speeches, conversations and ideas - meticulously recorded in his autobiography and in a number of documents and on tapes - were of great help in prosecuting Praljak and the other five defendants. But nobody likes to hear that today, since it might tarnish the image of Tudjman as the Founding Father.

In the last few years, the HDZ has turned sharply to the right. Its leading politicians and the Catholic Church express openly revisionist views. One infamous example was the placing of a memorial plaque with a fascist salute in close proximity to the site of the former WWII concentration camp in Jasenovac. Among the taboo topics, the biggest are Croatian aggression in Bosnia and the civil war between the Serbian and Croatian populations in Croatia. The public television station HRT recently instructed its staff journalists to respect in their work a parliamentary document from 2000 entitled 'Declaration on the war for the homeland'. Talk show host Aleksandar Stanković was reprimanded for failing to do so. The document states that Croatia waged a just, legitimate, defensive war.

The government is not reacting merely to the guilty verdict. Praljak is being used as a pretext - the real protest is directed at the confirmation of Croatian aggression in Bosnia, the aim of which was the annexation of Herzegovina (a part of Bosnia with a majority Croatian population). This is complicated by the fact that Croatia, under pressure from the USA, signed the Washington Treaty in 1994, thus becoming an ally of the Bosnian army against the Serbs. The verdict also opens up the issue of reparations for the tens of thousands of people who passed through the Croatian concentration camps in Bosnia. The protests need to be seen as a response to this too.

Finally, if Croatia's two highest ranking politicians were forced to make such statements, then they did so out of self-interest: both the prime minister and the president are brought to and kept in power by the most radical wing of the HDZ. If they want to keep their posts, they must behave accordingly.

It seems that the Croatian government is no longer much worried by the country's image abroad. If it has learned a single lesson in the past four years of EU membership, it is that once you are in, you can do what you want - just like Hungary and Poland. If big and important countries can behave like this, then small and unimportant Croatia can permit itself even more. But perhaps the display of nationalism and revisionism went too far.



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Let us hope that rejecting the ICTY verdict and turning war criminals into heroes is simply too much even for a disoriented European Union.