

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

RADOVAN KARADZIC

The other side to the Bosnian story

In a rare and exclusive interview, the former Bosnian Serb leader Dr Radovan Karadzic spoke to *Politics First's* Marcus Papadopoulos about the twentieth anniversary of Yugoslavia's implosion offering his version of events leading up to and during the war in Bosnia

Twenty years ago, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia imploded heralding the start of a succession of civil wars between the patchworks of peoples that made-up the country. The Bosnian conflict, the bloodiest and most brutal of all the Yugoslav civil wars, lasting from 1992-1995, was blamed by Western governments and Western media on the Serbs, who were accused of trying to carve out a "greater Serbia" from the territory of Yugoslavia. Indeed, throughout the duration of the war the Bosnian Serb leadership and the Bosnian Serb people, who constituted a third of the region's population at the beginning of 1992, having first settled on these lands in the seventh century, were completely derided by Western commentators and, as a result, the Serb version of events was ignored.

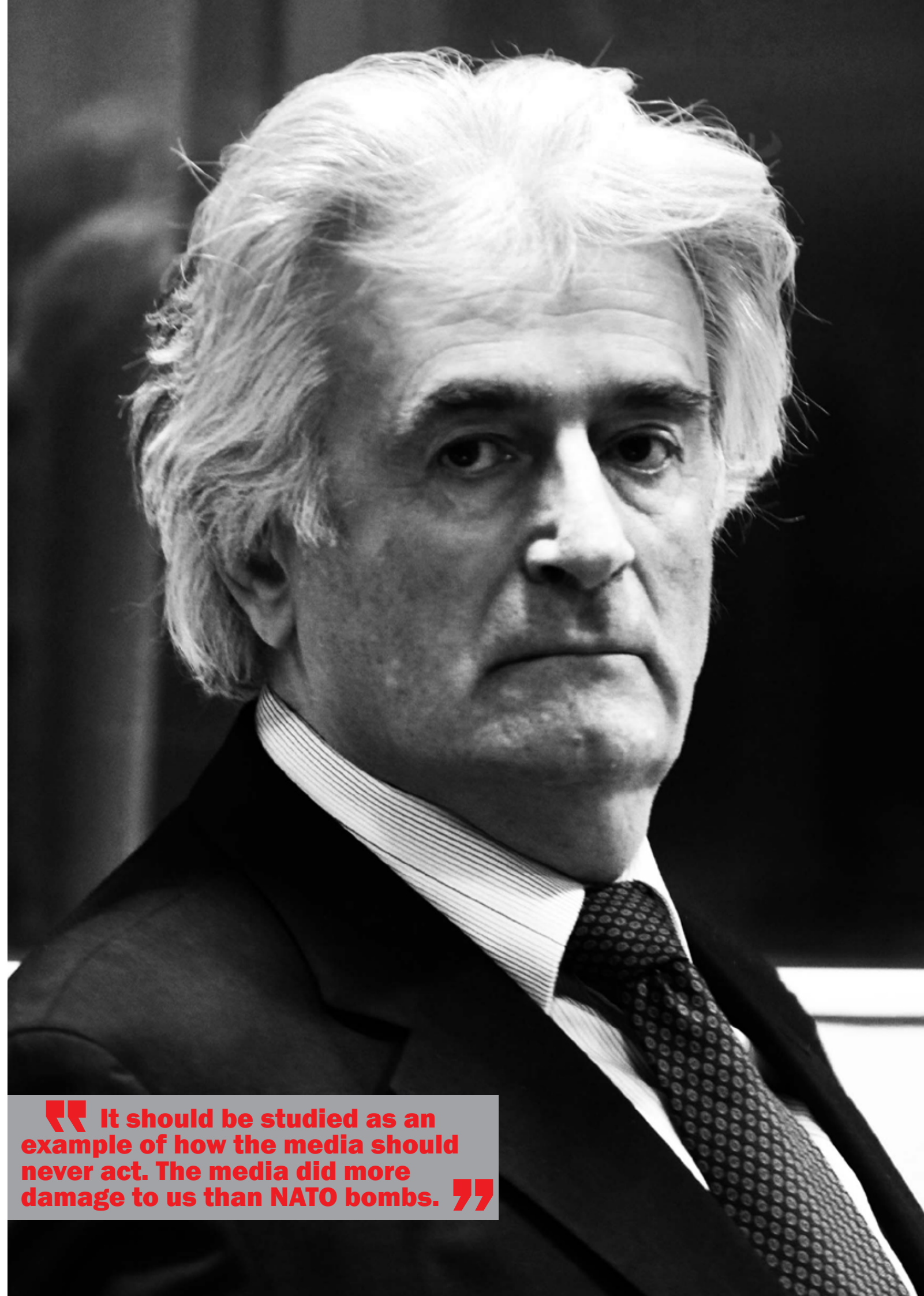
But there are always two sides to a story. Lord Carrington, the former chairman of the peace conference on Yugoslavia, said that the actions of the American, German and certain other European governments "made it sure there was going

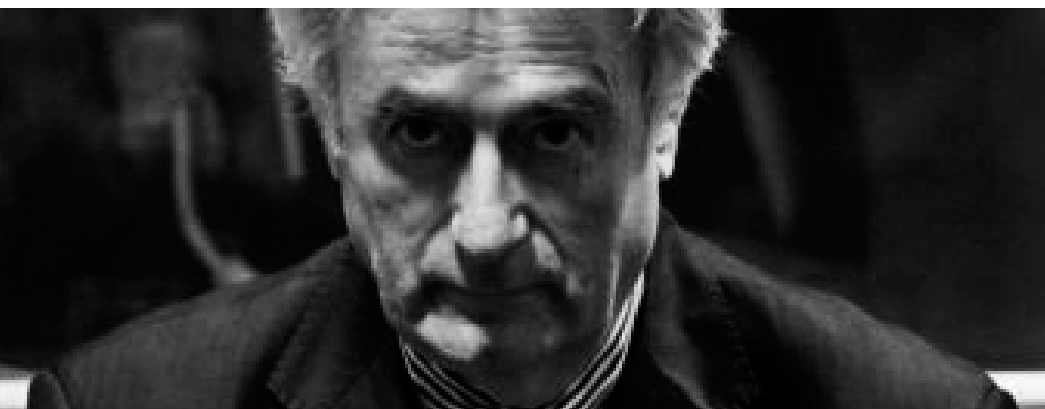
to be a conflict" in that region. And Lewis MacKenzie, the former United Nations protection force general in the former Yugoslavia and commander of the Sarajevo sector, commented that: "Those of us who served as UN commanders in Bosnia realised the majority of the media reports were biased, to say the least. Whenever we tried to set the record straight we were - and continue to be - accused of being 'Serbian agents'."

Dr Radovan Karadzic was the leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the war. Currently on trial at The Hague for war crimes, Dr Karadzic's version of events as to why Bosnia descended into civil war and what happened during the course of the fighting has rarely been heard in the West. In fact, it has rarely been told at all.

In the year which marks the twentieth anniversary of Yugoslavia's break-up, Dr Karadzic spoke to *Politics First* and offered the Serb perspective on the origins and events of the Bosnian war and how Western media reported the fighting.

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Origins of the Bosnian civil war

Q Some commentators have argued that the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was always going to collapse once Tito had died. What are your thoughts on this?

A Yugoslavia should not have been founded in the first place, but once it was founded it should not have been dissolved in the way it was. It had no real chance from the beginning, as it was a new nation of different tribes, with different history, different occupiers- Austria-Hungary and Turkey- and different religions. It was formed by the “entente powers”-France and Britain- to take Croatia and Slovenia out of German influence. In 1941, Yugoslavia dissolved in blood because Germany was on the scene. It happened again in the 1990s. From the beginning, the centrifugal powers were as strong as the centripetal powers.

Q How did you feel when the SFRY began to disintegrate in 1991?

A The communist party [of Yugoslavia] took the position even in the late 1920s that Yugoslavia should be dissolved and the Communist International inherited this attitude. The Yugoslavian communists secretly decided to dissolve Yugoslavia in the early 1960s, but this could not be achieved in a one party, one army system. Once a kind of democracy was introduced, antagonisms appeared in full strength.

Q When did you first begin to think that a civil war could engulf Bosnia?

A Although Western analysts envisaged it decades prior to the event, I did

everything I could to avoid a civil war. Once the war broke out in Croatia, we became aware that war could break out in Bosnia and that it would be much bloodier. That’s why we were willing to make the concession that Bosnia could leave Yugoslavia provided we had in Bosnia what Bosnia had in Yugoslavia, as the European Community had proposed.

Q What drove you into politics?

A I had been involved in politics since the 1968 student movement. Although I was suspected by the secret police, I did not remain active because my profession demanded long hours. However, when the decision was taken to form a democratic political party, I could not resist being involved.

Q How did you respond to the actions by the Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic from late 1990 onwards?

A At the beginning, Izetbegovic was very cooperative. He was for a reasonable federation and was, in fact, the first to mention the division of Bosnia into three interdependent or even independent states. However, he came under the influence of those who wanted to dominate Bosnia and this was the cause of the war. Izetbegovic was more interested in imposing the Islamic way of life in the Muslim community than in dominating Bosnia. He was, nonetheless, influenced by his own circle of extremists, some Islamic regimes and some Western countries seeking the domination of all of Bosnia.

Q There have been allegations that some outside countries, in particular Germany and the United States, played a pivotal role in igniting the wars in

Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. Do you have anything to say about this from the perspective of Bosnia?

A There is no doubt that the United States and Germany had their own interests in igniting wars in Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia. America’s reason concerned European unity and integration, as well as the reason d’être for NATO: erasing the last Communist regime (Slobodan Milosevic’s), weakening Yugoslavia’s military industry, which had 7% of the market, and re-basing NATO in Kosovo- thus bringing the alliance closer to Russia. The Germans wanted to take revenge on Yugoslavia for its involvement in World Wars I and II on the side of the anti-German coalition; to support their allies in Slovenia and Croatia as well as the Bosnian Muslims; and to secure strategic access for themselves through Slovenia and Croatia to the Adriatic Sea, as it had a preference for a group of small countries in the European Union instead of a big one.

A lot of evidence will come out during my defence case as to how the Americans wanted to secure a long-lasting war in Bosnia and instigated violations of the UN arms embargo, even in close cooperation with Iran, and how they supported and supplied the Bosnian Muslims to justify what they were doing to Muslims elsewhere. Germany’s involvement was a similar story. Germany influenced Izetbegovic to go for war rather than a peaceful solution. The BND [Germany’s foreign intelligence service] was preparing the dissolution of Yugoslavia before the 1990s. I hope that we will overcome the current lack of cooperation by the German government in opening their archives so that the true extent of their involvement in sowing the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia can be known.

FORMER YUGOSLAVIA



Republika Srpska

Q Why was the Serbian Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared in 1992?

A Being aware of the inevitability of war if we insisted on remaining a part of Yugoslavia, we gave up this ultimate objective, accepting for Bosnia to become independent, but only under the condition that we get our own autonomy and were not dominated by the Muslims. That’s why we declared the Republika Srpska. It came from many of my secret talks with Izetbegovic. He was the first to mention the possibility, and we accepted it.

Q How important was the history of the Bosnian Serbs in relation to their declaration of independence from Sarajevo?

A As a matter of fact, the Bosnian Muslims are Serbs who converted to Islam during the Turkish occupation. This was done

by whole families who chose one member to convert to Islam in order to protect others. Then those who converted, and their descendants, liked power, got used to domination and this lasted for several hundred years. In World War I, our Muslim brothers joined our enemies and occupiers offering themselves to be rulers of the Serbs. That is in the mind of every single Serb. Not all Muslims have lost their Serb identity- Muslims more oriented towards culture than religion and successful in the arts and sciences are oriented towards the Serbs, while it is those who are oriented towards fundamentalist Islam who do not want to have anything to do with the Serbs.

Q Did you work to try and keep Bosnia together as a unitary state? What were your feelings towards the Bosnian Muslims and Bosnia’s other ethnic groups?

A A unitary state of Bosnia was only possible when Bosnia was part of a larger

empire such as the Turkish, Austro-Hungarian, or Yugoslavian one. Neither the Serbs nor the Croats feel secure in Bosnia without any control. Many Croats were Serbs, either Catholics or Orthodox. We are the same people. Lord Owen said that the war in Bosnia was a civil war of Serbs of three religions. I agree. You can’t deny someone’s wish not to be a Serb, but it doesn’t change the fact that we are the same people, with the same language. I had no trouble socialising and living with Muslims.

Q When war broke out in Bosnia, how did you feel?

A I felt terrible, as if I was watching our worst nightmare coming true. I talked about that in the Assembly session of 25 January 1992 arguing that if people continued to push for unilateral succession, no one could control the chaos that would follow- and that is exactly what happened.

Events of the Bosnian civil war

Q What were the objectives of the Bosnian Serb leadership during the war?

A Our objectives can be expressed in a few words: to prevent genocide against the Serbs and to survive until a political solution could be found.

Q How did you find the peace negotiations with Izetbegovic and the international community during the fighting? Were efforts made by the Bosnian Serb leadership to end the war?

A We did everything possible to avoid war. Once war broke out, we made many concessions and offers, including UN administration for Sarajevo, in order to bring the war to a quick end, but the Muslims'

hope for international military intervention, sometimes fuelled by the Americans, secured the lasting of the war for 42 months.

Q What were the experiences of ordinary Serbs on the ground in Bosnia during the war?

A Bosnian Serbs had undergone the same situation during World War II. About 700,000 Bosnian Serbs were killed then. Ordinary Serbs were very determined to avoid the same fate this time around. It didn't matter who their leader was—they would have defended themselves more or less successfully.

Q How do you respond to the allegation by Western politicians and journalists that the Serbs were the aggressors in the war?

A How could the Serbs be aggressors on

their own cities, villages and homes? We are the oldest population in Bosnia. We only wanted to control our own areas.

Q Is it true that the Serbs helped evacuate the Jewish community of Sarajevo to safety out of Bosnia?

A The Serbs and Jews had shared the same fate in World War II. They feel very close—there were never significant anti-Semitic feelings among the Serbs. The SDS [Dr Karadzic's Serbian Democratic Party] supported a Jewish man for the seventh member of the Presidency in the 1990 Bosnian elections. It cannot be said that the Muslims in Sarajevo were against the Jews, but some fundamentalist Muslims allowed their hatred of Israel to spread to all of the Jews. During the war, I facilitated the evacuation of the Jews from Sarajevo at their request after meeting with British representatives of the Jewish community

Role of the media during the war

Q Following the outbreak of the war in Bosnia, the vast amount of Western media adopted a negative stance towards the Serbs, which continued throughout the conflict. Do you agree with the statement by the former UN protection force commander in Bosnia General Sir Michael Rose who said that "the reporting and commenting of some members of the press corps in Sarajevo became close to becoming identified to the propaganda machine of the Bosnian government"?

A I completely agree with General Rose's characterisation of the conduct of the international media. The contribution of the media to our suffering, to prolonging the war and to the Satanisation of our side was immense. It should be studied as an example of how the media should never act. The media did more damage to us than NATO bombs.

Q Do you believe that the media helped influence policy-makers in Western capitals?

A We have been told that some capitals were under the influence of the media, but I believe it was the other way around—some media were under the influence of the capitals. While I mean no disrespect for journalists as a whole, the editors of media outlets during the war were not influential, but instead were instrumental of their government's policies.

Q The argument has been made by some commentators that the Bosnian

Serbs were "camera shy" and that this had an adverse affect on their image internationally. What are your thoughts on this?

A Personally, I did everything I could to make myself available to journalists and to give them access. However, this trust was abused by journalists, who were willing to manipulate the truth for self-promotion and demonisation of the Serbs.

Q How do you respond to allegations by the media that you were an "ultra-nationalist, racist politicians" opposed to living alongside the Bosnian Muslims and the Bosnian Croats?

A It cannot be said that we were racist when Muslims and Croats are part of our own race. We did not have any problem living with the Muslims; we just did not want to live under their domination. I and all of

my people held freedom as our first priority. We had accords not only with Fikret Abdic [a Bosnian Muslim politician] but also with the MBO [Muslim Bosniak Organisation] party led by Adil Zulfakupasic with whom we entered into the Serb-Muslim historic agreement.

Q Did Western public relations firms play a role in the war? If so, how influential was this?

A This can be judged by the statements of the Muslims' own PR firm which said that they even managed to persuade the Jewish community [in the US] that the Serbs were Nazis, even though history showed that it was the other way around.

Q Did the Serbs hire PR firms to counter the image being portrayed of them?

A Because of the sanctions, we were unable to hire any PR firms in the West.



“ Those of us who served as UN commanders in Bosnia realised the majority of the media reports were biased, to say the least. ”

- Lewis MacKenzie

Former UN commander



- Dr Karadzic in court
- Scheveningen Prison, The Hague, where Dr Karadzic is being held

Aftermath of the Bosnian civil war

Q Have there been any events in Bosnia following the war which you believe vindicates anything that you may have warned of from 1990 onwards?

A Everything during and after the war justified our own moves. Today, certain Muslim circles haven't given up the idea of dominating Serbs and Croats. The only difference between Muslim leftists and fundamentalists is rhetoric. As a matter of fact, fundamentalists are more honest than Muslim socialists, who hide their intentions in acceptable language. Their interest is the same—to dominate and obtain privileges for themselves and their own community. The majority of Bosnian Muslims would not accept extremism as part of the Islamic culture, but if only 1 in 1,000 did so, that would create 2,000 European-looking terrorists.

Q You are currently representing yourself in your trial at The Hague. What are you hoping will surface during the trial?

A This trial is my shift on the front lines. I hope to achieve the goal of bringing out the whole story of what happened in Bosnia, beginning with the cause. If something happened at 10 and was reported to at 11, it changes the whole picture to know both the cause and the reaction, not just the reaction. My main objective is to show why things happened. If that comes out, I will have defended the Serbs, as well as myself.

Q How would you sum up the tragedy of the Bosnian war and are there any lessons to be learnt from it?

A The Bosnian people, as well as the Balkan people in general, have already had many chances to learn from history, which is always repeated in a bloodier form. The Balkans are on the main road to the east and there are too many powers interested in the region. Some covet one group and others another group. We are seen as the proxies for the great powers.

Q Finally, most Western governments and media outlets hold a negative opinion of your conduct during the war. How would you defend your actions leading up to and during the war in Bosnia?

A The truth is that we never favoured war and did our best to avoid it. When it came, we looked for a political solution that would allow us just to have the minimum of our freedom and our identity. I was a communist dissident for 40 years, and the Republika Srpska was the most democratic of all the entities in Bosnia. My political party appointed experts to government, regardless of their affiliation, and an independent judiciary. We embodied all of the values of democracy and Christianity. It is a shame that those with the same values fought against us rather than embraced us.

Dr Karadzic's trial at The Hague started on 26 October 2009 and is expected to finish at the end of 2013.

“ The Germans wanted to take revenge on Yugoslavia for its involvement in World Wars I and II ”