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Justice has become a normal thing

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When news broke of the arrest of Radovan Karadzic, former Bosnian Serb leader and indicted war criminal, honking and cheering filled the streets of Sarajevo. But the celebrations didn't last long. Torrential rains soon dampened the initial elation in town. By the time the storm stopped the euphoria among Sarajevans had dissipated, replaced by disbelief, relief, and then a return to daily activities.

There has long been discussion that Karadzic's arrest would prompt popular backlash, could entail heavy casualties, and might threaten the fragile Bosnian state. Some analysts argue that prosecuting war criminals according to universal criteria would further divide rather than unify people.

Yet none of these gloomy predictions have come to pass. Even in Belgrade, the place where Karadzic was apprehended, the reaction was subdued.

On Monday evening Serbian officials nabbed the fugitive leader who stands accused of genocide and crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at The Hague. Formed in 1993 to address violations of international humanitarian law in the region, the ICTY sought Karadzic, the former president of the self-styled Bosnian Serb Republic, for his role in the wartime violence, including the siege of Sarajevo and the fall of the UN enclave in Srebrenica after which over 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) boys and men were killed. Over 100,000 people were killed in the Bosnian war and two million displaced.

For 13 years the indicted Karadzic evaded authorities. Rumors abounded of elaborate disguises and furtive movements from monasteries in Montenegro to caves in eastern Bosnia.

Few could have anticipated, however, the image that flashed across television screens on Tuesday. His trademark coiffure exchanged for long white hair and a bushy beard, Karadzic now looks more like an aging 1960s activist than the arrogant wartime leader strutting among troops and sounding off before cameras. His new look fit his new life -- for several years he passed himself off in Belgrade as homeopath, peddling snake oil and Chinese proverbs. The same man who, in 1991, before the Bosnian parliament threatened Bosnian Muslims with "disappearance" was now offering alternative medical therapies.

Most news reports on his capture focus on what it means for Serbia's integration into the European Union and the fact that the arrest took place under the helm of Serbia's newly-elected government. But one of the overlooked stories of this event is the surprisingly tepid responses coming out of Sarajevo and Pale, the wartime capital of the Bosnian Serbs.

Alida Vracic, executive director of Populari, a Sarajevo-based think tank, spent the day traveling in around Sarajevo. One of her first stops was Pale, the wartime capital of the Bosnian Serbs. There she was surprised to find there were no protests or strong reactions, just normal daily life, were it not for the unseasonably cold weather.

At the end of the day, in the center of Sarajevo where there was supposed to be a gathering to commemorate the historic event, there were more journalists than attendees. The evening news footage showed an empty square.

"Those who had reason to celebrate didn't and those with reason to be unhappy about the arrest weren't," Vracic said.

What does this signal?

First, this is evidence of the normalization of war crimes prosecutions over the postwar years. Bosnians of all ethnicities have grown accustomed to trials and proceedings that have influenced both attitudes and everyday choices.

A survey of Bosnian non-governmental organizations in 2004 found that 74 per cent said the court positively influenced refugee returns, up from 33 per cent five years earlier; 65 per cent of NGO respondents in Bosnia's second entity, Republika Srpska, felt the ICTY was a credible institution, up from 17 percent in the same time period. In 2005, almost three quarters of Bosnian Serb soldiers agreed with the statement: "Bosnia-Herzegovina should cooperate with the ICTY because perpetrators of war crimes should be brought to justice." The ICTY still awaits the apprehension of Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic. Many other war criminals answerable to local courts remain at large in the region. Justice, however belatedly served, is finally becoming business as usual.

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