



HELSINŠKI ODBOR ZA LJUDSKA PRAVA U SRBIJI
HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA
Srbija, 11000 Beograd, Kneza Miloša 4, tel/fax: (+381 11) 33 49 170, e-mail:
office@helsinki.org.rs, <http://www.helsinki.org.rs>

Belgrade 28 August 2026

Ratko Mladić: The Death of a Convicted War Criminal, the Survival of an Ideology

There is nothing disturbing about the death of Ratko Mladić, a convicted war criminal. What is deeply disturbing, however, is the reaction his death has provoked—particularly among parts of Serbia's political, intellectual and wider social elites, including segments of the student movement. Calls for a state funeral, flags flown at half-mast, and the public glorification of Mladić reveal that his death is not being treated simply as the passing of a convicted war criminal. Instead, it is being used by some as an opportunity to revive and reaffirm the myth of Mladić as a national hero.

His death has therefore exposed something much deeper: Serbia has never genuinely come to terms with the defeat of the policies that led to the wars of the 1990s, nor with their consequences. Rather than critically examining those policies, the responsibility for them and the enormous human and political costs they produced, a significant part of Serbian society continues to embrace a narrative in which the wars are portrayed as a historical injustice against the Serbs, while those who waged them are presented as men who "fought for the freedom of the Serbian people."

That ideology did not disappear with Slobodan Milošević, nor did it disappear with the judgments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. It has survived both. The reaction to Mladić's death demonstrates that it remains deeply embedded in Serbia's political and social consciousness and continues to shape the way a significant part of society understands the recent past.

Particularly troubling is the fact that this narrative has found resonance among parts of a younger generation that sees itself as

the bearer of democratic change. This reveals how deeply nationalist patterns of thought remain entrenched and how incomplete Serbia's process of confronting its past still is. Political change cannot by itself constitute democratic transformation if the ideological foundations of the previous order remain intact.

Serbia cannot build a stable democratic identity without acknowledging that the wars of the 1990s were not simply the result of external circumstances or historical injustice, but were also the consequence of policies pursued from Belgrade aimed at redefining borders and the political position of Serbs within the former Yugoslavia. Genuine democratization therefore requires more than a change of government. It requires a fundamental break with the ideology that justified war, territorial expansion and violence in the name of the Serbian nation.

The most important question raised by Mladić's death is consequently not what kind of funeral he will receive, but what his glorification tells us about the society that remains behind. A war criminal can die, while the ideology that made him a hero survives. That is the real challenge Serbia continues to face.