

Serbia's Choice

Serbia can choose a European future or it can dwell on the past. But it can't have both.

Ratko Mladić, the Butcher of Bosnia, was buried in Belgrade on Monday with military and religious honors, less than two weeks after dying in prison in The Hague on August 27. Nine years earlier, he had been convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes for his actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995.

Mladić is perhaps most infamous for directing the massacre of over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys following the conquest of Srebrenica in July 1995. He was also convicted for leading the nearly four-year siege of Sarajevo, during which approximately 10,000 people were killed, many of them civilians.

This is not a matter of historical interpretation. Mladić received a full trial before an international court. He was convicted of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder, deportation, forcible transfer, terror, unlawful attacks on civilians, and hostage-taking. His convictions and his life sentence were upheld on appeal in 2021.

Serbian leaders have at times attempted to distance the country from Mladić's actions, while carefully avoiding any admission of collective Serbian guilt. President Boris Tadić apologized for the Srebrenica massacre and eventually succeeded in detaining Mladić and turning him over to the Tribunal. His successor, Tomislav Nikolić, did as well, even as he continued to deny that it constituted genocide. In 2015 while serving as prime minister, Serbia's current president, Aleksandar Vučić, described Srebrenica as a "monstrous crime" and attended its commemoration, but he too has rejected the genocide designation. He later led Serbia's campaign against the 2024 UN resolution establishing an international day of commemoration for the Srebrenica genocide.

Since Mladić's arrest in Serbia in 2011, after 16 years as a fugitive, Serbia's leadership has gradually worked to water down the extent of Mladić's crimes while at the same time pairing every discussion of Srebrenica with crimes against Serbs or invoking NATO's 1999 intervention over Kosovo, in an effort to suggest that everyone was more or less equally guilty and that Serbia has been unfairly singled out.

There is no doubt that crimes were committed against Serbs, and Serbian victims deserve recognition and justice. That is different from claiming every side is equally at fault. The facts remain: the systematic slaughter of thousands of prisoners after the fall of Srebrenica was genocide, and the siege of Sarajevo subjected its civilian population to 1,425 days of shelling and sniper fire. These are the findings of international courts, not arbitrary allegations.

For me, this is also very personal. In the summer of 1995, between my two years in grad school, I was living and working in a camp for Bosnian refugees in Croatia, teaching English and helping with visa applications to third countries. Many were from eastern Bosnia and had been driven from their homes to other parts of the country before somehow making it out. That summer, the situation in Croatia and Bosnia was dire. Croatia itself was nearly split in half by the frontline, Zagreb had been struck by missiles, and the remaining UN “safe havens” in Bosnia were teetering on the verge of collapse.

I will never forget that July night when news of Srebrenica began trickling out. Clusters of refugees huddled in the courtyard, smoking and drinking rakija as they listened to the radio, some crying and others singing folk songs. I lay on my cot in the stifling heat staring at the ceiling, listening all night to the mournful wails through the open window. The idealist I was at the time simply could not fathom that the UN would allow these enclaves to fall, that Europe and America would stand by and do nothing. I felt a profound sense of shame that we had let the Bosnians down. It became my driving mission to return to Bosnia someday and, however possible and in whatever small way, try to help put it back together again. For me, seeing some measure of justice for those who were killed was essential.

That is why Serbia’s official response to Mladić’s death is, for me, much more than another dispute over the past. It raises a basic question about the future Serbia actually wants.

Shortly before Mladić’s death, his lawyers petitioned the Tribunal to transfer him to a military hospital in Belgrade where he could receive palliative care near his family, a request that was denied. After Mladić died, Vučić, with no hint of irony, called the decision “uncivilized behavior, unprecedented and without excuse,” adding: “We can now see that they wanted Mladić to die behind bars.”

That is, generally speaking, what a life sentence means. Indeed, the men and boys captured around Srebrenica received no humanitarian consideration. They were separated from their families, taken to execution sites, shot, and either buried in mass graves or in some cases left to rot on the side of the road. Many of their bodies were later dug up, moved, and reburied in an attempt to conceal the crime.

Then came the calls for a state funeral. Serbia’s Justice Minister, Nenad Vujić, said in an interview shortly after Mladić’s death that he would “certainly receive all the military and state honors to which he is entitled.” A few days later, Vujić defended the arrangements by saying: “Punishment ends with death. Anything beyond that is revenge.”

Vujić’s background makes these statements especially jarring. Before becoming justice minister in 2025, he led Serbia’s Judicial Academy, coordinated Serbia’s EU rule-of-law negotiations, and had worked as a lawyer at the Humanitarian Law Center.

Serbia stopped short of formally declaring a state funeral, but the distinction now seems almost academic. Mladić's body was flown back to Serbia on a government aircraft, escorted by Minister Vujić. On Monday, members of the Serbian Armed Forces escorted his coffin, draped in the flags of Serbia and the Republika Srpska, while a military band played a funeral march. The patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church led the funeral mass, and both Defense Minister Bratislav Gašić and Minister Vujić attended. The government, meanwhile, insisted it had no hand in the arrangements. If this was not technically a state funeral, it was at least state-funeral-adjacent.

Yet Serbia continues to benefit directly from the largesse of the European taxpayer. Marta Kos, the EU Enlargement Commissioner, canceled an upcoming visit to Belgrade over what she called the “glorification” surrounding Mladić's death. On Monday, the European External Action Service said that “any glorification of war criminals, genocide denial and revisionism” contradicts fundamental European values and “have no place in the EU or in EU candidate countries.”

That is exactly the issue here.

Since the signing of its Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2008, Serbia has received approximately €4.5 billion in EU financial assistance. Following its official candidate status—a step only made possible after it arrested Mladić and turned him over to The Hague—the country has received €1.5 billion in pre-accession assistance between 2014 and 2020, followed by more than €872 million allocated between 2021 and 2024. The Commission approved another €139.4 million last year. Serbia has also been allocated €1.6 billion in grants and favorable loans under the EU's Reform and Growth Facility, of which €167.6 million had been released as of May 2026. And financial assistance is only one element of the relationship. Trade is perhaps even more significant: the EU bought 61.1 percent of Serbia's exports in 2024 and accounted for 58.3 percent of its total trade in goods.

It would be a profound mistake for Serbia to assume it could lose these benefits and simply plug the hole with Russian or Chinese money. Losing EU support would not bankrupt the country. It could, however, result in serious economic challenges. Alternative financing would almost certainly come on worse terms, carry higher costs, and make Serbia far more dependent on outside creditors. And neither Russia nor China can replace the trade relationship.

For too long Serbia under President Vučić has been allowed to benefit from EU support while prevaricating on reform, rewriting recent history, and testing the EU's tolerance for

democratic erosion. Each time the government approaches the limit, it pulls back just enough to avoid consequences.

At a certain point, the EU has to draw a line. Maybe honoring Mladić doesn't automatically violate a specific EU provision, but that misses the larger point. European taxpayers are financing Serbia's supposed "convergence" with a union built on democracy, human rights, and historical reconciliation. The country cannot credibly claim to aspire to that future while honoring a man convicted of genocide.

Serbia faces a choice: between the European future it says it wants and the wartime past it continues to hold on to. If it chooses the past, Europe should reconsider paying for the pretense.