**UNGA president's Serbian nationalism rankles Western powers**

**Vuk Jeremic**, the hyper-kinetic Serbian president of the U.N. General Assembly, is on a mission to restore Serbia's prestige on the world stage.

The former Serbian foreign minister has used his position at the head of the world's parliament to recast Serbia -- tarnished by its role in mass killings during the 1990s Balkan Wars, including the massacre of thousands of Bosnian Muslims males in Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb forces -- as a victim of history.

In a series of speeches and events, Jeremic has highlighted the plight of Serbs in World War I and World War II, denouncing more recent abuses of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo while glossing over Serbian aggression in places like Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s.

"Like many other nations, mine has travelled through periods of tragedy and periods of glory sacrificing men and treasure far beyond its means whenever its freedom was in need of defense," Jeremic told a gathering of small states in October, 2012, shortly after starting his one-year term. "One quarter of our population perished in the First World War, at enormous cost to our development. In the Second World War, close to a million Serbs fell to defeat the scourge of fascism."

But as Jemeric prepares to convene a high-profile [conference](http://www.tanjug.rs/news/66786/jeremic--public-debate-on-tribunals-in-april-2013.htm) next month on international justice -- an event that critics suspect he will use to denounce a U.N. court that indicted more than 90 Serbs, including the former Serb President **Slobodan Milosevic**, who died in 2006 in a jail cell in the Hague -- he is facing a backlash from governments and international jurists who feel he has abused his position to advance his narrow national interests.

In recent days, several international legal experts -- including **Song Sang-Hyun**, the president of the International Criminal Court -- who had confirmed their attendance at the conference have pulled out of the event. Many governments, including the United States and members of the European Union, are now considering sending low-level diplomats to the conference in order to register their displeasure with Jeremic's words.

International anxiety over the event stems from Jeremic's response to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugsolavia's November acquittal of two Croatian generals, **Ante Gotovina** and **Mladic Markac**, who had been convicted by a lower court of carrying out mass killings against Croatian Serbs during Operation Storm, a Croatian campaign of ethnic cleansing against ethnic Serbs in the Kraijina, Croatia.

The controversial decision drew criticism from court experts who felt the appeals court had erred. But Jeremic has decided to go a step further, convening a major U.N. conference on international justice and reconciliation on April 10 that, he suggested in a [series of tweets](http://twitter.com/jeremic_vuk), would serve as a venue for denouncing the Croatian acquittal.

"The Hague appeals chamber has sent a signal that the ethnic cleansing has value, and is not a crime," Jeremic wrote in a November 25 tweet on his personal account, which he writes in Serbian. "These are the days of evil," he added four days later. "We must not be despondent. Wait for April, 10, 2013, the day of truth."

The timing of the event coincides with the 72nd anniversary of the April 10, 1941, founding of Croatia's pro-Nazi fascist state, a scheduling decision that has fueled suspicions among U.N. diplomats that Jeremic intends to turn the world's parliament into a forum for denouncing the failings of the court.

It has also raised concerns among U.N. delegates that he intends to convert the United Nations into a venue for nursing Serbia's past grievances and for pave the ground for a return to Serbian politics when he returns home. "The common assessment is that Jeremic, once again, [is trying] to abuse the U.N. for his domestic political purposes," said one European diplomat. " He is not serious about a profound and balanced debate about international justice and reconciliation. Given this highly polarizing setting...one can only hope that the secretary general will be very, very careful in pondering his participation."

Jeremic served as foreign minister under the former Serbian President **Boris Tadic**, a pro-Western politician, who vigorously opposed Kosovo's independence but who had publically apologized to the Bosnians and Croatians for crimes committed during the 1990s. Jeremic's election to the presidency of the U.N. General Assembly was a sign of Serbia's diplomatic normalization with the world body.

But in recent weeks, Jeremic -- who still retains a seat in the Serbian senate -- has sounded like a man preparing for a return to national politics. "When I complete my mandate as president of the U.N. General Assembly, I intend to go back to Belgrade, because I believe we can make Serbia into a country where citizens can achieve their full potential," he told members of the Serb-American community in a March 16 speech before a fundraising dinner in Chicago for ethnic Serb orphans in Kosovo. "I am asking you to join us in crafting a new vision for Serbia."

In the meantime, Jeremic is facing the greatest challenge to his stewardship of the General Assembly. In an interview with *Turtle Bay*, Jeremic said that the conference he scheduled to learn lessons from the U.N.'s 20-year long experiment in international criminal courts has come under attack by unnamed influential states, who have pressured key attendees, including the ICC president, to pull out of the event.

Among those who has have cancelled or declined invitations include the president of the Assembly of States Parties for the International Criminal Court, **Tina Intelmann**; the U.N. secretary general's special advisor on the prevention of genocide, **Adama Dieng**; the executive director of Human Rights Watch, **Kenneth Roth**; and the U.N. secretary general lawyer **Patricia O'Brien**.

"She can't make it; she's enormously busy," Jeremic said of O'Brien. "We note that very soon as a person confirms their attendance and we make it public it takes not more than a few days that he writes back saying regrettably we can't make it."

"There are some people who feel very uncomfortable about the date," he added. The date, he explained, "symbolizes in many ways evil and an undelivered justice from the Second World War. Imagine if someone said we feel uncomfortable on Holocaust Memorial day because people feel uncomfortable."

The event will begin with a public session in which all 193 members of the United Nations will be given an opportunity to speak. In the afternoon, Jeremic has scheduled two panel sessions to provide more focused panel discussion. Delegates say the list is unbalanced, providing critics of the tribunal with greater scope to denounce it.

Jeremic countered that he has offered several of the courts' supporters a seat at the table. But they have sought to distance themselves.

Their suspicions stem from an earlier episode.

In January, Jeremic organized a concert by a Serb youth choir in the General Assembly, which was attended by the U.N. secretary general. As an encore, the group [performed](http://www.rferl.org/content/serbian-war-song-un-assembly-controversy/24876973.html) a rendition of a World War I martial song, "The March on the River Drina," which Bosnian victims groups claimed had been used by Serb forces during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Secretary General **Ban Ki-moon** -- unaware of the song's history -- clapped and swayed along with the beat, prompting complaints from Bosnian groups. "The genocide that occurred in Srebrenica and Zepa, and other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was conducted by Serbian aggressors while blasting this song as they raped, murdered, and ethnically cleansed the non-Serb population," read a [statement](http://www.bosniak.org/protest-letter-to-ban-ki-moon-un-general-secretary/) by an American Bosniak organization.

The episode proved embarrassing to Ban, whose spokesman subsequently issued a statement expressing regret for any offense, and noting that he had not been aware of the history of the song -- which was not listed in the official program. But Ban's deputy spokesman, **Eduardo Del Buey**, said Ban had no intention to boycott the event. "If the SG is in New York, he will attend." Asked if Ban intended to be in town, del Buey recommended that this reporter ask Jeremic's office.

Jeremic defended the performance, saying nobody complained about it until "some diaspora organization here in America launched this controversy. Basically the song, which is almost sacred in our culture, is about sacrifice in the First World War. The question at stake is whether -- after everything that has taken place in the 1990s in the Balkans -- we as Serbs have the right to be proud of our First and Second World War history. If the answer to this is yes, then the song is ok."

<http://turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/25/jeremic_serbian_nationalism_speech>