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Serb Nationalist's Trial Begins in The Hague

By [MARLISE SIMONS](#)

THE HAGUE, Nov. 7 — The man considered the main propagandist of the Serbian nationalism that led to four disastrous wars went on trial on Wednesday at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. He is accused of inflammatory speech and of numerous crimes committed by his own militia.

Uniquely, the defendant, [Vojislav Seselj](#), did not sit in the dock. He had a seat at the bench reserved for defense lawyers, a privilege that he demanded because he is conducting his own defense.

Mr. Seselj, 53, the most senior political leader now on trial here, laughed out loud several times as a prosecutor read a four-hour opening statement. Calling him a “master politician” and an “autocrat, a shrewd and calculating man,” the prosecutor, Christine Dahl, said that Mr. Seselj had engaged in poisonous propaganda that incited fear and hatred and that his fiery speeches in many towns and at the front lines spurred Serbs to kill, torture and rape in their effort to drive away Croats and Muslims.

“The language Seselj used made his speech criminal,” Ms. Dahl said. The prosecutors will have to demonstrate that Mr. Seselj was accountable for the acts of looting, killing, rape and persecution of Croats and Muslims that they attribute to his militia in the wars that tore up the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

At a pretrial hearing this week, Mr. Seselj said: “I am being tried for atrocious war crimes that I allegedly committed through hate speech as I preached my nationalist ideology that I am proud of. I have no other involvement in these crimes except for what I said or wrote.”

The trial of Mr. Seselj, a onetime sociology professor who has fencend with the court for many months over his rights, often in foul language, is certain to create another formidable headache for the [United Nations](#) tribunal. The court has had to deal with a variety of disruptive defendants but none as forceful as Mr. Seselj.

[Slobodan Milosevic](#), the former Serbian leader, who died in 2006 before the end of his long trial, was low key by comparison.

Mr. Seselj has announced that he will present a political defense, which is likely to be grist for the mill of the party he leads, the nationalist Serbian Radical Party. It is Serbia's largest opposition party, holding one-third of the seats in Parliament. Party officials have pressed several Serbian television stations to broadcast the entire trial, which the judges said might run until 2009.

Some experts watching the session from the public gallery said they saw the Seselj trial as the most important case since Mr. Milosevic died. While the two men were variously rivals and allies, they were linked in the same project of using a violent campaign to drive away anyone not a Serb from parts of Bosnia and Croatia and thus create a larger homeland only for Serbs.

Mr. Milosevic never openly espoused Mr. Seselj's fanatic style and once called him the "personification of violence and primitiveness." But Mr. Milosevic made ample use of the support Mr. Seselj generated and of the militia he mobilized and led.

"This is like a continuation of the Milosevic trial," said Sonja Biserko, chairwoman of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. "Seselj helped create the conditions for the war."

"He provided the framework and spread the ideology," Ms. Biserko said. "The trial will probably show how the propaganda war worked, show what role the media played and how the militia worked with the army and police."

A panel of three judges, from France, Italy and Denmark, is trying Mr. Seselj on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, many of them attributed to his armed bands of unruly and feared volunteers known as Seselj's Men. Mr. Seselj once said that his group, also known as Chetniks, comprised about 10,000 men. He collected money from Serbs abroad and said weapons were provided by Mr. Milosevic.

A prolific author, Mr. Seselj has continued to write books in his cell in The Hague, where he has been since he surrendered to the tribunal in 2003. Although the trial opened a year ago, it was stopped when he went

on a 28-day hunger strike to push various demands, several of which were met. All earlier proceedings were then annulled.

On Thursday, Mr. Seselj will have four hours to make his own opening statement.

Europeans Back Serbia Deal

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia, Nov. 7 — With the deadline for negotiations over the disputed province of Kosovo just a month away, the [European Union](#) gave pro-Western forces in Serbia some help on Wednesday, initialing a deal with Serbia that could lead to its membership in the union.

The deal, which must now be agreed upon by the European Union's 27 member states, stipulates that Serbia must first arrest and turn over four war crimes suspects indicted in The Hague. But a leading human rights group quickly accused the European Union of giving in after it had for years demanded that Serbia turn over the suspects before any deals could be made.

The four suspects still at large include the wartime commander of the Bosnian Serbs, Gen. [Ratko Mladic](#), and the political leader of the Serbs, [Radovan Karadzic](#).

The initialing of the deal could strengthen the hand of pro-Western politicians and groups that urge close ties with Europe as they struggle against Prime Minister [Vojislav Kostunica](#). Mr. Kostunica accuses the West of planning to break up Serbia by backing United Nations plans to grant Kosovo independence.

The United Nations has set a Dec. 10 deadline for the completion of talks between Serbia and Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority, after which Kosovo is expected to declare independence.