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E.U. Offers Serbia a Deal Towards Eventual Membership

By [NICHOLAS WOOD](#)

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia, Nov. 7 — With a deadline for negotiations over the disputed province of Kosovo just a month away, the [European Union](#) gave pro-Western forces in [Serbia](#) a boost today, initialing with Serbia a deal that could lead to Serbia joining the 27-nation group.

The deal, which must now be agreed upon by European Union 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 caving in on years of demands that Belgrade turn over the suspects before any deals were made.

The four suspects still at large include the wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, [Ratko Mladic](#), and the political leader of the Serbs, [Radovan Karadzic](#). Both are accused of masterminding the worst atrocity of the war, in which Bosnian Serb forces killed more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica.

The Serbian deputy prime minister, Bozidar Djelic, and the European commissioner for enlargement, Oli Rehn, initialed the accord. “This agreement is creating concrete benefits for the Serbian people and conditions for uniting not only states, but also people in a very true European spirit,” Mr. Rehn said at a news conference in Brussels broadcast by the European Union.

Serbia was the last country in the western Balkans to move toward such a deal. Some of its neighbors now are close to European Union membership.

The initialing of the Stabilization and Association Accord could strengthen the hand of pro-Western politicians and various nongovernmental groups that urge close ties with Europe as they struggle with the government of 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 talks to be completed between Serbia and the leaders of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority, after which the province is expected to declare independence.

Mr. Rehn stressed that the accord initialed today could not lead to membership unless the remaining war crimes suspects were arrested and sent to the international tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. But in the Netherlands and Belgium and among human rights campaigners, there were concerns that Europe had compromised in its demand that Serbia had to hand over the war crime suspects from the 1992-95 war in Bosnia before any further accords could be made.

“There are growing voices within the E.U. that Mladic is passé,” said Param-Preet Singh, a lawyer with [Human Rights Watch](#), in a telephone interview from New York. “The issue facing the E.U. is whether it will abandon the victims of Srebrenica — the first genocide on European soil since the Second World War — and its own principles in the face of other important political challenges.”

However a leading human rights advocate in Serbia welcomed the step even while doubting that Mr. Kostunica would ever hand over the war criminals.

“Civil society and human rights organizations and the Democratic party are afraid of Serbia's growing ties with Russia,” said Natasha Kandic, the director of the Humanitarian Law Center, an organization that has consistently campaigned for Serbia to hand over war crime suspects to the Hague. “Now it is important to consolidate their relation with the European Union.”

Speaking in a telephone interview from Belgrade, she said that ultimately, the European Union's gamble was unlikely to sway the nationalists in government. “I don't expect Serbia will arrest Mladic, because for this government and prime minister,” she said, “protecting Mladic is more important than Europe.”