Is Putin following the self-destructive path of Slobodan Milosevic?

Errol Mendes

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Russian President Vladimir Putin could be following the fate of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic into the hall of leaders of state convicted for the most serious international crimes. Putin may well be facing the same route to self-destruction as Milosevic, the first European head of state to be prosecuted for genocide and war crimes. Both have caused immense damage to lives of millions of Europeans and dashed the hopes of a peaceful existence for millions of others in post-cold war Europe.

In the almost 10-year period from 1991, Milosevic presided over mass atrocities in south-eastern Europe including the genocide in Srebrenica and the delib-erate targeting of civilians in Sarajevo, Vukovar, and in other cities. He was labelled as an inhuman war criminal in the same manner as many around the world are labelling Putin. The similarities don’t stop there. Like Putin, Milosevic was a ruthless military tactician within his own country, demolishing historic cities through artillery and bombardment and killing rivals and opponents, while building domestic support through lies and propaganda through the state media. However, while he was able to win particular military victories in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo within his diminishing country, Milosevic was destined to lose the larger war that would trigger involvement by NATO due to the atrocities in Bosnia and Kosovo. Putin may well be following the same losing strategy. Similar to the present international sanctions against Putin’s actions in Ukraine, Milosevic eventually triggered international sanctions for his atrocities.

Milosevic’s fate should be telling Putin that eventually the domestic and international reaction to the litany of his atrocities will result in his fall from power and all the protections he has built up around him will not prevent it.

The former Yugoslav president, was indicted for war crimes by Canadian international criminal tribunal prosecutor, Louise Arbour, in The Hague in March of 1999. Arbour’s successor prosecutor, Del Ponte, extended the charge to genocide for the massacre of more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica in July of 1995. At the time of these indictments, I lauded the work of prosecutors Arbour and Carla Del Ponte in my research and teaching for one simple reason. Just the indictments alone would and did make the president a global pariah, and could and did lead some of his former supporters to abandon him. For the same reasons, I strongly support Canada joining 37 other countries in referring the situation in Ukraine to the Int
ternational Criminal Court.

Like Putin, Milosevic seemed indifferent to extreme human suffering and even dared the international response to the most serious international crimes that he and his military were committing. Milosevic also thought that he would never end up before an international criminal tribunal. He probably was not counting on being beaten in the presidential election in 2000 given his prior successful attempts to manipulate elections, another similarity he shares with Putin. Milosevic finally did cede power to president Vojislav Kostunica and was later arrested in March by then Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic at the urging of the U.S. He was then flown to stand trial at the international criminal tribunal in The Hague. Milosevic’s trial at The Hague started on Feb. 12, 2002, on charges of genocide and war crimes. He acted as his own lawyer, but at his anger-filled trial the hearing ended without a conviction and the “Butcher of the Balkan” died in his prison cell in an apparent heart attack on March 11, 2006.

Putin probably is convinced he will never face the same fate as Milosevic as he has planned to stay in power forever. Nothing is forever. Ultimately, the horror of what has been perpetrated in Ukraine by Putin will breach the iron veil of mendacity that the state media in Russia has promoted to Russians. It could be the anger of the mothers of the dead Russian conscript soldiers who were not even retrieved from Ukraine that could trigger Putin’s demise. The sanctions against Russia will continue to decimate what was once the 11th biggest economy in the world. The most ardent supporters of Putin in the military and the economy may decide to abandon and possibly conspire against him. Some may seek to repeat the fate of Milosevic with Putin and seek his transfer to the International Criminal Court to stand trial for the worst mass atrocities since the second World War. There is a special place in international criminal infamy for strongmen butchers like Putin and Milosevic Professor Errol P. Mendes is a law professor at the University of Ottawa, editor-in-chief of the National Journal of Constitutional Law and president of the International Commission of Jurists, Canadian Section.

The Hill Times “Putin probably is convinced he will never face the same fate as Milosevic as he has planned to stay in power forever. Nothing is forever.”

**Figure:**

Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic. In the almost 10-year period from 1991, Milosevic presided over the mass atrocities of civilians in south-eastern Europe including the genocide in Srebrenica, and the deliberate targeting of civilians in Sarajevo, Vukovar and in other cities. Milosevic’s trial at The Hague started on Feb. 12, 2002, on charges of genocide and war crimes. He acted as his own lawyer, but at his anger-filled trial the hearing ended without a conviction and the ‘Butcher of the Balkan’ died in his prison cell in an apparent heart attack on March 11, 2006. Photograph courtesy of Commons Wikimedia