

FACE TO FACE

“THE BITICI CASE”, AFTER THE INDICTMENT HAS BEEN RAISED

WHO FIRED THE SHOT

Bojan Toncic *journalist, daily Danas*



The War Crime Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with the FBI, continues investigation into the crime; what is certain is that a number of persons should be brought to justice.

For the murder of U.S. citizens of Albanian origin Mehmed, Agron and Ili Bitici in July 1999, the War Crimes Prosecutor’s Office raised charges against Sreten Popovic from Nis and Milos Stojanovic from Krusevac in August last year. However, after more than six years their murder has not been solved. The War Crimes Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with the FBI, continues investigation on the crime, and what is certain is that a number of persons should stand trial either because they were accomplices, or because they did not file reports.

Who ordered the murder and who performed the execution, who was covering up – these are questions to which the public wants to hear the answers, and on several occasions the U.S. Embassy came forward with balanced, but at the same time warning statements.

- Goran Radosavljevic – Guri, the commander of the Gendarmerie, is responsible for the murder of my brothers. Guri could not leave without the state’s permission, and the American state structure had sent clear signals to the state that he was preparing his escape – said Fatos Bitici, brother of those murdered, shortly before this issue of Pravda u tranziciji was completed.

Ili (1974), Agron (1976) and Mehmed (1978) were originally from Prizren, and on July 8, 1999, they were taken from the prison in Prokuplje in which they served their 11-day jail term after being convicted for misdemeanor on charges of illegally residing in FRY. They were taken from Prokuplje to the base of Special Police Units in Petrovo Selo (one of the witnesses in the investigation claims to have given them food and water there), where they were killed two days later and afterwards buried in a mass grave.

The Bitici brothers fought with the “Atlantic Brigade” of the Kosovo Liberation Army. They entered the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from Albania, without being evidenced by the state organs. Before returning to Kosovo they were living in New York, where they owned a pizzeria. Their mother and their relatives used to live in Prizren. Now they, too, live in New York and are asking us not to blame them for refusing to say anything.

Trail

Natasa Kandic, Executive Director of the Humanitarian Law Center, reminds that Goran Radosavljevic-Guri was commanding over the Special Police Unit which is suspected to have committed a big number of crimes. “Many of the murders can be tracked down to him, and trails regarding the murder of the Bitici brothers, lead also to him (Radosavljevic), and there is rumor that allegedly the main culprit for the crimes is Vlastimir-Rodja Djordjevic, who disappeared from Serbia and Montenegro long ago, more precisely, immediately after the change of regime in 2000. There are replacements in the military and the police, but I think that they are not linked to war crimes. Nobody has been dismissed, everywhere we see political reasons, the impression is that it is the intention to have all those who participated in the action “Saber” removed from the Police – said Natasa Kandic.

The fifth and sixth

Immediately after NATO intervention in the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ended, and after the military-technical agreement in Kumanovo was signed, they helped their neighbors, a Roma family Mitrovic from Prizren, to return to Serbia, to Kraljevo, where they emigrated during the war in Kosovo. The police stops them at the administrative border between Serbia and Kosovo. Because they violated the Act on movement and residence of aliens, they were taken to Kursumlija, where the misdemeanor judge sentenced them to fifteen days in prison, and they were taken to the prison in Prokuplje. Upon their request to be released on parole, they were released from prison three days earlier.

They were sent out through the side exit from the Prokuplje prison on July 8, 1999. Their neighbor Miroslav, informed that they will be released, waited for them at the main entrance. According to Miroslav Mitrovic's testimony, Aleksandar Djordjevic, head of the Prokuplje prison, told him that two men in civilian attire came to collect them in a white car, without plates.

- I heard that the police were blocking the investigation; they must not speak. Arrested are the fifth and the sixth culprits, where are the first four and the others? What could Sreten Popovic do without an order from Goran Radosavljevic – asks Fatos Bitici shortly before this issue of Pravda u tranziciji was completed.

The Bitici brothers were shot in the back of their heads. Information collected by the family, too, indicate that the crime was committed near the base of the Special Police Unit in Petrovo Selo, close to the location of one of the three recovered mass graves in Serbia. According to Fatos Bitici, the family has lead a long, painstaking investigation, encountering closed doors, unfulfilled promises (Dusan Mihajlovic, the then first person of Serbia's Home Ministry), but with support from the U.S.A, i.e. the Embassy and FBI.

Mass grave

The remains of the Bitici brothers were recovered from the mass grave in Petrovo Selo near Kladovo. In the graves in Petrovo Selo were found bodies of another 67 men and seven women from Kosovo. The victims were transported from Kosovo in a lorry via Negotin and Zajecar.

Who ordered, who effectuated

The former Home Minister of Serbia, Dusan Mihajlovic, confirmed in 2001 that in one of the graves recovered in Petrovo Selo three bodies were found for which it was believed to be the remains of the Bitici brothers. Mihajlovic said to the press that he had talked to the then U.S. Ambassador William Montgomery, and that the Ambassador expressed "Washington's interest for a thorough investigation into the case". In the meantime, the remains of the Bitici brothers were delivered to the family and laid to rest in New York.

Mihajlovic also said that the bodies of the Bitici brothers were found with tied hands, with blinds over their eyes, and with shots fired in their head. Recovered were also certificates that they completed their time in prison.

- I learned that Guri ordered the crime from the statement that a police officer in Pristine gave to the investigative judge in Kladovo. I was in Kladovo and talked to the investigative judge. He told me to sign criminal charges against Vlastimir Djordjevic, and I asked what about the others – said Fatos Bitici.

This statement – which Fatos Bitici saw for a short time, while at the judge Dusan Caranovic – says that the Bitici brothers were tied and transported to Prokuplje in a jeep.

- The witnesses say that four policemen were accompanying them, two of them in civilian clothes. It is also written: "I turned them over to general Guri in Petrovo Selo". The American consul asked whether Guri knew that they were American citizens, and the policeman said that he did – stresses Fatos Bitici.

In a statement given in front of the investigative judge of the Municipal Court in Kladovo inspector Zoran Stanojevic said that documents on the release of the brothers Bitici were prepared and in his opinion they were given to them. These documents were found in their clothes, in the mass grave.

- I talked to somebody from the prison's management. On that day, somewhere around 1.p.m., I was told that two persons came in some white car and that they took them with them. This was the first time since I have been working as inspector that something like this happened. Later I heard from the manager of the prison that on that day the head of the Police Department Prokuplje Milisav Vuckovic called him and announced that some officials from the Police Department would come to take over the Bitici brothers – said Stankovic.

"Two officers", let us suppose, could not have been "unauthorized": to whom and according to which law could the manager of the prison Aleksandar Djordjevic give over the prisoners who had just completed their time in jail for their misdemeanor. Fatos Bitici says that Aleksandar Djordjevic said that it was inspector Zoran Stankovic who should have accompanied his brothers until Merdare, however, in the meantime arrived some people who had the order to take them away.

- I asked Zoran why he did not undertake anything, and he kept silent. Even if my brothers were

terrorists – and they were not – why did they not stand trial? Stankovic says that all “papers” refer to the fact that “three Americans in Prokuplje” were sent to Belgrade – says Fatos Bitici.

There are a few presumptions on who ordered, and who effectuated this crime. The question remains whether or not one of these presumptions should be straightforwardly rejected – namely, the possibility that this is personal revenge. Is it a decision of the state leadership? It is supposed that no government, not even in Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic, could afford the luxury of killing American citizens. During Slobodan Milosevic’s regime, however, the impression was made that one of the favorite hobbies of the government was defying America. In an authoritarian regime established on such foundations it is possible that somebody, out of servility and careerism, wants to be more Catholic than the Pope. Numerous facts indicate that this was a state decision. Vladan Batic, the former Minister of Justice, said he made contacts with the prison in Prokuplje and got the confirmation that the Bitici brothers were sentenced to 15 days imprisonment for misdemeanor.

- On July 8th they were released from prison, and people from the police department were waiting for them – said Batic and stressed that he had no information on what happened later on.

More than six years have passed since the crime, for which the state is responsible regardless of who was the immediate executor.

The Witness Passed Away

Miroslav Mitrovic passed away in Kraljevo in 2004, where his family is living today as well, in a twofold fear of revenge. On the one hand, from the Serbs – displaced persons from Kosovo who are living in Kraljevo – because they had helped Kosovo Albanians, members of KLA; on the other, from the Albanians themselves because they feel responsible for the death of the Bitici brothers.