

SLAVIŠA KRUNIĆ

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LOCAL ORGANIZED-CRIME BOSSES
AND THEIR POLITICAL BACKERS’

ON 22 APRIL 2019, the deafening sound of multiple gunshots broke the calm of a still spring night at the property of one of Bosnia’s wealthiest and most beloved entrepreneurs, Slaviša Krunić.

Krunić, an outspoken Bosnian Serb who was known for defying local organized-crime bosses and their political backers, died that night in hospital. One of his attackers, a well-known organized-crime figure named Željko Kovačević, who had previously served a sentence for robbery, died on the spot. Krunić’s bodyguard, Žarko Pavlović, was also killed, and his driver, Goran Ilić, was seriously wounded.

The armed ambush, believed by police at the time to have been planned by Kovačević and three underground figures, two of whom were later arrested, took place near Krunić’s home in a suburban area of Banja Luka, Bosnia’s second city and de facto capital of the country’s predominantly Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska.

By the next morning, the news of the 48-year-old father of four’s passing had spread sadness and outrage, including among his employees. He managed five companies and employed more than 3 000 workers.

Born in 1971 in then-communist Yugoslavia and raised by a police-officer father, Krunić learnt right from wrong at an early age. ‘He was a soldier by nature, precise, on time,’ one of his relatives told the author.

This deeply instilled sense of discipline is likely to have influenced his career path. After visiting Germany in the years following the bloody 1992–1995 Bosnian War, Krunić had the idea of starting a private security and protection agency, one of the first in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The concept was so groundbreaking at the time that a new law on security companies was adopted three years after Krunić started Sector Security in 1999.

In addition to being principled, Krunić was widely regarded as hardworking and someone who always gave more to people and society than he got back. His dedication to Banja Luka is perhaps most evident in his acquisition in 2014 of Žitoprodukt, a milling and baking business in Banja Luka that was struggling after the conflict of the early 1990s.

Žitoprodukt was more than just an investment for Krunić. He felt nostalgic for the time when Banja Luka was a bustling and picturesque part of Yugoslav life, and wanted to restore vitality to the city. ‘No one would have bought Žitoprodukt just to revive it, not for that price,’ said one of Krunić’s friends. ‘He always went for the harder way. For him it was an issue of pride; he nurtured this company.’

Krunić rose to popularity in the country when he said that he would offer jobs to people who used to work at Žitoprodukt before the war, or to their children. By doing this, he was advocating for the return of the many Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) who had fled the city during the war, some of whom had a hard time finding work in a city where Serbs form the majority.

‘Who can say today that coexistence is impossible in this country, that progress is impossible and that it [the country] cannot exist as it is?’ Krunić said in a television interview in late 2015. ‘In our company, there are workers who were on different sides in the war. They all honoured their own ethnic group, fought for their ideals but they realized in the end they have been cheated.’

Krunić had developed a similar ethos in how he staffed his security company, where he employed people who had fought against each other in opposing armies less than three decades earlier. ‘He was a good speaker and he could put together what others thought was incompatible,’ one of his close co-workers observed.

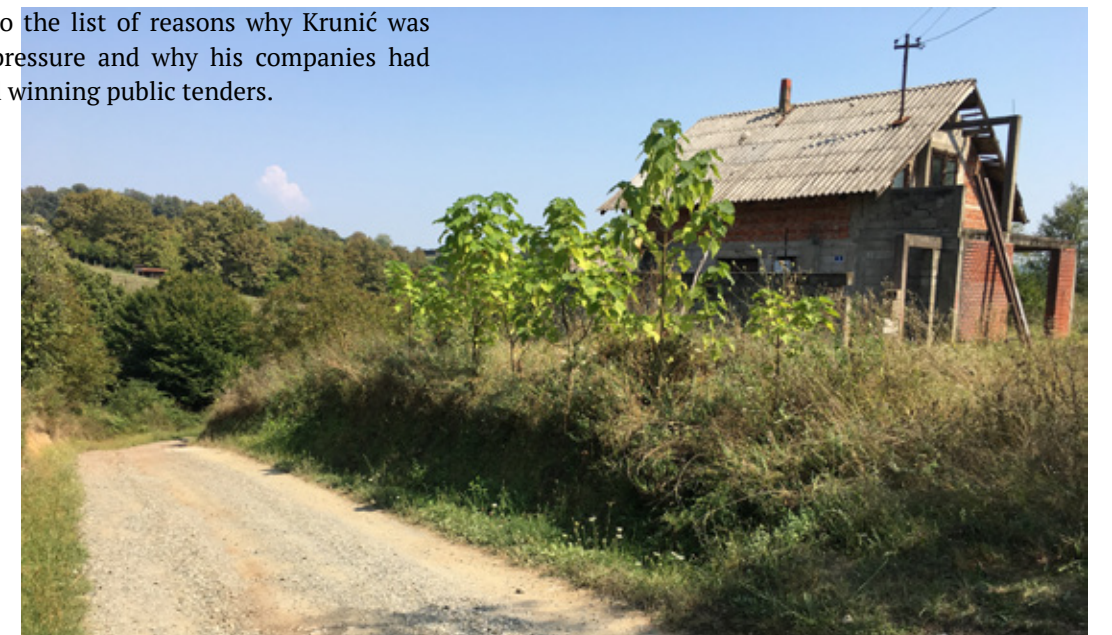
Krunić’s bold moves and brave outlook on life may have been appreciated by many in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially his own workers, but they raised eyebrows among the political elite, who were winning elections on the back of a nationalistic narrative that divided citizens into three distinct ethnic groups. ‘He had his principles and that cost him,’ said his relative. ‘They could not bend his spine, so they had to spill his brain,’ added his co-worker.

As Krunić’s portfolio and the number of people he employed had grown, so had the pressure on him from people connected to organized crime, as he had complained publicly on many occasions. Even before the acquisition of Žitoprodukt, in a 2008 United States diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks, Krunić was cited as allegedly making a complaint to the US embassy in Sarajevo against Milorad Dodik, a leading Bosnian Serb nationalist politician.

According to Krunić, Dodik had ‘blacklisted’ Sector Security, preventing him from obtaining government contracts, a significant source of income for security companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Krunić also allegedly claimed that people close to Dodik were pressuring him to sell the company, as it was a direct rival to other private security companies believed to be connected to or owned by organized-crime figures or corrupt politicians.



The road to Slaviša Krunić’s property, where the murder occurred



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But Krunić’s defining characteristic was his strength of will. And this, coupled with a strong sense of justice and his social conscience led him to defy ruling politicians – especially those with a nationalistic bent. He disagreed with them on almost everything, and especially with Dodik on how Bosnian Serbs should behave in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Contrary to Dodik’s assertions that Bosnian Serbs in the semi-autonomous Republika Srpska owed their primary allegiance to neighbouring Serbia, a stance that prioritized their Serb connection, Krunić publicly promoted the idea that all people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are, first and foremost, Bosnians. ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina is our motherland and we have a duty to make it a better place to live. All of us,’ Krunić said in an interview.

Krunić also irritated political elites in more concrete ways, however. When a protest erupted in 2013, after a plan to build a skyscraper in a Banja Luka park was announced, Krunić sent his security workers to protect a family whose house was meant to be destroyed and who had been arrested and beaten. This added to the list of reasons why Krunić was under pressure and why his companies had stopped winning public tenders.

‘He felt abandoned by this [political] system,’ his relative said, a feeling Krunić himself described in an interview he gave in 2015. ‘I am Banja Luka born, but as such I became unfit,’ he said. ‘There were pressures to sell the company. I made a decision not to sell it to the people who are not part of the story, which is building this country, who do not mean well to the future of our children. And those are the ones we see in the political arena every day.’

As one in a series of unsolved, apparently politically motivated murders in Banja Luka, Krunić’s death has made his fellow citizens uncertain of their future. ‘With Slaviša’s death, the old Banja Luka is dying too,’ his friend said. ●