

# **ANTUN VRDOLJAK**

**Zagreb**

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**The interview was recorded and documented under the following label**

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The interview was conducted in Zagreb, at the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall

**We have started and now I will kindly ask you to introduce yourself at the beginning of the interview. Please tell us your name, surname, date and place of birth, profession and residence.**

Antun Vrdoljak. I was born on June 4, 1931 in Imotski. I am a film director. Currently I am retired however I still do my work. I was a vice president of the Republic of Croatia after the first parliamentary elections. After that I served as a member of the Croatian parliament for two terms and was a director of the Croatian television during the war, Homeland war. I even have a rank. I am a brigadier of the Croatian army. That is all that I can say about me. I have 5 children, 9 grandchildren, and a wife. I have a house.

**Mr Tonči, we are talking about the indictment raised before the Hague Tribunal against the General Slobodan Praljak. The Indictment alleges establishment and participation in a joint criminal enterprise. I am interested in your experience, and your memories of the years 1992, 1993 and 1994. You were involved in sport events organizations. According to your experience did there exist a cooperation between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and if yes, what kind of cooperation existed between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

Well the cooperation was very intense, especially regarding sport activities and events. In 1991 we were accepted as a member at the International Olympic Committee (IOC). That happened on January 17, 1991. No, in 1992! Before that we were first accepted as non-full members at the end of 1991, however at that time the Olympic Committee was about to bring a decision regarding our full membership at that year's International Olympic Committee's congress. We had been accepted earlier in order to pass the qualifications for the Olympic Games that were held in February 1992 in Albertville, Winter Olympic Games, and the summer Olympic Games in

Barcelona in 1992 in August. We made quite enthusiastic and carried away preparations because we were extremely happy about the fact that we could participate for the first time under our own flag. Serbia, specifically former Yugoslavia was not allowed to participate at the Olympic Games under its own flag, but they participated under a white flag, as far as I remember. That was done in order to continue the tradition of the rule that nobody can prevent youth from any country to participate at the Olympics. That was a sacred rule of the then president Juan Antonio Samarán. According to that same principle we had been accepted earlier as a member of the International Olympic Committee in order to be able to participate at the Olympic Games. We were accepted even before the UN Security Council recognised the Republic of Croatia as an independent state. The same thing happened with the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The IOC accepted them before they received the official recognition from the United Nations. The International Olympic Committee's Statute clearly states that only a UN member-state can become a member of the International Olympic Committee. There are exceptions - Switzerland is also a member of the International Olympic Committee, and is not a UN member state, but almost all IOC headquarters are situated in Switzerland. Therefore you can see that there are some finesse. Maybe I tire you with that entire staff.

**No, please go on.**

We closely cooperated with our friends, the athletes from Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time. I was visited by the leadership of the BiH Olympic Committee and was asked how we could help them, because they were at war. They were not able to undertake any kind of preparations; they did not have a place to make them. Not a single playground, sport hall, or soccer field was functional at the time. That was all under bombs. And then we made certain arrangements with them, and they came to our country in order to conduct

preparations for Summer Olympic Games in Istria. I think they were accommodated in Poreč. They stayed in Poreč for a month or 40 days at our expense. And all their preparations were completed under our hospitality. I even remember, we worried about Olympic uniforms for our representation – we did not have a sponsor then, because the sponsors are usually found far in advance of the Olympic Games – and it all passed by us – in the process of taking care about our team clothing we also took care about clothing of their athletes as well. I cannot tell you the exact number of their athletes who came to us; they were a very small representation that is for sure. Qualifications are needed for the Olympic Games. In spite of the fact that Yugoslavia was disqualified from the program of the Olympic Games as a country, its athletes were allowed to participate in the sports for which Yugoslavia had qualified. It was fortunate for us that we had previously participated at the basketball tournament in Barcelona and achieved a great success there by entering the finals and playing against American Dream Team and won silver. We even managed to have a 1-point lead in 11th minute of the game at the great delight of our players. That happened because the qualifications for the basketball tournament were held immediately before the start of the Olympic Games in Barcelona and because America decided to sign an agreement between NBA league and International Olympic Committee in order for its professional players be able to participate at the Olympic Games for the first time. That is why the qualification tournament was delayed a bit and we managed to get into it and qualify. The BiH representation was also faced with a problem of getting to Barcelona. I was a president of the Supervisory Committee of the Croatian Airlines then, the Croatian airline company. They sponsored our flight to Barcelona, of course. We didn't have 140 competitors to fill in all the seats on the plane, thus we also boarded representation of BiH and flew them at our own expense to Barcelona. Equally we returned with them to Croatia after the Olympic Games were over. After that they left for Bosnia through different ways. However, some of those athletes had already lived for some time among the refugees who joined Croatian sport clubs in order to be able to train and engage in sports. Sport was out of the question in Bosnia. There was

no possibility for something like that.

**I will interrupt you now for a moment, and go back to some details which seem interesting to me. You say that the arrangement was that Bosnian athletes come and have their preparations in Croatia. Who made that arrangement? Where did they come? Which month was that? Do you remember those details a little bit better?**

I will show you, the best thing would be to give you written documentation - if we have any. You know, we didn't even have the office as yet. We were just founded. Croatia had never had its own Olympic Committee before. I remember that Franjo Ključić came; he was a president of the Olympic Committee of BiH. Franjo Ključić had already been engaged in some internal conflicts with the HDZ in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was first a president of the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), then some internal conflicts within the leadership of HDZ happened and he was expelled. But, his expulsion from the HDZ of BiH did not affect at all our relationship because we behaved as true sportsmen and simply were aware of the fact that we had to help our friends in trouble. Preparations were held a month before the beginning of the Olympic Games.

**When did the preparations begin approximately?**

Somewhere at the beginning of August, they came to Croatia at the beginning of July.

**At the beginning of July?**

Yes.

**Which year?**

In 1992. Most of them had already been living in Croatia. Some of them played in Cibona basketball team and some in Zadar basketball team. They, as basketball players, did not go to the Olympic Games, but we now speak about most of these sportsmen who lived here because they had ran away from BiH, and were simply living here in exile. We offered their athletes the opportunity to meet a month before the beginning of the Olympic games, I don't know who else was there, and they trained in Istria. I don't know whether that was Medulin or Poreč – I cannot tell you exactly now. You can contact me later on and I can give you written documentation about those things.

**We can check that?**

Of course we can! Eh, that was our first cooperation. Our second cooperation took place in 1993 during the Mediterranean Games in France. The games were dispersed across various towns in France. We helped Bosnian athletes again. They were in our country making preparations for the Mediterranean Games.

**Where were they?**

They were in Istria again. I think that preparations were not possible everywhere in the country because we were in war as well.

**Yes, do you have some sort of paper with names of the people who were here?**

We can ask. The easiest thing is to see who was a member of the Bosnian representation at the Olympic Games at the time. You can find that... we can find it in Almanac. Their names are listed there and we can ask each one of them about his and hers whereabouts during the preparations. The precise list exists at the International Olympic Committee, and it can be checked there. All athletes who passed the qualifications are registered there. They all register at the Olympic village and receive their passes and identification cards. They cannot enter without them. You cannot come to the Olympic Games as you please. All participants of the Olympic Games, all 5000 athletes are registered by their names, surnames, date of arrival to the village, and departure from the village.

**That is very clear to me! I am interested in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian team. Did they all train and have preparations for the Olympics in Croatia?**

They all had preparations in Croatia.

**Did some of them make preparations in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Were there any possibilities or conditions to train in their own country?**

No! There weren't any conditions! There weren't any conditions in Croatia either besides Istria. Istria was not a war stricken area.

**Did they have preparations in any other country rather than Croatia? Were they accepted elsewhere?**

No! There was no need. The Olympic team has to be together at one place, they have to cooperate and live together. You know that is how a spirit of togetherness is created.

**That spirit of togetherness was created in Croatia?**

In Croatia.

**Let us talk about 1993, about the preparations for the Mediterranean Games in France – when did they begin? When did the athletes arrive, approximately?**

I will again approximately say. All great sport events take place in summer. Having that in mind, the Mediterranean Games took place in summer in France. They were dispersed across several towns in France. The Bosnian athletes came here again. Not in such a large number, a smaller group came to Croatia for preparations this time. Their sportsmen were dislocated all around the world at the time; all around Europe. They played in different clubs etc. But the group was larger than the one that had participated at the Olympic Games, because the qualifications for Mediterranean Games were not as demanding. There were no great demands. There is no such a great pressure to participate at the Mediterranean Games. Thus it is easier to enter the qualifications and easier to qualify.

**Under which flag they participated at the games?**

Under the flag of Bosnia

and Herzegovina.

**Bosnia and**

**Herzegovina?**

Under the flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They gave me, I can show you that, a coat of arms of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was a golden badge on which it was written Bosnia and Herzegovina and was given to me as a token of gratitude at the Mediterranean Games. I still have it and take care of it. And I also received a plaque. It was a large plaque which I have to look for, because we moved twice. I have many plaques, thus I should see where it is now. It has to be somewhere at the Olympic Committee. I shall look for it with a help of my former associates, you can take a photo of that as well. The plaque was given to us officially at the Mediterranean Games in France as a token of appreciation for all the friendship and help which we had given them; appreciation for all the financial help and hospitality which we offered to the representation of BiH.

**I think that I understood that through this conversation with you, but I would appreciate very much if you could emphasise the fact and thus I raise the following question: who financed the accommodation of the Bosnian athletes, their preparations, and help they received? Did some kind of agreement exist?**

We were all in great trouble at the time. I undertook special efforts to cover all the expenses related to our participation at the Olympic Games. The country was at war and our budget did not cover the expenses of eventual participation at the Olympics. We didn't have that covered. Neither did them. That was all improvisation, and that all was – I can assuredly claim that – one great friendship; great friendship and great need of ours to make the Bosnian athletes feel welcomed in Croatia. That was in the end, a part of the state politics of Croatia at the time because that is how we accepted refugees from BiH as well. There were many more refugees than athletes, my God. That means, we treated them the same way we accommodated the refugees from BiH – who were coming in waves, as people from Dalmatia (the coast)

would say. Those refugees were driven away by circumstances in BiH, by the fights. People ran both spontaneously or in organised manner. They ran to Croatia mostly. They did not simply run to Croatia, we invited them to come. I suggested to Franjo Kljuić that the representation of BiH come to train and make preparations for the games in Croatia and that we would transport them by our plain to Barcelona. That is how it happened. We took them. We did not pay for the plane either, to be clear about that. The Croatian Airlines sponsored the flight. Perhaps the reason for it was that I was a president of the Croatian Airlines Supervisory Committee – but I would like to see who wouldn't be willing to sponsor the first participation ever of one's own representation at the Olympic Games. And since there was enough space in the plane, because unfortunately we couldn't make any arrangements, some things went by us, with the Serbs. We failed to arrange some kind of cooperation with Serbs. For example we didn't succeed in taking the Yugoslav handball representation alongside the Croatian water polo representation, since they both qualified, to the games. They complicated matters too much, and we couldn't reach them. We were not able to make any kind of contact with their Olympic Committee which at that time was called the Yugoslav Olympic Committee. In the end, neither Croatian water polo team nor Yugoslav hand ball team participated at the games. That was stupid. We had problems with participation of our tennis team which had qualified for the games. But something was obvious. The Croatian tennis team was represented by Goran Ivanišević and Goran Prpić who were both Croatian players. They clearly stated that they would play at the Olympics solely under Croatian flags. Not under any other. Nothing could be done about that. Serbs had to accept the fact that two of their team members would participate under the Croatian flag. Those were times of great improvisations. The only thing that wasn't improvised was emotions. Nobody can improvise emotions. We were all in the same trouble at the

time. Our countries were both attacked by the same enemy and it was logical that we befriended one another and helped one another. And that we did.

**In 1993, the conflicts between the Croats and the Muslims in Bosnia continue. On other side we have many refugees from BiH and help which Croatia provides for them. In that arrangement of yours, was there any signal or any sing that help to the athletes of BiH – I am talking about the Croatian highest political leaders - should be denied or that they shouldn't be welcomed?**

God forbid! I know that I was invited to the VONS assembly once where I had to inform about departure and participation of the Croatian representation at the Olympic Games. Finally, I had to get 2 million German marks out of them at the time. That was such a huge amount of money that you couldn't even dream of. And we were given 2 million German marks. I spoke at the VONS assembly and told them that I had understood how much that was, but that there wouldn't be any other way of going there – and I told them that the sum also covered the help provided to the Bosnian and Herzegovinian athletes.

**You said that?**

I said that at the VONS assembly. All of those who were present there, including President Tuđman and all others, accepted that very emotionally – and very sincerely greeted the arrangements with the BiH representation. I don't know to whom we need to explain that the people who lived in Croatia at the time know with how much care and worries and with how much sacrifice were the refugees accepted to their own homes. We didn't only invite them to come to Croatia. We didn't only accept them and accommodated them simply on the stadiums, or on some open field? Of course, all sport halls were

occupied by the refugees from BiH. That was the beginning. Later on all the hotels and motels were full. And what to say about Slavonia, that was the region where refugees poured over the Sava river and to Županja down there. That region was full of refugees. And we didn't only consider that to be some Catholic or humane thing to do, but we considered it to be a necessity; a need to give a chance to the people who were our friends and because they suffered as well. Their destiny was the same as ours: they were attacked by the same enemy, their families had been separated etc.. We accepted it as if it were a normal thing. When I reply to your questions today it seems to me that all that is forgotten. As if some kind of amnesia existed - here or there. As if people didn't know those things existed. Those were facts.

**That is why we need to record those things in order for them to be remembered. Tell me, regarding the preparations with the athletes, organisation etc... is there anything else that we should mention?**

Well listen, not only have we accepted the Bosnian and Herzegovinian athletes but a great number of athletes from our representation came from BiH. A few Bosnians played for the Croatian basketball team. If the hand ball team had participated at the games there would be even more Bosnians playing for them. There wasn't a strict division such as: these are Bosnians and this is us. All of us went for the first time to the Olympics to defend the colours of our own state and were entirely enthusiastic about it. I will tell you only one fact. In February 1992, the winter Olympic Games was held in Albertville. We didn't have Janica or Ivica Kostelić at the time. We weren't good at winter sports. We don't have snow here. The snow falls once in a year in our country during Christmas and not every year. But when we entered the sport field in Albertville, we were greeted with a French speaker who said: "And now ladies and gentlemen, I am sure that none of us remain seated: let us greet Croatia for the first time at the Olympic Games! "Who could at that moment

even think about the hostilities? We didn't even care about the Serbs. We participated under our flag at the Olympic Games for the first time in history! You have to know that the Croatian Olympic Committee was first founded in 1908. When we were about to leave for the Olympic Games we couldn't do it under our flag, but had to go under Hungarian flag because we were a part of the Austro-Hungarian state. In 1918, when we finally seceded from Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the same man, Franjo Bučan, founded the Croatian Olympic Committee again. In 1919 it was moved to Belgrade. And again we were left without the Croatian Olympic Committee. I can proudly state that I founded the Croatian Olympic Committee in 1991 and that its headquarters are in Zagreb. Since that time we attended many Olympic Games, I would have to count: Barcelona, America, Sidney, and finally Athens. I counted only summer Olympics. There were even more winter Olympics. They were divided into two year cycle, one took place in 1992, the following in 1994, because a two year cycle was introduced, winter-summer, winter summer cycle. We participated at more winter Olympic Games. I cannot explain enough with how much love and care we accepted Bosnian athletes and sportsmen here. You know, we knew that they had even harder time then we did. In 1992, one third of Croatia was still occupied, but the remaining territory under our authority was gradually recovering, it was slowly recuperating – not in a sense that we could throw away our money, two million German marks, and I repeat again is a very large sum. I know that the sum was discussed at the assembly by the highest state leadership because the governor of the Croatian National Bank, Dr Pero Jurčević and the minister Dr Zoran Jašević told me that they didn't have that amount of money. I complained to the President of the Republic and told him that we wouldn't be able to go the Olympics. He then called minister Jašević and the governor of the Croatian National Bank and told them: „Why are you giving him such a hard time?“ And the governor told him: „Mr. President you are asking a convertible currency from us, and Mr. Vrdoljak seeks two million German marks!“ And he responded: „If it depends on that, then don't give it to him“.

He was entirely on our side. Imagine us quarrel over every penny, Kuna or mark – at that time there were still German marks. Imagine at such a moment being able to invite somebody at our own expense, ah that was something! That was not an act of mercy. That was an act of profound sacrifice. You can show mercy when you have something and then you give it away, but we didn't have anything and we anyway gave something away. I feel embarrassed to talk about it because I don't want us to look as some benefactors.

**No, we are talking about the facts.**

I was at the time considered a great friend of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the man who probably understood them better than anybody else, because Herzegovina was my neighbourhood, we are first neighbours. Well if there is any sense in talking some more about that, I was invited in 1993 to a very important assembly, to the very important meeting between delegations of the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Bosnia where an agreement regarding the way of conducting military command among the units of BiH had to be signed. The agreement was a result of the previous agreement that BiH already had with BiH regarding aid. The meeting was attended by the President of the Republic Alija Izetbegović and I think it was Silajđić at the time on Bosnian side, what is his name? I don't know...

**Haris?**

Haris Silajđić, Yes! He was a president of the Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time. He was the second man in charge of political affairs in BiH. On our side we had a president of the republic, Franjo Tuđman, a minister of defence, Gojko Šušak, a president of the Herzeg-Bosnia, Mate Boban and I. I remember that Tuđman told me, when we were about to sit around the table, that I should go and sit by their side, so that we had three people on one side and three on the other side of the

table, and not four people opposite two people. I remember that detail. We were supposed to meet at 6 p.m. Our task was to go over a document which had already been prepared by the Ministries of the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ambassadors wrote the document and we had to check it. Each of us received a copy. The paper was short. There were two pages only.

**What was written in that paper? Do you have it?**

Archives have it. A simple thing was written. The agreement was written in order to achieve a better understanding and make things more clear regarding the command of the units in the territory of BiH, that is, of the joint units in BiH. When I say joint units, I do not refer to the joint units of the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of BiH, but of Bosnian units, of units consisting of Croats and Bosniaks; joint units of Croats and Bosniaks. The proposal had already been accepted before the meeting took place. We only had to sign the agreement at the meeting. It was planned that the signing of the agreement take place at 7 pm in front of the television cameras and that the entire thing be broadcast on prime time TV daily news by the Croatian Radio and Television. It was written that the command would be organised in the following way: units consisting of majority of Muslims, Bosniaks would be commanded by a Bosniak who would in turn be obeyed by everybody, and in the region where there was a Croat majority a commander should be a Croat and should be accepted by everybody.

**These two things were written down in that document?**

It was one document about these two questions. That seemed the most logical to us. That seemed logical even to Alija Izetbegović. However, I remember that Silajđić arrived that day somewhere from

abroad; I don't know exactly where from, whether from America or Europe. He was located in Geneva, had a flat there. I think his family lived in Geneva. He arrived to Zagreb that day, and met Alija before they met us. And he was the one, how would I explain that to you, who completely smashed that agreement. He was against formulating the command structure in such a way. Problems related to command structure and its conduct in Bosnia were great. These problems reminded us mostly and were mostly similar to family quarrels or to who would be the man in the house. Even brothers quarrel about some things from the past or about inheritance, what was left to whom by their father etc...I have to say with a great regret that – we parted at around half past 10 at night. We sat for four and a half hours together without being able to convince Silajđić to accept the agreement.

**That happened in 1993, and we are now in 2006 and I know that it the meeting was a long time ago but can you remember what was the idea represented by Silajđić, specifically by Izetbegović?**

Izetbegović came, I have to say, very tired to that meeting. I remember a certain detail. I sat on their side of the table and I remember that Silajđić was constantly pushing him with his leg below the table. And Izetbegović had a large graffiti pen, green, a regular pen, and was constantly drawing something on that piece of paper, and then he would arise it with a small rubber which he had on top of that pen. And thus he drew things, and wiped them off with that rubber. Three of us kept silent while the President Tuđman spoke because we expected that president Tuđman and president Izetbegović would talk. But no, the entire meeting turned into Silajđić's monologue in which he claimed that such an agreement meant meddling

into internal affairs of BiH, and stated that no one from Zagreb shouldn't be telling them whom to put in charge as commanders in BiH. But that didn't really matter.

### **Thus he was strongly against it?**

He was strongly against it. It seemed highly illogical to us that appointment of a Croat commander in Široki Brijeg, where there is no one else but Croat population would be inappropriate. Both Croats and Muslims had a strong wish for cooperation at the time and it didn't matter who was formally in charge. That mattered exclusively because of the local relationship, solely because of the local relationship. Looking at it in general sense the political aim was to defend BiH from Serbian aggression. That was a fundamental principle that should have been followed. According to my opinion, if the agreement had been signed all terrible things that happened in Bosnia could have been avoided. Discussing all the stories related to the agreement, I doubt it even today that breaking of the agreement originated from BiH. I am deeply convinced that, although I am not a historian and don't have any intention to deal with such historic issues I am deeply convinced that if Silajđić had not been present at the meeting the agreement would have been signed. If Silajđić had not come from abroad that day, he wouldn't have advocated his ideas aggressively because it was obvious that he had been instructed to do so.

### **Finally the agreement was not signed?**

No! It wasn't signed! We all parted around half past 11, when Tuđman said regretfully: „We waste our time“! It was not easy for the state leaders at that time to spend 4 hours at some meeting. Things moved extremely fast at the time; with a speed of light, and not with a speed of sound. We felt desperate, we felt dejected because of the fact that

the agreement had not been signed. I assure you that the agreement would have solved all the unresolved issues between the Croatian Council of Defence and the Bosnian Ministry of Defence. That is what I remember.

**We finally reached the end of our interview. Can you remember anything else of importance in this story of ours?**

Perhaps we should talk about ... Kljuić was replaced at the Olympic Committee of BiH later on by a Serb from Bosnia and Herzegovina, a very honourable man. That man was a former member of the presidency of Yugoslavia during the times of Stipe Mesić. What was his name? We continued to have brilliant relationship with the Olympic Committee of BiH. We always sat together at the same table at all sport meetings and assemblies, both Mediterranean Committee and International Olympic Committee' assemblies, or European Committee Community's meetings and shared similar opinions. I know when Rijeka was nominated as a candidate for the host of the Mediterranean Games that the Olympic Committee of BiH voted absolutely for Rijeka with every one of its votes. I have to tell you that, in 1994 voting was conducted in Bari and a very high pressure was made – you have 7 Arabic countries in the Mediterranean committee – on BiH because Tunis was our opposing candidate. It was expected that BiH would vote for Tunis due to all those disturbed relationships. But no! We have clear evidence that all three votes ...

**In 1994?**

Yes! They voted for Rijeka. And later on, we nominated Rijeka in four consecutive years as a candidate for the Mediterranean Games in vain.

That is we were nominated as candidates three times for the Mediterranean Games but it was very difficult to get them. Later on, Spaniards came and took it, and after Spaniards Italians got them. We hope now that we could maybe get it. However, Bosnia has always, but absolutely always voted for Rijeka. And get this, we were warned by our friends, our European friends not to count on BiH, that they would vote for Tunis! The initial letters of our states are B and C. Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we sit right next to each other. And we have always showed to each other a paper on how we voted.

**You saw that then?**

No! We showed it. We deliberately showed it. Do not let anyone later on tell you that it wasn't like that. You have seen it, now you take it to their table.

**They voted for us?**

Yes! They voted for us each time. I think that if other things had been similar to our sport cooperation everything would have turned out differently.