

Repression over human rights defenders

Attacks against Women in Black in the period



March - September 2014

Dossier No. 2

Brief overview

Women in Black is an activist group and network of feminist-pacifist orientation, made up of women of diverse generations and ethnicity, levels of education, social status, lifestyles and sexual orientation. Women in Black was founded on 9th October 1991 in Belgrade.

Since its inception (1991), WiB has been confronted with various forms of repression, both on the administrative-state level, and also on the social and cultural plan. Its members have often been the target of assaults, because of their engagement for human rights and the rights of the others and the different (in the ethnic, political, sexual sense).

This repression has been particularly marked after the action "We remember the crimes committed in Kosovo" was organized on 26th March 2014.

I The Chronological order of attacks in 2014:

26th March Women in Black protest – We remember/Kujtojmë: on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the crimes committed against Albanian civilians in Kosovo: Women in Black - Belgrade, supported by the art troupes Art Clinic from Novi Sad and Dah Theater from Belgrade, marked on 26th March, in Republic Square, the 15th anniversary of the crimes committed against Albanian civilians with a peace action called "Reconstruction of a crime". On that occasion, the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča, launched an appeal to hooligans for lynch of Women in Black on his Facebook status.

29th March – another appeal for lynch of Women in Black: on his Facebook status, "Boris Knežević" wrote: "I call upon all our brothers, wherever they see those whores in black, to immediately lynch and burn them!!! Justice for Počuča", etc., which was followed by hundreds of threats and offensive comments, as a direct consequence of the public call for lynch, launched by R. Počuča.

1st April: fabricated interview against Women in Black on the Facebook "Online Reporter": among other things, it says that Radomir Počuča "came under attack of this infamous women NGO, who are threatening to publicly rape him in Republic Square until Počuča apologizes to them in public or until he dies of exhaustion". On the same day, numerous comments appeared on the Internet against Women in Black, of which I quote only a few: "A bullet in the forehead..."; "those are heartless filthy women WHORES!"; "They are evil, they have made up those so-called rapes in Bosnia and Kosmet, they would be happy if anyone wanted to rape them..."

4th April – the police issued permission for a rally against Women in Black: The Public Peace and Order Department of the Belgrade Police Administration allowed a rally to be held on 5th April in front of the building where Women in Black premises are located (18, Jug Bogdanova St, at the largest city bus terminal Zeleni venac), by the Serbian Congress 'Zavetnici' (Pledgers), in support to the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia Radomir Počuča, who called for lynch.



5th April. protest of the ultra-rightist movement “Srpski sabor Zavetnici”: as a sign of support to Radomir Počuča, and against Women in Black, in the vicinity of Women in Black premises. The entire area was blocked. The demonstrators demanded that a law be adopted in Serbia which would ban the activities of non-government organizations, like in the Russian Federation. The protest rally was attended by thirty-odd persons, while twice as many heavily armed police officers were present. The Police blocked the access to Zeleni venac, checked the tenants’ IDs and disturbed the public even more, by failing to ban such a rally of the ‘Pledgers’. In short, the tenants were alarmed by the massive presence of police forces in front of the building and inside it during the protest.

The campaign for the eviction of Women in Black: A consequence of failing to ban the rally was the information that the tenants of the building announced a petition to have Women in Black evicted from its premises. On the site “Srpski sabor zavetnici” the information appeared, announcing that “Srpski sabor Zavetnici will support the efforts of the tenants living at 18, Jug Bogdanova St. to get rid of the NGO ‘Women in Black’ and we will lend them all form of support, legal and other, to that end”. This campaign has continued. Numerous printed media have been joining this persecution of Women in Black - tabloids with headlines such as “No one likes Women in Black, move out of here”, “Women in Black deplore Albanian victims, disregarding the Serbian victims”, “We will do everything we can to chase Women in Black away from this building”.



5th April – calls for murder and liquidation of Women in Black activists: on the Facebook page of the online magazine “Press Online”, the following appeal appeared, signed by FB user Aleksandar Balaban: “They have to be eliminated urgently. I offer 100,000 euros per capita of those whores to whoever wastes them... the only condition is that they must be slaughtered with a jagged blunt knife... the offer remains valid as long as they live...” This was followed by brutal, violent, misogynous comments against Women in Black, coupled with the bid to “... ban Women in Black and all the NGOs...”, etc.

8th July – attack against Women in Black in Valjevo: on the occasion of the 19th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, Women in Black and the participants of the initiative “Peace activism – activist cycling - Srebrenica 2014” organized a peace action on the main city square in Valjevo, a silent vigil in mourning “We will never forget the Srebrenica genocide”. A group of men, wearing T-shirts with the inscription “The Chetniks of Valjevo”, as well as T-shirts bearing the picture of Ratko Mladić (indicted for the Srebrenica genocide, who is currently being processed by the Hague Tribunal), hurled insults and threats, throwing objects at the activists, ultimately building up a genuine atmosphere of lynch. The police did not manage to prevent the breaking of the picket lines by the pro-fascist group, so that during the assault, amid an atmosphere of lynch and calls for annihilation, Staša Zajović, Ljiljana Radovanović, Miloš Urošević and Dejan Gašić were hurt. Following this event, the persecution of Women in Black continued on social networks, with the vociferous messages: “Women in Black are a national disgrace!”, “Ban once and for all these creeps!”, “There is no place in Serbia for Women in Black”, etc.

22nd July, assault on Staša Zajović, Women in Black coordinator: at the bus stop at Zemun, an unfamiliar man hurled the worst insults at her, as member of Women in Black, coupled with the threat: “We are invisible, we come out of the dark and work in the dark, we are everywhere...The American commandos won’t be able to save you ...”

II Legal protective measures undertaken by the Lawyers- Committee for Human Rights/Yucom and Women in Black

31st March: The Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights /Yucom, on behalf of Women in Black, filed a criminal complaint against the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia, Radomir Počuča, “because of reasonable doubt that he committed the criminal offence “Racial and other forms of discrimination” from article 387. paragraphs 2 and 4 of the Penal Code of the Republic of Serbia”.

21st July, request submitted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs: Invoking the Law on free access to information (article 15, paragraph 1), Women in Black submitted a request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, to be provided with information on all the relevant data/information related to the rally of the ultra-rightist organization “Srbski sabor Zavetnici” held on 5th April 2014, in view of the fact that the police manipulated the provision of freedom of assembly, issuing permission for a protest whose motive was violence.

21st July, request submitted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs: Invoking the Law on free access to information (article 15, paragraph 1), Women in Black submitted a request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, to be provided with information on all the relevant data/information related to the assault on WiB in Valjevo, on 8th July 2014.

22nd September, request to put R. Počuča in remand – The Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights /Yucom demanded that the authorities verify allegations that Radomir Počuča is currently in Ukraine and to undertake all the necessary measures to ensure his presence during the procedure that has been launched against him because of the criminal charges brought against him to the competent court, as it is now clear that it is his intention to avoid appearing in court. In this respect, the Court also has the power to impose a restricting order on abandonment of place of residence, and to confiscate his travel documents/passport.

III Measures undertaken by the state concerning the attacks, the state response to the requests submitted by Women in Black and the Lawyers’ Committee for human rights

28th March: The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia most energetically “condemns the act of the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Radomir Počuča”, whose service contract expired in April and has not been extended.

Ombudsman *Saša Janković* strongly condemned the calls for lynch of “Women in Black” and proposed that the Ministry for Internal Affairs initiate criminal and disciplinary procedures against the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit R. Počuča.

Commissioner for Equality *Nevena Petrušić* condemned most energetically the call for lynch of the non-government organization Women in Black.

7th April: R. Počuča, former spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia was arrested, because of his call for lynch of Women in Black. On the same day, the Prosecutor’s Office for high-tech crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia began a preliminary legal procedure against R. Počuča.

7th and 8th April: Hearing of Women in Black activists (*Staća Zajović*, *Ljiljana Radovanović* and *Violeta Đikanović*) before the Department for combating high-tech crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia, in relation to criminal charges pressed against R. Počuča; the hearing took place in the presence of lawyer *Kristina Todorović* (Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights).



Because of constant threats to WiB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs assigned a 24/7 police patrol to the building where WiB premises are situated, which continued on 8th April.

11th and 14th April: The High Public Prosecutor’s Office launched a preliminary investigation against the suspect Radomir Počuča. The witnesses’ statements were taken – from WiB activists *Ljiljana Radovanović*, *Violeta Đikanović* and *Staća Zajović* in order to collect evidence against R. Počuča, suspected of having committed the criminal act of threatening personal safety. It is noteworthy that the initial qualification of the criminal act was altered into that of threatening personal safety, which

incurs milder sanctions than the one referred to in the criminal complaint submitted on behalf of Women in Black by the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights.

13th May: Ministry of Internal Affairs (Police Directorate, Police Administration for the City of Belgrade): the statements were taken from WiB activists Ljiljana Radovanović, Staša Zajović and Violeta Đikanović regarding the threats addressed to them by Boris Knežević.

20th June: The trial scheduled before the Higher Court in the case of attacks against WiB was cancelled due to the lawyers' strike.

8th and 9th July: The police arrested 11 persons in Valjevo because of the attack against activists of the non-government organization "Women in Black". Four men who were also suspected of having committed the criminal act of assault on an official on duty and the criminal act of violent behavior, were first sanctioned with one month of custody, but they remained in remand only one day, and were released afterwards. The pre-trial Criminal Chamber of the Municipal Court in Valjevo ruled out the decision on a one-month custody with the explanation that the Law on criminal proceedings had been violated in the process of assessing the gravity of the acts that were attributed to them.

8th July: The Municipal Public Prosecutor's Office in Valjevo took the statements from the injured activists: Dejan Gašić, Ljiljana Radovanović, Miloš Urošević and Staša Zajović.

23rd July: the trial of Radomir Počuča, indicted of violating the security of Women in Black was postponed because the defendant-s lawyer failed to appear in court.

17th September: The trial scheduled before the Superior Court concerning the case of attacks against WiB was cancelled because of the lawyers' strike.

And R. Počuča, former spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia wrote on his Facebook profile that he had gone to Ukraine to fight on the side of the pro-Russian forces.

IV Support and solidarity of the local and international networks and international institutions

The civilian society of Serbia and the Western Balkans immediately voiced clear support to Women in Black. Actions of support in solidarity have been numerous, thus confirming the reputation that Women in Black enjoys within the civil society organizations/OCD, and which were also aimed at defending their own dignity and survival.

Amnesty International condemned (on 28th March) the calls for lynch of WiB and called on Aleksandar Vučić, the first deputy Prime Minister of Serbia to "publicly condemn the call for lynch of Women in Black".

Regarding the assault in Valjevo (8th July), and the threats addressed to Staša Zajović (22nd July), the most important international human rights, peace and women human rights organizations, as well as members of the most renowned academic institutions throughout the world, reacted, expressing solidarity and support to Women in Black, and voicing requests to Serbian authorities that the perpetrators of acts of violence against Women in Black be sanctioned.

The representatives of international institutions have also raised their voices, expressing their outrage because of the attacks against WiB. The leading figures of this outcry have been: Luca Bianconi, First Secretary and Chief of the EU political delegation in the Republic of Serbia and Marija Rauš, UN Human Rights Advisor in Serbia. In the course of numerous contacts with the UN and EU representatives which were held in this period, WiB activists brought forward the facts concerning these attacks, as well as their views on the political context in which the violence against human rights defenders and peace activists took place.

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