

# Repression against human rights defenders

**August 2017 - December 2017**

*Dossier no. 10*



Women in Black are an activist group and a network of feminist-antimilitaristic orientation, made up of women of different generational and ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, social status, lifestyles and sexual choices. Women in Black were founded on October 9th, 1991 in Belgrade.

Since the beginning of our work (1991), Women in Black face various forms of repression, both by state and non-state actors.

Due to the escalation of repression against activists of Women in Black at the beginning of 2014, Women in Black began to compile Dossiers that deal with attacks on activists in an analytical and systematic way. Dossier no. 10 deals with events in the period from August 2017 to December 2017.

In the first part of this Dossier, we will present the development of the situation regarding the previous attacks in the mentioned period. In the second part we will take a look at the current political and social context in Serbia.

## **Attacks on activists during events they organized**

Events and actions organized by Women in Black and other related organizations during May and June were targeted by extreme right-wing organizations, as described in Dossier 9. Although it was a wider and organized campaign aimed at obstructing and preventing activities dealing with the past, and despite the fact that during the attacks, actions which were taken (threats, disturbing of the public assembly) are subject of criminal responsibility, the police, as well as the Prosecutors Office have not taken any action to prosecute the perpetrators.

During the events itself, police activity is such that it has a high degree of tolerance for people who hinder these events, and often threats and insults occur in the presence of police officers who rarely react in such cases.

The last example is the protest "Stop Occupation!", which was held on December 22nd, 2017 in the center of Belgrade, in order to support peace process in Israel / Palestine. During the protest, a group of Israeli tourists insulted and threatened activists, invaded their personal space, etc. . The police stood by and did not respond.<sup>1</sup>

On the occasion of the anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, on July 10th, 2017, Women in Black organized a commemorative event in Belgrade on Republic Square, at the same place and in the same time as every year. This year the event had to be moved to another location at the request of the police, because members of extreme right-wing groups gathered in the scheduled place at the same time. Women in Black sent a letter to the police. In the letter, on the basis of the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance, we asked them to give us documentation about the event of extreme right-wingers, as well as a police report on the mentioned event.



1 <https://www.rferl.org/a/belgrade-israel-tourists/28933765.html>



Under the Law on Assembly of Citizens, the organizer is obliged to inform the police about the organization of the assembly. The police do not issue a permit for organizing, but has the right, in case that there is a justified danger of disturbance of public order or violence, to prohibit the assembly. In a concrete case, when one event was already announced, the police should not allow the holding of the second at the same place and at the same time, especially when it is a event whose sole purpose was to disturb or prevent the already announced event. We remind that the policemen told us on that occasion that the “counter-event” was submitted to the police on that day, and that the order to allow it came from the Cabinet of the Minister of the Police.



**Even after 5 months, the police did not respond to a request from Women in Black and submitted the requested documents.**

### **Informer Case**

In the daily *Informer*, which is under the control of the ruling party, on November 9th, 2016, on the front page was published the article “WOMEN IN BLACK THE BIGGEST FOREIGN MERCENARIES: The West gave them EUR 1,587,596 to accuse Serbia of war crimes.”<sup>2</sup> This article states that Women in Black received that amount of money in the last two years with the aim of “attacking and destabilizing the state of Serbia”. The article lists donors, as well as the amount of money they have given, and the Women in Black organization is called “anti-Serb”. The data published in the text are completely inaccurate. Women in Black for the indicated period, from all donors, for concrete projects, received almost ten times less money than what is stated in the article.

Women in Black in December 2016, filed a lawsuit against *Informer* for the damaging of reputation. So far, 4 hearings have been held. At a hearing on September 26th, 2017 Stasa Zajovic testified. On that occasion, the defendant Dragan Vucicevic, the owner and editor of *Informer* was supposed to testify, which would have ended the trial and the court could give a verdict. Although he was duly invited, Vucicevic did not appear and his legal representative informed the court that Vucicevic had another trial at the same time in other court. For this reason, a new hearing was scheduled for December 25th, 2017. **Subsequent insight into the schedule of the trials, it was established that in the case that Vučićević’s legal representative referred to as the reason for his absence, on September 26th, no hearing was scheduled.**



At the hearing held on December 25th, 2017, the defendant Vucicevic did not appear again, and his legal representative informed the court that he was “officially prevented”, and that he would subsequently provide evidence for that. The new hearing is scheduled for January 25th, 2018.

### **Political and social context**

In the period covered by this dossier, all the general trends have continued. This primarily refers to the strengthening of the authoritarian rule of Aleksandar Vucic, his party SNS and their coalition partners. This strengthening of authoritarian tendencies is followed by the collapse of fragile institutions built since 2000 and the fall of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime.

2 <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/101988/ZENE-CRNOM-NAJVECI-STRANI-PLACENICI-Zapad-dao-evra-optuzuju-Srbiju-ratne-zlocine>



## Strengthening autocracy and collapse of institutions

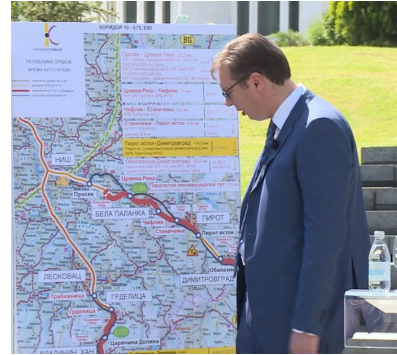
Although Aleksandar Vucic is officially in the position of president, who, under the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, has very limited powers, he in reality fully controls the executive branch of power, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, as well as ministers in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, directly responds and carries out the orders of Aleksandar Vucic, despite the fact that president does not have any authority over them by the Constitution.

About the Aleksandar Vucic widespread and unlawful interference in the widest segments of state affairs and institutions, tells his bizarre statement in which he said that, he himself has drawn the route of the future highway and the railway that needs to be built.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all the major media are under the control of the government. Critical voices at the expense of the authorities are almost impossible to hear on the mainstream media. At the same time, anyone who dares to criticize the government is exposed to a media lynch which uses all possible means, including obvious lies, as well as ad hominem attacks on those who criticized and their family members.

In 5 municipalities, on December 24<sup>th</sup> 2017, local elections were held. The authorities involved all the resources in the campaign, and the President of the state personally took part in the campaign, as well as the majority of ministers. Many abuses of state funds have been registered in the campaign, voters are offered money, as well as other prizes, if they vote for the ruling party. Opposition activists have been bullied. Due to the overall atmosphere, some of the opposition parties withdrew from the election process. On the day of voting, numerous irregularities were noted, of which the largest was mass emergence of public voting. Voters were forced to show their ballot paper, in order to “prove” that they voted for the SNS. In all polling stations, as well as in their immediate surroundings, there were dozens of SNS activists who kept records of who and how voted. The epilogue of such an electoral process is a convincing victory of the SNS in all five municipalities. In one of the municipalities, the SNS received almost 80% of votes, which in itself speaks of compromising the election, as a free expression of will.<sup>4</sup>

These developments are alarming, ahead of local elections in Belgrade, which will be held in March 2018. As the stakes are much higher, more pressures and abuse by the authorities are expected.



## Pressure on the media

In addition to direct pressures on the media, one of the main problems is economic pressure. Unofficial rule is that, state institutions, as well as public companies, do not advertise in the media that are critical of the authorities. Also, the government exerts pressure on private companies not to advertise on those media.

By amending the media laws, a regulation was introduced that state, as well as local self-governments, can not be owners of the media. The same amendments introduced the obligation of project financing of private media by local governments, who would be obliged to report to the public on the work of local self-governments. During the competition a number of abuses occur and funds are allocated without any professional criteria. Nearly all the money is received by the media that are close to the authorities. There were also cases of money being allocated to media that were founded just days before the competition. In this way, the media is kept under control, and their reporting is based on the promotion of authorities.<sup>5</sup>

3 <http://rs.n1info.com/a252404/Vesti/Vesti/Poslednja-Vuciceva-konferencija-za-stampu.html>

4 <http://rs.n1info.com/a351611/Vesti/Vesti/Izbori-u-Negotinu-Pecincima-Presevu-Kostolcu-i-Mionici.html>

5 <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/pozovi-v-radi-deobe-novca-za-medije/>



## Rehabilitation of war criminals and war crime policies

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia on November 22nd, 2017 delivered the first instance verdict to Ratko Mladic, Chief of Staff of the Army of Republika Srpska. For war crimes committed, including genocide in Srebrenica, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Government reactions in Serbia were inappropriate. None of the top officials condemned the crimes convicted. Almost no one mentioned the victims, while everyone in their statements questioned the objectivity of the work of the ICTY. Minister Nenad Popovic said: "This court has nothing to do with law and justice, but it is a political instrument, formed with the goal of presenting the entire Serbian nation as genocidal."<sup>6</sup>

Media controlled by the authorities positively presented Ratko Mladic in their reporting, even because of his alleged health problems, he was presented as a victim. The objectivity and legitimacy of ICTY was a main subject. The victims of Ratko Mladic, as well as his crimes, are almost completely ignored. We point out several examples of this kind of reporting: state television RTS had a special program on the occasion of the Mladic judgment in which the only guests were convicted war criminal Nikola Šainović, head of the cabinet of President Vučić and one of the war crimes lawyers, the daily "Serbian Telegraph", close to the authorities, gifted a calendar with the image of Ratko Mladic<sup>7</sup>, daily newspaper "Vecernje novosti", in which the government of Serbia has control rights, and which editor, appointed by the government is Milorad Vucelic, one of the biggest war propaganda and hate speech promoters from the 1990s, on the front page published the main article with the citation of Ratko Mladic: "I will fight while I'm alive to abolish the lie about the Serbian warfare."<sup>8</sup>



The attitude towards the war crimes of the Serbian authorities was also showed with the decision that Vladimir Lazarevic, who was convicted of war crimes in Kosovo, to be appointed as a lecturer at the Military Academy of the Serbian Army. Explaining this decision, Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin stated: "We have introduced the rule that the most prominent officers from the wars which are behind us, will join us at the Military Academy, and hold lectures to the cadets, and to the current generations of officers"<sup>9</sup> That is in some way the correction of the injustice applied to them in previous years ". To make the absurd complete, the topic of the first lecture, held on October 26th, 2017 was: "Heroism and humanity of Serbian soldiers in defense against NATO aggression and during anti-terrorist operation in Kosovo 1998-1999."<sup>10</sup>

We are facing complete rehabilitation of the policy that led to wars and war crimes, as well as convicted war criminals. They are frequent guests in the media and on television, even in comedy shows. One of them Veselin Slijivancanin, convicted of crimes in Vukovar, is often accompanies President Vucic during his official visits.<sup>11</sup>

## Terror against refugees

The attitude of the Republic of Serbia towards refugees can be clearly seen in the case of Dzevdet Ajaz.

Dzevdet Ajaz, a Turkish citizen, is a Kurdish political activist. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison on the basis of his "admission" after torture, due to the "endangering of the constitutional order". Arriving in Serbia, he asked for asylum. During his stay in Serbia, while his asylum request was under consideration, a request from the Turkish authorities arrived that Ajaz should be

6 <http://rs.n1info.com/a343888/Vesti/Vesti/Vucic-i-funkcioneri-o-presudi-Mladicu.html>

7 <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/srbija/2913868-naslovne-strane-sutrasnjih-novina-prelistavanje-stampe-za-cetvrtak-23-novembar-2017-godine>

8 <http://www.republika.rs/vesti/srbija/27961/jagma-srpskim-telegrafom-mladicev-poster-arkan-rasprodali-ceo-tiraz-nastavljam>

9 <http://rs.n1info.com/a335737/Vesti/Vesti/Lazarevic-ce-biti-predavac-na-Vojnoj-akademiji.html>

10 <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:692670-Lazarevic-o-mamcu-koji-je-gutao-NATO-VIDEO>

11 <http://rs.n1info.com/a332845/Vesti/Vesti/Vucic-o-Slijivancaninu-u-Rumi.html>

extradited to them. Serbian authorities have began the procedure for his extradition. The UN Committee Against Torture has issued a recommendation requesting the authorities of Serbia to refrain from extraditing Dzevdet Ajaz because there is a risk that he may be subjected to torture in his home country.

Despite this recommendation on December 25th, 2017, Ajaz was extradited to Turkey. The State of Serbia has violated its obligations under the United Nations Convention against Torture by virtue of Article 3 which says:

*"No Member State shall expel, return or extradite a person to another State if there are serious grounds for suspicion that it may be subjected to torture."*<sup>12</sup>

Serbia has become the only country in Europe to cooperate with Turkey in the persecution of its citizens on a political and national basis.

Just before extradition, Ajaz was denied a request for asylum in Serbia, although he is a typical example of a person who needs such a kind of protection, which shows that Serbia only formally has a system of asylum, and that in reality it does not exist and that foreign citizens in trouble can not count on any kind of protection. In the case of Dzevdet Ajaz, it is particularly scandalous, that he had appealed the first-instance decision to refuse his asylum, and he was extradited to Turkey, although the second instance procedure is still pending.<sup>13</sup>



*Mirko Medenica  
Belgrade, January 8th, 2017*

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12 [http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/images\\_files\\_Konvencija%20protiv%20torture%20UN.pdf](http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/images_files_Konvencija%20protiv%20torture%20UN.pdf)

13 <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/9146/Turski-dr%C5%BEavljanin-izru%C4%8Den-uprkos-preporuci-Komiteta-UN-protiv-torture.htm>