

Repression Against Human Rights Defenders

January 2018 - April 2018.

Dossier no. 11



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 Women in Black (1991), they 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. 11 deals with developments in the period from January 2018 to April 2018.

In the first part of this file we deal with actual attacks, as well as the development of the situation regarding the previous attacks in the mentioned period. In the second part we will look at the current political and social context in Serbia.

Threat messages on the office door of Women in Black

On the night of 22nd/23rd February 2018, members of the ultra right-wing organization "Zavetnici" placed on the premises of several NGOs posters on which it was written: Foreign agents - closed from March 4th - Closed from March 4th - Zavetnici. The entrance door of Women in Black office was also covered with these posters. The police came and made an investigation. At the request of the police, Women in Black March 5th 2018 delivered a video clip from a security camera showing two people who were placing threatening messages on the Women in Black office door. After that we did not get any information from the police.

On March on 26th, 2018 we officially requested from the Police to inform us about the undertaken actions to detect the perpetrators, but at the time of writing this Dossier we did not receive any answer.¹

We remind you that local elections were held in Belgrade on March 4th, 2018. The ultranationalist organization "Zavetnici" also took part in the elections. This organization was previously known for attacks on human rights defenders and NGO's. The organization has great support from the state structures of Russia, and also the support of the authorities in Serbia.² Although they regularly participating in the elections, they never received more than 0.7% of the vote. Despite these poor results, their presence in



1 Dopis od 26.03.2018.

2 <http://www.pravda.rs/lat/2016/11/10/zavetnici-doneli-poruku-iz-rusije-srbija-lider-na-balkanu/>



pro-government media is significant, and this media space, they used almost exclusively for attacks on human rights organizations that are critical on the Government. It is also evident from their actions, that they have significant financial resources, but the sources of money are not known. As a main goal in the campaign in the local elections, they emphasized the ban of human rights organizations, because “they are traitors and foreign mercenaries, financed by Soros, who are working against the Serbian people.”

The interruption of the screening of the movie “Kosovo Gezuar / Nazdravlje”



On March 29th 2018 in the Dom omladine, Belgrade within the “March Documentary Film Festival”, a screening of the film “Kosovo Gezuar / Nazdravlje” was held. This movie is about the friendship of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo.³ The screening of the film was also attended by few activists of Women in Black. After the start of the screening, the members of “Zavetnici” organization entered the cinema and stood in front of the cinema screen and raised their posters and banners, yelling and threatening the audience and preventing viewers from watching the movie. After a few minutes, the police came, and these people left the cinema.⁴ At the moment when this was happening, a friend of the Women in Black activist T.P. started feeling bad, under the influence of stress and she left the cinema looking for fresh air. She was accompanied by T.P. . The group of persons who were obviously part of the group that participated in the interruption of the screening threatened and insulted T.P. in front of the cinema.⁵

Women in Black on April 13th, 2018 pressed charges against two persons identified as members and officials of the “Zavetnici” organization, as well as several other N.N. persons who participated in this event.⁶ Also, on the basis of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Interest, we sent a request on April 13th, 2018, to the Police, to provide us with a police report (official note) on the mentioned event.⁷

At the time of writing of this Dossier, we still have not received any response.

Threats of Vojislav Seselj at the Special Court for War Crimes

On March 30th 2018 a hearing was held at the Special Court for War Crimes in Belgrade in the proceedings against members of the Army of Republika Srpska for war crimes, the killing of 1303 Bosniak civilians, killed in Kravica in July 1995 during the genocide in Srebrenica. Vojislav Seselj, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party, was also present at this hearing, accompanied by about twenty supporters.

In the space for the audience, Seselj and his supporters occupied all front rows and the families of victims and journalists were pushed back. The trial was late, so Seselj used the opportunity to threaten the Women in Black and their representative, Stasa Zajovic, saying: “She was supposed to be killed on the day she was born. ”Seselj then shouted, “Is there anyone from Women in Black in the audience, so we can change them to blue” (In Serbian slang expression “make someone blue” means to beat someone). Since it was previously announced that this hearing will be closed to the public, there were no Women in Black representatives in the courtroom, and Jelena Diković, a journalist from daily newspaper Danas, expressed her solidarity, saying

3 <https://vimeo.com/221140795>

4 <http://rs.n1info.com/a375670/Vesti/Policija-izbacila-Zavetnike.html>

5 T.P. Statement 30.03.2018.

6 Prekršajna prijava od 13.04.2018.

7 Zahtev za pristup informaciji od javnog značaja od 13.04.2018.

that she is from Women in Black, and all the Seselj's supporters turned to her. Seselj asked for her name and when she replied, the Seselj told his fellow party members: "Write it down, Jelena Dikovic, so we can turn her into blue."⁸

Despite this behavior, which took place in the presence of families of victims, the court security did not respond.

Attacks in the media

Attacks in the media under the control of the government are continued, on daily basis. As an example we will mention the attacks in daily newspapers Alo, Srpski Telegraf and Informer on March 20th, 2018. On the previous day, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic promoted a new policy for increasing birth rate, during his speech, he used misogynist and racist terminology, and put the problem of negative population growth rate into the context of possible new armed conflicts, by saying: "we will not have enough people for one brigade". Women in Black, together with other organizations and groups, responded with the statement "We will not give birth for a state, nation, church or army..." pointing out the inadequacy of Vucic's exposure. A day after that, on the cover of the daily newspaper Alo, the article was published under the title: "BECAUSE OF MEASURES TO PREVENT THE NEGATIVE POPULATION GROWTH RATE IN SERBIA" Women in Black attacked Vucic!" The essence of the article is reflected in the following quotation: "It is well known that" Women in Black "and similar organizations have always been against everything that was patriotic, but this time they were bothered by the very idea that something could be done so that our cities do not remain empty. The coordinated action of these NGOs with the opposition, says that their goal is to demolish the plan of the President and the Government of Serbia for helping mothers and families."⁹



"We Remember - 26 Years From the Beginning of the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina" - the obstruction of the event on April 6th, 2018

On April 6th 2018 Women in Black organized a street action, to commemorate the 26th anniversary from the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Upon our arrival at the venue, we noticed Simo Spasic from the Association of Families of the Kidnapped and Killed in Kosovo. He himself stood some 30m away from where we planned to hold our action. At the place where he stood, he spread a large canvas. Upon our arrival and the beginning of our action, Simo Spasic came to us and spoke to the participants of the gathering through the loudspeaker all the time, telling them insults and defamations. He also addressed citizens who were passing by, saying "look at these traitors, these are foreign mercenaries," and so on. Participants of the event organized by "Women in Black" stood by holding banners, while on the ground a canvas with messages was laid.

For all the time Spasic was standing directly in front of the "Woman in Black" activists on a one meter distance, sometimes even closer, and he was shouting loudly in the megaphone. He also put his banner in front of the activists of "Woman in Black", partly covering Women in black banner. After unsuccessfully addressing to Simo Spasic to stop such a behavior, some twenty

8 <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/seselj-koristi-i-sudnicu-da-preti-zenama-u-crnom/>

9 <http://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/zene-u-crnom-napale-vucica/153157/vest>

minutes later Women in Black activists moved 30m away to continue with the street action. Simo Spasic followed them and stood again in front of them, and continue with the same behavior. Shortly thereafter, Women in Black activists, unable to continue with the street action decided to leave.¹⁰

This event was held in the presence of a number of police officers, partly in uniforms, and partly in plain clothes. From the very beginning and the moment when Simo Spasić began his actions, we addressed the present police officer who was in charge, and asked from him to enable normal conditions for our street action. We were told by him that he had consulted his superior and that he he was told not to react.



Police officers violated the law, by refusing to react on obvious breach of law, particularly Law on Public Gatherings and article 151 of Criminal Code, although they were repeatedly warned.

Because of these circumstances, Women in Black on April 20th 2018 filed an appeal to the police.¹¹

Informer case - Women in Black appeal rejected

In the proceedings against the owner and editor-in-chief of Informer, Dragan Vucicevic, on the appeal of Women in Black, the High Court in Belgrade on March 8th, 2018 rejected the appeal as unfounded.¹² From the confusing explanation of Judge Slobodan Keranovic's verdict, there were no clear reasons for rejecting the claim. Although the court found that this were false information, aimed at violating the reputation of the Women in Black and "creating intolerance in society for this organization and its activists, and provoking hostility and violence against this group." Wrongly and narrowly interpreting the law, Judge Keranovic rejected the claim as unfounded. On April 4th 2018 an appeal was submit against this decision due to substantial violations of litigation procedure, erroneous and incompletely established factual situation and incorrect application of law.¹³

We want to add that at the hearing held on March 8th, 2018, testimony was given by the defendant Dragan Vucicevic and while giving the testimony, he made numerous insults and defamations on the account of Woman in Black. Among other things: "Women in Black are an anti-Serb organization – everyone knows that, like that today is March 8th. They accuse Serbia of genocide, advocates Serbia to condemned genocide in Srebrenica. They received huge donations from foreigners for this, and this is not an insult, but facts. They received most out of all foreign mercenaries, although donations are in line with the law. Their main and only job is to accuse Serbia of alleged genocide in Srebrenica. Their basic activity, and almost the only job is to invent genocide" etc. The defendant also stated that "the organization Women in Black should be expelled from Serbia".

Judge Keranović did not react, although it was clear that the term "expelled" was used in terms of physical expulsion, Judge Keranović understood this statement of the defendant as a call to ban the work of the organization.

10 <http://rs.n1info.com/a377726/Vesti/Antiratna-akcija-Zena-u-crnom-Spasic-ometao-skup.html>

11 Žalba na rad policije od 20.04.2018.

12 Presuda Višeg suda u Beogradu 472/16 od 08.03.2018.

13 Žalba na Presudu Višeg suda u Beogradu 472/16 od 04.04.2018.

“Srebrenica 8372” - the obstruction of the event on July 10th 2017

Women in Black on July 10th 2017 in Belgrade marked the anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica. This action, as every year, was planned to be held on the Republic Square, in front of the monument to Prince Michael. The gathering is properly reported to the police. Upon the arrival of activists and citizens on the Republic Square, the place where the gathering was supposed to be held was already occupied by a group of people, among which there were a large number of members of ultra right-wing organizations. Radomir Pocuca, who recently received suspended sentenced for participating in the war in Ukraine and has recently been acquitted for the criminal offense of endangering the security of Women in Black activists, Misa Vacić, convicted for the attacks on LGBT people, who until recently had been adviser in the Government of Aleksandar Vučić, Milovan Drecun, a journalist who stood out in the wars for spreading ethnic hatred, especially towards the Albanians in Kosovo and today is the deputy of the Serbian Progressive Party and the chairman of the Kosovo Committee of Serbian Parliament. There were also a large number of members of the ultra right-wing organization Zavetnici, as well as the neo-nazi organization Alternativa. The police encircled and moved the citizens who came to the Women in Black event to the other end of the Republic Square, surrounded them and practically restricted their movement, and access to the event. Activists and citizens who wanted to join had problems because the police did not allow them to join. At the same time, members of the ultra right-wing organizations freely moved around, threatened and insulted the citizens who came to honor the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica.¹⁴

After several requests to the police and after months of waiting, on April 23rd, 2017 on the basis of our request for access to information of public interest, we received a response from the police that they do not have application for public gathering organized by ultra right-wing organizations on July 10th 2018.¹⁵ We also received a police report (official note) about the mentioned events, which states: “On July 10th 2017 in the period from 7.30pm to 8.25pm in the Republic Square we were securing a public gathering organized by “Woman in Black” ... at 7.00pm, about 70 supporters of the rival party gathered around, and around 7.30pm came about 80 members of the organization “Woman in Black.” The gathering ended at 8.25pm. There was no violation of public order.”¹⁶



From all of the above, it is clear that the police did not act in accordance with the Law on Public Gatherings and the Criminal Code. The Law on Public Gatherings in Article 12 foresees the obligation of the organizer to notify the police of its intention to organize a gathering no later than 5 days before the gathering. Article 13 of the same law stipulates that it is not necessary to notify the police, if it is a “spontaneous peaceful gathering, without an organizer, as a direct reaction to a particular event, after that event”.¹⁷ The gathering of ultra right-wing organizations was announced in advance, three days before the “Women in Black” gathering, so it can not be “spontaneous gathering as a direct reaction to an event.”¹⁸

In this case the police did not react and prevent the an unlawfully organized gathering, nor did they react when the participants in that gathering committed the acts described in Article 151 of the Criminal Code: “Who, by force, threatening, deceiving or otherwise preventing or obstructing a public gathering organized in accordance with the law, unless any other serious

14 http://www.danas.rs/drustvo.55.html?news_id=350733&title=Scenska+akcija+%26quot%3BSrebrenica+8372%26quot%3B+n+a+Trgu+republike

15 Dopis od 23.04.2018.

16 Izveštaj od 10.07.2017.

17 https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_javnom_okupljanju.html

18 <http://www.srna.rs/novosti1/512471/docek-srpskog-zida-placa-srebrenica-u-ponedjeljak-u-centru-beograda.htm>

criminal offense has been achieved, shall be punished by a fine or imprisonment not exceeding two years.”¹⁹ The conclusion of the police was that there was no violation of public order.

In the following period, Women in Black will, in the light of all the above circumstances, initiate proceedings against members of the police who were responsible for securing the gathering.

Zavetnici case - obstruction of the event “We will never forget the crimes in Vukovar” on November 18th 2014

On November 18th 2014 during a public gathering organized by Women in Black, a group of people, members of the ultra right-wing organization “Zavetnici” tried to hinder and prevent the gathering by threatening and insulting the participants. Against two persons from this group, police press charges on November 21st, 2014. for the violation of the Law on Public Gatherings (not notifying the police about their gathering) and the Law on Public Order (due to rude and ruthless behavior). After several requests to the court to inform us on the outcome of this proceedings, on March 21st 2018 on the basis of our request for free access to information of public interest, we received a copy of the Court’s decision no. 120904/15 from November 30th 2016 which terminates the procedure due to obsolescence.²⁰

This case is just another in a series of examples confirming that the perpetrators of the attacks have the protection authorities, either on the level of police, courts or prosecutor’s office.

Political and social context

In the period covered by this Dossier, all the trends that we pointed out in the previous period, the strengthening of authoritarian rule, the erosion of institutions and the rule of law, the escalation of nationalist rhetoric, the denial of war crimes and the promotion of war criminals continued.

Strengthening of the Authoritarian Rule

The current authorities in Serbia continue to strengthen the authoritarian elements of their rule, this trend lasts practically from their coming to power in 2012, and especially since 2014, when Aleksandar Vucic strengthened his own and the power of his Serbian Progressive Party. Serbia is a state in which all institutions are “occupied” by the authorities and serve to consolidate and enrich the ruling political elite. Authorities strives to succeed in expanding its influence on the widest social spheres, even those outside of politics and economics, such as education, art, culture or sport. One of the most striking examples is this year’s City of Belgrade competition for financing projects in the field of culture and art. Projects of numerous eminent organizations and artists have been rejected, and projects that have almost no artistic value or projects submitted by the organizations which were founded immediately ahead of the announcement of the competition and which are linked to the ruling party were accepted.²¹

In Belgrade, on March 4th 2018, local elections were held and the ruling party won 63 of the 110 seats. These elections, as well as in the previous period, were marked by numerous irregularities. Authorities in large proportions have misused state resources for the purpose of campaigning. As in the previous local elections in smaller towns in Serbia, the Serbian President,

19 https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni_zakonik.html

20 https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni_zakonik.html

21 <http://nezavisnakultura.net/2018/04/05/predstavljena-analiza-rezultata-gradskog-konkursa/>



as well as all members of the Government, were again very much involved in the campaign. The presence of government candidates in the media was absolutely predominant. Special attention should be paid to the media lynch that the opposition candidates experienced in the media under the control of the government.²² One of the most significant examples of abuse of state resources for the purpose of the campaign is the granting of one-time assistance to the socially vulnerable. Namely, on February 28th, 2018, just four days before the election, the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Welfare paid around 2 million Euro to the Center for Social Work of Belgrade for helping the socially vulnerable. It was subsequently established that persons who received help in the vast majority were not on the list of socially vulnerable and beneficiaries of social welfare centers. In the Lazarevac municipality, part of City of Belgrade, out of 200 persons who received help, only 1 person was on the list of the Center for Social Work. All this leads to the conclusion that these funds have been used to influence voters in order to vote for government candidates.²³ Taking into account these, as well as a series of previous elections, it can be concluded that the results of elections in Serbia no longer represent the freely expressed voter's will. There is a widespread system of influencing voters, by giving them money, as we saw in the previous example, then employing or obtaining the widest spectrum of privileges in exchange for support on the election. This system is known as *clientelism*²⁴, and it is well known that it does great damage and leaves serious consequences on democracy. Accountability of the government, as a key element of democracy, in the sense that voters in elections are deciding who to vote for, by evaluating the previous work of authorities is undermined by clientelism, because a large number of voters is not influenced by the quality of work of the authorities, but the material benefit they receive from the ruling structures.

Nationalism and Hate Speech as the Dominant Narrative

Authorities in Serbia actively participate in raising ethnic tensions in the region. The game they have been playing for a long time, alternately appearing in the role of the one who produces problems, and then the one who is solving the problems continues. In Kosovo, in Mitrovica on January 16th 2018, Oliver Ivanovic, a Kosovo Serb opposition politician was killed.²⁵ Ivanovic had been a target of media lynch in Serbian state-controlled media for several months, he was accused that he is "working against Serbs", which is a common accusation for anyone who is critical of the authorities in Serbia. Ivanovic, just before his death, pointed out the connection between the Serbian authorities and the criminal structures in northern Kosovo. He often stressed that "Serbs in Kosovo are not afraid of Albanians, but Serbs", alluding to the Serbian criminal structures associated with the Serbian authorities.²⁶ After his assassination, the Serbian authorities shamelessly exploited this event to raise ethnic tensions, insinuating that it was an ethnically motivated murder, which was denied by all associates of the killed Ivanovic. Even after almost 4 months after the murder, there is no information about possible perpetrators. On March 26th 2018 Marko Djuric, head of the Kosovo Office of Government of Serbia, ignored the ban on entering the Kosovo, issued by Government of Kosovo because of his insulting and inflammatory statements, and illegally entered the territory of Kosovo, where he was arrested by the Kosovo police, and then deported back in Serbia.²⁷ This event was used by the authorities in Serbia for shameless hate campaign against Kosovo Albanians. Pro-government media created the atmosphere that the armed conflict in Kosovo is a matter of days. The main "star" of this campaign was Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who used threats and insults and addressed them to the Kosovo public, he also called Kosovo institutions terrorists and emphasize that "they will pay the price" for deporting Djuric.²⁸

In the context of raising tensions, we also point to the case of the declaring of the Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin, for

22 <http://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CRTA-Beogradski-izbori-Drugi-izvestaj-dugorocnih-posmatraca-.pdf>

23 <https://www.danas.rs/politika/sns-preko-centra-za-socijalni-rad-kupovao-glasove/>

24 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clientelism>

25 <http://rs.n1info.com/a357026/Vesti/Vesti/Ubijen-Oliver-Ivanovic.html>

26 <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1565485>

27 <https://www.danas.rs/politika/uhapsen-marko-djuric-na-kosovu/>

28 <https://www.espreso.rs/vesti/politika/236925/vucic-posle-hapsenja-djurica-ti-bedni-teroristi-napali-su-jadnog-marka-poslali-su-magarce-sa-sok-bombama-na-goloruki-narod-da-bi-rekli-mnogo-smo-jaki-video>

the persona non grata by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, because of his provocative nationalistic statements.²⁹ Aleksandar Vulin is known for his nationalistic and warmongering rhetoric, which lately, due to the fact that he is in the position of Minister of Defense gets on weight and represents a significantly more dangerous phenomenon. The clash between the political elites of Serbia and Croatia over this issue has peaked in the statement by Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic: "If the Croats want war, they will get a war."³⁰ This statement, in itself inappropriate, is additionally scandalous because of the fact that it comes from foreign minister, who according to the description of the his job should be someone in charge of settling the situation and finding a solution.

Negation of War Crimes and Promotion of War Criminals

The Serbian authorities have shown their attitude towards their personal dark past, after the ICTY ruling to Vojislav Seselj, the president of the infamous Serbian Radical Party in which he was convicted of war crimes, the promotion of persecution, deportation and forcible displacement of citizens of Serbia of Croatian descent.³¹ We recall that the ruling Serbian Progressive Party was formed by separation from the Serbian Radical Party, as well as the fact that Aleksandar Vucic was the longtime secretary general of the Serbian Radical Party and the "right hand" of war criminal Vojislav Seselj. As in previous war crimes cases, media controlled by the authorities mainly dealt with the ICTY's credibility, but it was noticeable that this topic was significantly less talked about. This attitude of the media comes from the fact that Aleksandar Vucic and the Serbian Progressive Party ignored this news and did not make any statements at all. The fact that Seselj was convicted for crimes committed in the territory of Serbia, as well as the fact that Vucic and other high officials were his close associates was not enough to provoke the reaction of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. The attitude of Aleksandar Vucic to the war criminal Vojislav Seselj is actually reflected in the fact that Vojislav Seselj is allowed by the authorities to commit crimes, threat and insult people. Since his return to Serbia, he has committed numerous offenses, but he has never been prosecuted. As an illustration of his behavior, we cite the threats he made after the verdict: "Anyone who says that I am a war criminal, I will smash his face".³² Vojislav Seselj is also a frequent guest in media under the control of the government, where he is openly spreading hatred.

Conclusion

In Serbia, a consolidated autocratic regime is fully established. Using international circumstances and the current lack of interest of the European Union, regime merges "incompatible" - on one hand verbal commitment to "European values", and on the other hand systematically violates human rights and oppresses citizens freedoms, the regime shows verbal efforts for reconciliation and cooperation in the region, and on the other hand, regime constantly produce ethnic tensions.

When we add Government's toxic nationalistic propaganda, which creates an atmosphere in which convicted war criminals are celebrated as heroes, to the general trend of endangering of human rights and freedoms, we are getting a real picture and a framework in which activists of Women in Black are working.

*Mirko Medenica
Belgrade, May 12, 2018.*

29 <http://rs.n1info.com/a381807/Svet/Region/Vulin-do-daljeg-nije-dobrodosao-u-Hrvatsku.html>

30 <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/2954887-ako-zele-rat-imace-rat-dacic-srbija-spremna-da-odgovori-hrvatskoj>

31 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pocelo-izricanje-drugostepene-presude-seselju/29159032.html>

32 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/bahati-seselj-preti-i-u-skupstini-da-vidim-da-li-ce-mi-neko- reci-da-sam-ratni/y22j6ks>