

Repression Against Human Rights Defenders

May 2018 - August 2018

Dossier no. 12



Women in Black is 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 and 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. 12 deals with events from May 2018 to August 2018.

In the first part of this file we deal with actual attacks, as well as the development of the situation regarding to 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 door of Women in Black office

At night 22/23rd February 2018, members of the far right organization "Zavetnici" put posters on the premises of several NGOs on which it was written: "Foreign agents - closed from March 4th".¹ The Women in Black office was also targeted. The police came and investigate the scene. At the request of the police, Women in Black on March 5th 2018, delivered video from a security camera showing two people who were putting the threatening messages. On March 26th, 2018 we officially requested from police to inform us about the undertaken actions to detect the perpetrators.²

Police replied on May 4th 2018 and informed us that "until now they didn't identified the perpetrators and that they are still working on that".³

In the above answer, despite we asked for it, it was not stated what actions were taken.



Interruption of the screening of the movie "Kosovo Gezuar/Nazdravlje"

On March 29th 2018 in the Dom omladine in Belgrade, on the "March Documentary Film Festival", a screening of the film "Kosovo Gezuar / Nazdravlje" was held, which speaks about the friendship of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. The screening

1 <http://rs.n1info.com/a366756/Bg-lzbori/Zavetnici-ponovo-lepili-plakate-na-Kucu-ljudskih-prava.html>

2 Dopis od 26.03.2018.

3 PU Savski venac - Dopis od 30.04.2018.

of the film was attended by activists of Women in Black. After the start of the screening of several members of far right organisation "Zavetnici" entered the cinema and stood in front of the cinema screen and raised their posters and banners, insulting 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 happened, a friend of the Women in Black activist T.P. was very upset and stressed, and she was accompanied by T.P. left the cinema. The group of persons who were obviously part of the group that participated in the interruption of the screening was 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 of the leadership 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 Importance, we sent on April 13th, 2018 request to police, to provide us with a police report (official note) on the mentioned event.⁷

Police Directorate - Department of Public Order on May 4th sent us a police report on the event. It states that a person who has interrupted the screening of the film will be subject to misdemeanor charges, for committing the offense referred to in Art. 8. p. 1 of the Law on Public Order and Peace (Irresponsible or Ruthless Behavior).⁸ Uln the moment of compiling of this report we don't have information whether police pressed charges.



"Solidarity with Refugees/Migrants – International Refugee Day" - interruption of the event, June 20th 2018

On June 20th 2018, Women in Black organized the event in Belgrade, Knez Mihailova Street, on the occasion of the International Refugee Day. This event was duly reported to the police.

Upon arrival at the venue, we noticed Simo Spasic from the Association of Families of the Kidnapped and Killed in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as several other people. From the very beginning of the event, Spasic used a megafon to shout slogans. Initially, he was crying for refugee rights and right to return, which we did not respond to. After ten minutes, he began to insult and threaten the participants of the Women in Black event.⁹ We immediately addressed the police officers in charge of maintaining order at the event and demanded that they act in accordance with the law and prevent Spasic from breaking public order and obstructing the event. Police officers said they had to consult their superiors and the prosecutor. Spasic continued with threats, insults and disturbances of the event, and some other people joined him. Several more times we asked the police to react, but they did nothing. After more than half an hour since we approached the police officers, and some 5 minutes before the end of the event, they came to Spasić and a group of people who were with him and ordered them to move away, what they did.



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

5 Izjava T.P. od 30.03.2018.

6 Prekršajna prijava od 13.04.2018.

7 Zahtev za pristup informaciji od javnog značaja od 13.04.2018.

8 Odeljenje za javni red i mir - Dopis od 04.05.2018.

9 <https://beta.rs/vesti/drustvo-migranti/92074-zene-u-crnom-uz-polijsko-obezbedjenje-u-centru-beograda-na-svetski-dan-izbeglica>

Although this was a good reaction from the police and a shift in relation to the previous situation, when the reaction was absent, we believe that it came too late, because Spasic and others were allowed to insult, threaten and disturb the event almost to the very end. Police officers have justified their own behaviour claiming that they needed the opinion of the prosecutor, which does not correspond to the truth, since police officers, in their actions, especially when necessary to act urgently, in order to prevent the commission of criminal offenses or the violation of public order, are not obliged to consult with the prosecutor's office, nor do they need their approval to act.

After the event, the police informally informed us that they had a video of the whole event and that they would press charges against Spasic. At the moment of writing of this report, we have no information whether this has been done.

Complaints on the work of the police, related to the events on the protest “We Remember - 26 years since the beginning of the war in BH”, April 6th, 2018

Related to the events during protest “We Remember - 26 years since the beginning of the war in BH”, held on April 6th, 2018, Women in Black filed a complaint on the work of police. The complaint was filed on April 20th, 2018, although the Law on Police, in Article 235, foresees that the complaint procedure may last for a maximum of 60 days, at the time of writing of this Dossier the procedure has not yet been completed.¹⁰

During the procedure, we had talks with the representatives of the police units that acted during the event. During the interview with the police officers of the Public Order Department, we were told that their officers acted in accordance with the law. As they stated: “There was no violation of public order and peace, no physical contact, nor violation of the law on public gatherings”.¹¹ Police officers of the Police Brigade, also presented their view on our complaint and claimed it is not based. The members of the Police Brigade, in their statements, claimed: “that Spasic expressed the views of his association through a megaphone”, “that during the meeting there were no insults or verbal threats” ...¹² Women in Black remained on the positions made in the complaint, and now after the police officers have been heard, the procedure moves before the Ministry of Interior Commission, which will decide on the outcome of the complaint.

We want to point out the change of behavior of the police at the events, as well as at subsequent events organized after the complaint was filed. Although identical actions were involved, at the first event on April 6th, 2018, police officers did not see the elements of the violation of the law, while at the event held on June 20th, reacted and removed persons who disturbed public order and peace.



10 https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_policiji.html

11 Uprava za javni red i mir – Zapisnik o razmatranju pritužbe od 30.05.2018.

12 Policijska brigada - Zapisnik o razmatranju pritužbe od 30.05.2018.

“We Remember – 23rd Anniversary of Genocide in Srebrenica”, July 10th 2018

In the context of police relation towards Women in Black and their events, we want to emphasize that the event on the occasion of marking 23rd anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, held on July 10, 2018 in Belgrade, went without incidents.¹³ Last year’s event was obstructed by more than a dozen members of right-wing and fascist organizations, and the police did not undertake actions that would allow unhindered and safe holding of the rally. Before this year’s event, Women in Black had several meetings with various police units, where we insisted that the police respect the law and, in accordance with their authority, provide a smooth and safe holding of the event. Through these conversations, as well as using all legal means (filing complaints on the work of the police), we tried to influence the observance of the law. The epilogue is that this year’s rally was held in peace, without interference, threats and insults. All this tells us that the police have enough capacity to enable citizens to exercise their rights to public gatherings, and that their failure to do so is linked to pressure from the authorities. Some progress has been made, but it remains to be seen whether the holding of this rally in a normal atmosphere was an exception or would become a rule.



Political and Social Context

In the period covered by this Dossier, all the trends we pointed out in the previous period, 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. The process of establishing authoritarian rule has been completed.

Stabilisation of authoritarian rule

Already in the previous Dossiers, we noted that the government led by Aleksandar Vucic established total control over all branches of power, as well as in the areas of economy, the media, and in the wider social sense.

Anyone who dares to criticize the government, faces attacks and problems. The vast majority of the media are under the control of the authorities, and all the major media are controlled by it. There is no limit to these media when it comes to attacks on people critical of the regime. False information is published, both about public activities and about private matters.

Denial of war crimes and promotion of war criminals

Despite the fact that more than 4 months have passed since Vojislav Seselj has been sentenced for war crimes, although the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament in Article 88, paragraph 3 prescribes that a deputy’s mandate shall cease in the event that he has been sentenced to a prison sentence longer from 6 months, he is still a member of the National Assembly.¹⁴ The ruling majority consciously avoids adopting the provisions of the law and thus undermines the reputation of the highest state body, allowing the convicted war criminal to sit in it.

13 <http://rs.n1info.com/a403000/Vesti/Zene-u-crnom-odale-postu-zrtvama-Srebrenice.html>

14 https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_izboru_narodnih_poslanika.html

This attitude of the ruling majority is also shown in the case of the embarrassing statement of the Serbian Radical Party MP Vjerica Radeta. On July 23rd 2018 on the social network Twitter, in response to the news of the death of Hatidza Mehmedovic, whose husband and two sons were killed in the Srebrenica genocide, she wrote: "Who will bury her, a husband or sons?"¹⁵ In spite of the fact that the Serbian public is used to nationalistic and fascist rhetoric, that relativization and negation of war crimes are the dominant narrative, this statement of Vjerica Radeta caused big public reactions. On the other hand, apart from a few mild ones, there was no other reaction from the authorities. Vjerica Radeta was not removed from the post of the vice-president of the National Assembly, nor was any proceedings instituted against her. After the statement given by Prosecutor's Office representatives to the media, that there is no investigation, because no one press charges,¹⁶ despite the fact that by law, that Prosecutors Office has a duty to investigate possible breach of law without anyones request, Women in Black on July 26th 2018 pressed charges against Vjerica Radeta.¹⁷



Negators and relativizers of war crimes, as well as war criminals themselves, have a significant media space in the media under the control of the authorities. As an example, we mention a broadcast on TV Happy, one of the most watched television stations. Guests at the studio were convicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj and John Bosnić, allegedly a journalist, but widely known as a war crimes negator. Lately, he has been coming several times to events of Women in Black and other similar organizations and threatened and insulted participants. To make the absurd complete, the name of the mentioned program is "Good morning Serbia".

Kosovo

For a long time, the authorities of Serbia, through the so-called "internal dialogue", put the theme of Kosovo as a priority. The idea of "internal dialogue" proposed by Aleksandar Vucic is meaningless in the context of total control of the media by the authorities. Authorities in Serbia, in the usual matrix, are sending, at the same time, completely opposite messages, confusing the public. Intermittent messages are sent alternately and emphasizes the importance of reaching agreements with Kosovo Albanians, and on the other hand, hatred is spreading towards the same Kosovo Albanians. The highlight of such an action is the idea of Aleksandar Vucic's "demarcation" with the Albanians. This idea implies the exchange of territory and population between Serbia and Kosovo, where Serbia would get 4 municipalities in the north of Kosovo, and parts of the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, in the southeast of Serbia, would be attached to Kosovo. Although this idea was presented by Aleksandar Vucic as a solution to normalize relations with Albanians, in the media under his control, this idea is supported and justified by a racist campaign against Kosovo Albanians. As an illustration of this campaign, we quote the statement by Vladimir Djukanovic, MP and senior official of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party: "We must understand that life in a common state with Albanians is impossible, they will eat us all over time."¹⁸

State controlled media are continuously spreading false stories about alleged "plans" of Kosovo Albanians for attacks on the Serb community in Kosovo. Members of the Serbian community in Kosovo are exposed to the terror of criminal structures that are exercising power in Kosovo on behalf of and for the account of Aleksandar Vucic. Every voice that is different from that of the Belgrade authorities is targeted.

15 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/citam-umrla-hatidza-mehmedovic-vjerica-radeta-objavila-monstruozeni-tvit-o-smrti/xcrpygq>

16 <http://rs.n1info.com/a406917/Vesti/Tuzilastvo-o-tvitu-Vjerice-Radete.html>

17 Krivična prijava od 26.07.2018.

18 <https://twitter.com/VladimirStev/status/1034778113761337344>.

Refugees/Migrants

The number of refugees / migrants in Serbia has been significantly reduced. Since February 2018, due to the police terror and blockade of the border with Serbia by the Croatian and Hungarian police and the military, the vast majority of refugees / migrants headed towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia is no longer a transit area, as refugees / migrants mainly use the route through Albania and Montenegro.

A new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection was adopted in Serbia, which aims to increase the rights of asylum seekers and facilitate their integration. Please note that even in the current law there were no obstacles for integration. Nevertheless, for more than two years, as many thousands of people were in the asylum procedure, mostly families with children, who were housed in camps throughout Serbia, according to available CRDP data, only 12 people are included in the program of integration.

The Republic of Serbia has received EUR 100 million from the European Union for refugees. Bearing in mind the situation in the camps, as well as the number of refugees / migrants, the beneficiaries of these funds, the conclusion is that a small part of these funds has been used to help refugees / migrants. An example of this is the fact that the European Union financed "consultations and work on the drafting of the new Law on Asylum" with 1 million euros. Women in Black, on the basis of the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance, sent requests to the institutions^{19 20 21 22} who received funds from the European Union, to provide us with reports on the funds spent. Within the legal deadline, the Government of Serbia, CRDP, the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans' Affairs and Social Affairs did not provide any information, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs responded that it did not have the requested data.²³



Serbian authorities have used the situation to become part of the global trend of the "migration industry". The essence of this is that people, in this case, refugees / migrants are treated as commodities and that their suffering and misfortunes are used to earn money and enrich the members of government and the companies connected with them.

Conclusion

In Serbia, a consolidated autocratic regime is in power, which, using international circumstances and the general deterioration of the state of human rights and freedoms around the world, including the countries of the European Union, merges "incompatible" - on the one hand verbal commitment to "European values" and on the other systematically violates human rights and violates the freedoms of citizens, verbal efforts for reconciliation and cooperation in the region, and on the other hand, the constant production of ethnic tensions.

When the general trend of the shrinking of rights and freedoms is accompanied by toxic nationalist propaganda by the authorities, we are getting a clear picture and framework in which activists of Women in Black work.

Mirko Medenica
Belgrade, September 6th 2018

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- 19 Zahtev za dostavljanje informacije od javnog značaja od 31.05.2018.
 - 20 Zahtev za dostavljanje informacije od javnog značaja od 31.05.2018.
 - 21 Zahtev za dostavljanje informacije od javnog značaja od 31.05.2018.
 - 22 Zahtev za dostavljanje informacije od javnog značaja od 31.05.2018.
 - 23 Dopis od 19.06.2018.

