

Repression Against Human Rights Defenders

January 2019 - April 2019

Dossier no. 14



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. 14 deals with events from January 2019 to April 2019.

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.

Valjevo Case - dismissal of a constitutional complaint by the Constitutional Court

After the decision of the Constitutional Court, which, by Verdict from 17.09.2018¹, dismissed a constitutional complaint², thus exhausting all legal remedies within the domestic judiciary, on 10.02.2019, the application was filed to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.³

Complaints on the work of the police procedure, regarding to the event "We remember - 26 years since the beginning of the war in BH", April 6, 2018

Regarding to the event "We remember - 26 years since the beginning of the war in BH", held on April 6, 2018, detailed in Dossier 11, Women in Black filed a complaint to the work of police on April 20, 2018.⁴

Although the legal deadline for the decision on the complaint is 60 days, the Commission's session where the decision on the complaint was made, was held only on January 30th, 2019, seven months after the expiration of the deadline. The Commission rejected the complaint as unfounded.

The parties in the proceedings reiterated their arguments. What marked this procedure is an absolute misunderstanding of the right to freedom of assembly by the police. Representative of the Public Order Department pointed out that the job of the police "is to ensure that none of the participants is physically attacked and that there is no damage to property".

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- 1 Verdict, 17.09.2018
 - 2 Constitutional Complaint, 23.06.2017
 - 3 ECHR Application, 10.02.2019
 - 4 Complaint, 20.04.2018



The right to freedom of assembly, as defined by international documents, primarily the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as domestic legal sources, the Constitution, the Law on Public Assemblies and the Criminal Code, implies the obligation of state bodies not only to ensure the physical integrity and integrity of property, but also the undisturbed public gathering. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights has numerous judgments, it has very clearly established this broader interpretation of the right to public assembly.

This behavior of state authorities is typical of Serbia, where state authorities insist on fulfilling the form, ignoring the essence of a certain right. This application of the law actually represents their endangerment, because in the case of the freedom of assembly, as well as the concrete case that was the subject of this procedure, the only thing that was achieved is the physical existence of the rally, while all other elements of the freedom of assembly, which, as defined by the Law on the public gathering is define as “free expression, exercise and promotion of convictions and goals, other freedoms and rights”, were disabled due to threats, disturbance and other forms of violent behavior. The lack of police response to such events indicates that state bodies are complicit in limiting the right to freedom of assembly.

March 8th Rally

In connection with marking of March 8th - International Women’s Day, a series of incidents occurred. On March 6th, a group of activists carried out an action in which several monuments of historical figures were dressed in aprons with messages calling for respect for women’s rights. One of the monuments to which the apron is set is a monument to Patriarch Pavle, late head of Serbian Orthodox Church. This campaign has caused a major hate campaign in the media and social networks. Openly they called for the lynching of activists who took part in the action. As one of the examples, we highlight the article published in the pro-government daily Kurir, under the title: “THIS IS THE FEMINIST WHO SET THE APRON ON PATRIARCH PAVLE AND ENRAGED THE SERBS!”⁵. It contains a picture of N.D., one of the activists who took part in the action, and in the context of the overall reporting of the event, this text is a call for a lynch of this activist. You can find more about social network threats in the next chapter of this dossier.



OVO JE FEMINISTKINJA KOJA JE OKAČILA KECELJU PATRIJARHU PAVLU I RAZBESNELA SRBE! A sada se pere: Crkva mi se meša u seksualni život!

During the march on March 8th, 2019, there were more attacks. In addition to the usual threats and insults, it was also noted that someone threw a stone on the column of participants. The most serious incident was an attack on activist D.B. . During her arrival on the march, several people followed her, insulted her and spit on her.⁶ Due to stress, D.B. had to seek the help of a doctor. Please note that D.B. was previously a target of physical attacks.⁷

5 <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/3216749/ovo-je-feministkinja-koja-je-okacila-kecelju-patrijarhu-pavlu-i-razbesnela-srbe-a-onda-se-na-tv-pravdala-ckva-misli-da-ima-pravo-da-se-mesa-u-moj-seksualni-zivot-video>

6 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/pljuvali-su-nas-i-vikali-da-smrdimo-detalji-napada-na-lgbt-aktiviste-u-centru/wwwnzpr>

7 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/tukao-nas-je-jednu-po-jednu-uzvikujuci-lezbijke-lezbijke/4qtIheg>

The threats to Stasa Zajovic in the Special Court for War Crimes

At the hearing held on February 26th, 2019 in the Special Court in Belgrade, for the war crime in Kravica, members of the Serbian Radical Party, about fifty of them, waited Staša Zajović, as she approached the court and insulted and threatened her, among other things, she was called a “whore” and they were saying she should “be killed”, which is why the security of the court was brought to the court where the trial was held. This is not the first time that members of SRP threaten Stasa Zajovic, every time she comes to some of the trials, she is under the constant “siege” of the SRP supporters who are insulting and threatening her.

At the same hearing, convicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj was present in front of the Special Court in support of the eight indictments, Seselj reiterated that they were “innocent” and that “this is not a war crime but an incident”. He and members of SRP entered the courtroom with a badge “There was no genocide in Srebrenica.” At the same time, there were 20 family members of victims, friends and journalists in the courtroom.



Threats to activists S.M.

Women in Black activist S.M. is a student at the University of Belgrade and lives in a student dormitory in Belgrade. He has been exposed for months and months to threats and other forms of intimidation by his colleagues. In addition to verbal threats and insults, his belongings were also destroyed. One of his female colleagues was told to stop being friend with him, otherwise he would be beaten, and she stopped seeing him. In the last of a series of incidents, at the door of his room, a swastika was drawn.

S.M. addressed the administration for several times. Despite promises to do something, maltreatment of S.M., did not stop.

Threats and insults on online media and social networks

The persecution and attacks on activists of Women in Black are taking place in a lynching atmosphere, created by media under the control of government, and also on social networks. The situation and the consequences of this campaign can be seen on the example of the text published in the daily newspaper Alo, which is under the control of the authorities. On January 26th 2019, Alo published an article titled “NONSENSE OF THE PROTESTS IN ONE IMAGE: When you see who supported the protest, you will not feel well!”⁸. It contains a photo of the Women in Black coordinator Stasa Zajovic and several other activists of Women in Black at a large protest organized against the authorities. This photo and the fact that activists of Women in Black support and participate in protests has been used to discredit the protest. As the title itself implies “when you see who supports the protest, you will not feel well”, Women in Black themselves represent something bad, and you do not need to get into the concrete content of their actions. This example points to the level of campaign against Women in Black, where they become synonymous with something bad.



SAV BESMISAO ĐILASOVIH PROTESTA U JEDNOJ FOTOGRAFIJI Kad vidite ko ga je večeras podržao neće vam biti dobro! (FOTO)

AUTOR: E.A. DATUM I VREME: 26.01.2019. 21:07

Like 200 Share 2 komentara

Sličan se sličnom raduje



Žene u crnom | Staša Zajović, protest, Foto: Pavoljub Janković
Večeras su u Beogradu održani osmi po redu građanski protesti u organizaciji Dragana Đilasa, Boška Obradovića i Vuška Jeremica.

8 <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/kad-vidite-ko-ga-je-veceras-podrzao-neze-vam-biti-dobro-foto/208686/vest>

The epilogue of this campaign can be clearly seen on social networks, as well as in comments on media portals.

Here is an example of the text published on the Espresso portal⁹, owned by Kurir, another media controlled by the government. These are some of the comments on a text about the street action of Women in Black marking 20 years since the crimes against civilians in Kosovo and reminded the public of the existence of a mass grave in Batajnica with bodies of 744 Albanian civilian victims from Kosovo:

These whores in black should be slaughtered all of them. See you around ...

Someone should fire from a mortar on them, they are bloody liars.

Please note that according to the Law on Media, comments on the texts are an integral part of the media content, and the responsibility for them is on editors in chief.

We'll also mention an example of comments from Facebook¹⁰ on the occasion of the same event:

We should put them in the gas chamber!

We just need a sharp pole, I think they would give up gathering anymore

Kill this assholes and then they can wear black

Kill them all

Kill the assholes

This event is a pure provocation, I would break their bones one by one !!!

These bitchies and witches should be burnt

They should be all eliminated, and not spare anyone life.

I'm fed up with those little whores in black.

There were no reactions from the state authorities, primarily from the Prosecutor's Office.

Authorities in Serbia are using social networks to spread their propaganda and attack those who are critical towards them. There is a whole network of accounts and Facebook pages, which are formally not linked to the ruling party, but according to their content it is clear that behind them is regime propaganda machinery. One of the examples of such sites is the Facebook page "Serbia is our country"¹¹. This site has over 150,000 followers, and its publications are constantly sponsored, and the number of people on social networks to whom these messages appears are significantly higher. This page targeted Women in Black as well. Recently, a photo of the Coordinator of Women in Black, Stasa Zajovic, was published, along with accompanying text, which lists false data on the financing of Women in Black, and the conclusion that Women in Black are mercenaries working against their country.

9 <https://www.espreso.rs/vesti/beograd/367110/u-srbiji-postoje-4-masovne-grobnice-s-telima-941-albanca-ubijenog-na-kosovu-skup-u-bg-a-prosao-bez-incidenta>

10 <https://www.facebook.com/tamara.tomasevic.37>

11 http://www.autonomija.info/dinko-gruhonjic-iza-profila-srbija-nasa-zemlja-stoji-drzava.html?fbclid=IwAR0bojyMKGYktCu9hKCmaLbBLYiVJM_4pRYwmyrQRtU7RfoINRwoxq5e4ao

Political and social context

The period covered by this Dossier was marked by protests against the authorities, as well as the reaction of the regime to these protests. The regime reacted to protests with intensified repression, which is certainly a worrying fact. There is a conclusion that the regime has no limits in its intentions to remain in power and that, if necessary, it will openly use widespread violence in the fight against opponents.

Although protests are currently stagnant, the fact is that there is a huge dissatisfaction with the regime, among the citizens. The continuity of the duration, as well as the number of participants, are in favor of this fact.

What is lacking in protests is the absence of clear policies and demands. Although they were officially citizens protests, it was clear that behind them, at least in terms of organizational support, were opposition parties, mostly "Alliance for Serbia". This group of heterogeneous political parties has opted for the so-called "politics without policies". By avoiding to share a clear view on current issues, with the aim of gaining as much support as possible, the opposite effect is achieved. It turned out that politics that does not take clear positions on issues, can not mobilize enough people to participate in protests, nor increase their energy.

It can be concluded that without clear policy and clear positions on key issues, it is not possible to successfully combat the aggressive and repressive regime, which is in power in Serbia.

As we have already stated brutality and unscrupulousness of regime increases, in proportion to resistance. Regular parliamentary elections in Serbia should be held no later than April 2020, which means that Serbia is already in the pre-election year. The current political conditions and state repression against political opponents are such that there are no minimum conditions for free elections.

The two main pillars of the authoritarian regime in Serbia are almost complete control of the media and massive abuse of state resources in the interests of the ruling regime.

We have already written about media control and brutal media campaigns against anyone who criticizes the government in previous dossiers, we can only add that the intensity of control and attacks are increasing every day.

Regarding the abuse of state resources, the government's reaction to the protests is illustrative. Shortly after the start of the December 2018 protests, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic launched his campaign "The Future of Serbia". During this campaign, he visited dozens of cities throughout Serbia, organizing large events. This campaign needed enormous logistics, from the transportation of thousands of participants, to the engagement and use of the most modern audio-visual equipment. All of this entails enormous costs, which are measured by millions of euros.

Until today, sources of funding for this campaign are not known, because, on the one hand, in the budget for the activities of the President, there are not enough funds, and on the other hand, political parties are prohibited from organizing this kind of activities outside the election campaign. In just three months, the authorities organized two big gatherings in Belgrade, the first in January, on the occasion of the official visit of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin and the second in April as part of the campaign "The Future of Serbia". The authorities brought their supporters from all over Serbia to these events. For the second event, held in April, over 2,000 buses were used. Estimates are that only transport costs were close to one million of euros.

If this data is compared, with the data that the main opposition candidate in the last elections held in 2017 (presidential) had a campaign budget of 300,000 euros, it comes to the conclusion that the ruling party, in just one day, for the organization of one meeting, outside of the election campaign, spent a lot more money than the main opposition candidate in the presidential election for the entire campaign.

All this shows the extent of abuse of state resources by the government and the absolutely unequal conditions for political work.

In their statements, the authorities, and especially Aleksandar Vučić, in the populist style, identify themselves with the state and the “people”. Every attack on government is considered “an attack on the state and people”.

One of the tactics used by the authorities is the continuation of raising ethnic tensions. In addition to the most current issue of Kosovo, relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina are deteriorating, for which the authorities in Serbia are using Milorad Dodik. In this “game”, for which Serbian authorities have partners in the nationalist authorities of neighboring countries, they are successfully putting the “ethnic problems” in the focus of the media, while the daily problems of the population, poverty, corruption, crime, and the lack of functioning of public services are on the margins.

*Mirko Medenica
Belgrade, May 19th 2019*

