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Militarization in the time of corona - Serbia

I Introduction: from permanent militarization to coronization

The state of emergency was introduced on March 15, 2020 and not in accordance with the Constitution, bypassing the Parliament, and was revoked on May 6, 2020. During that period Serbia implemented the most restrictive and repressive measures in the whole region: the human rights defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, but also by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, were violated.

During that time the number of infected persons and those who died of COVID was the highest so far, as well as the biggest number of infected medical staff in the region. Drastic restrictive measures in response to COVID-19 were only partially serving to protect public health, and initially a tool of political repression, intimidation, causing panic, persecution of those who think differently... In short, the “coronization - the social use of coronavirus” is in full swing.¹

II Visible manifestations of militarism – war, armed forces, military budget, arms production and sales etc. That is a system of force and domination, the involvement of military and police institutions in politics, economy, culture, education, health system, which occurred more intensely since the introduction of the unconstitutional state of emergency (March 15). Legal experts consider that there was no need for the state of emergency since there are laws for emergency situations (the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management and the Law on Protection of Population from Infectious Diseases). The autocratic regime of A. Vucic has “introduced measures which were more of a sadistic than epidemiologic nature: some of those measures were not only counter-productive but also risky for health.”²

Unfortunately, similar measures weren't unique to only the state of Serbia, since we “live in a state of siege everywhere”, when all countries govern with improvised decrees and administrative-police force, but also with military force, if needed.”³

We will name only some of the most drastic decrees and acts as a part of the strengthening of the repressive legislation in Serbia:

The army at the borders, on the streets, in front of hospitals - On March 17th a decree was passed by which the Army of Serbia was to control the borders, be present in front of hospitals, fully armed, fighting against the virus: “Why do they think that if a soldier stands in front of a hospital or a nursing home the virus won't come in, and it did?”⁴

In short, these measures are being implemented as if the state of war was declared and not a pandemic... COVID hospitals were opened - meant for mass accomodation of those who are being

¹ Darko Suvin, Novosti, 14.8.2020.

² Dr Zoran Radovanović, NIN, 14.5.2020.

³ Darko Suvin, Novosti, 14.8.2020.

⁴ Miodrag Zec, Danas, 22.4.2020.

“suspicious” of having coronavirus. The largest one of those hospitals, located at the Belgrade’s Fair, can receive 3,000 patients! There’s a complete chaos running inside those hospitals: “By the beginning of April (2020) most patients at the Fair had conjunctivitis and diarrhea because of unsanitary conditions...”⁵

March 18 – Senicid - house arrest for the elderly over 65 years old (65+) lasting 42 days is the most drastic measure during the state of emergency; the movement ban for persons older than 65 since the proclamation of a state of emergency, March 15 to April 27, after which they were allowed to go out only for 30 minutes (on Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays) not farther than 600 meters from home. The regime brought a decision on March 22, 2020 to allow the elderly over 65 years old to go out shopping between the hours 4 AM and 7 AM, and only on Sundays! This measure was in fact the continuation of Serbian regime’s warlike system - a concentration camp for those with a different name or of a different nationality during the wars, while a “concentration camp for the elderly” of the same nationality during the time of the state of emergency.⁶

March 19 - beside the police and sanitary inspectors, members of the military are also mobilized at the borders in combat vehicles; on **March 21** the public transport was halted; on **March 22** a decision was brought on halting total public transportation system on the territory of the whole country, and these bans lasted until the repeal of the state of emergency on May 6.

The Army at the refugee camps – by declaring the state of emergency, the elementary human rights of the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in shelters and asylum centers were violated, and all in the name of the alleged protection from the pandemic COVID-19. The refugee camps were turned into prison units and concentration camps without elementary hygienic conditions: “They locked up 9,000 people in premises with 3,000 people capacity”⁷. After repealing the state of emergency, in some of the 18 refugee centers there were even more drastic measures applied with an excuse that the Army “helps the police” in preventing incidents by refugees/migrants, which was about petty thieving, clashes between the refugees themselves etc. In short, there were no legal assumptions to engage the Army in front of migrant centers: “Since the repeal of the state of emergency the police didn’t identify one incident caused by the migrants on the territory of Sid (the place of a refugee camp at the border between Serbia and Croatia). The arrival to Sid on May 17, 2020 and the speeches held by the Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin and the Vice Commissioner of the General Headquarters of the Army of Serbia Petar Cvetkovic, as well as the presence of the Commissioner of the Administration of the Military Police general Rajko Milovanovic only raised an already high degree of militarization of the state authorities. The bringing of the Army of Serbia to refugee centers in western Serbia fuels a climate of racism and fascist attacks which were not rare even before the state of emergency”⁸. The violence

⁵ Dr Z. Radovanović, at the WiB conference ‘The Ogre of Corona Goes Around the World’ (June 12-14, 2020)

⁶ Staša Zajović, Solidarity in the time of corona, September, 2020

⁷ Nikola Kovačević, lawyer at the WiB conference ‘The Ogre of Corona Goes Around the World’

⁸ Statement of WiB, May 19 2020

against the refugees became a physical terror as well: “Some people in the camps protested and then the private security started to beat people with wooden and metal sticks.”⁹

Demonstration of force - violence by the police, parapolice, paramilitary units, party militia...

Beside the constant demonstration of force, threats, punishments and other repressive measures, the regime also used brutal force against all types of protests by applying drastic measures: “By using the state of emergency the regime continued to practice political repression against all dissidents, who became a shooting target.”¹⁰. We will give a few examples:

Torches against non-violent citizens - the action “With noise against dictatorship” started on April 26, was being held every evening around 8 PM by making noise with pots or other objects. It was happening not only in Belgrade but in the whole country and it became a civil non-violent revolt. As soon as this action intensified the regime responded with brutal violence - by lighting torches on the roofs of buildings in Belgrade and other places by “unknown persons”: “Allegedly some unknown persons hired by some members of the ruling party lit torches every evening on the roofs of buildings terrorizing citizens and doing so during the police curfew, when it wasn’t allowed.”¹¹

The police and parapolice terror in July demonstrations – at the beginning of July 2020. A. Vučić threatened by applying the police curfew again because of the higher number of infected persons, which was a consequence of the decision to cancel all epidemiologic measures during the election campaign (the parliamentary elections were held on June 21). The citizens revolted and went out on streets *en masse* on July 7. The regime infiltrated members of the police, parapolice, hooligan and beating gangs, formations that in the name of the regime carried out attacks on the police, justifying the violence against the demonstrators. “The goal of the specially trained police officials and regime hooligans which were infiltrated among the citizens was to show the domestic and foreign public that the protests are violent and that they are being organized by the extreme right-wing organizations. This was not true – a great majority of citizens that spontaneously gathered on the streets were not violent.”¹² The protests were not completely organized, they were ideologically mixed (left-wing and right-wing oriented citizens and parties were present); what followed was the arrests of exclusively non-violent participants who became victims of police torture. After a few days the protests stopped - they were broken up by hooligan groups and the police, who gave each other a motive for the escalation of violence, while the majority of citizens were scared for their own safety.

It’s worth mentioning that during these years the regime created different “storming troops” or praetorian guards - beside these non-formal groups for “special tasks” the regime also introduced a communal militia by law, and it announced the foundation of paramilitary units close to the

⁹ Nikola Kovačević, at the WiB conference ‘The Ogre of Corona Goes Around the World’

¹⁰ Statement of WiB, May 9 2020

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Statement by the NVO group, July 9, 2020

Party. On one hand, that represents a tool for hiring Party staff (the ruling SNS party has over 700,000 members) and, on the other hand, a tool that would serve the regime for combatting with its dissidents. Those groups are led by extreme rightist politicians and persons with a criminal past, and the regime has total control over them.

Arms trade in the time of corona and state of emergency – these last few years the state of Serbia has been exporting arms to countries in conflict and various dictatorial regimes: who use it to torture and kill civilians in those countries. The harshest statement indicating brutal militarism is the one made by President A. Vucic where he said: “There are so many wars around the world, so many conflicts, that we manage to sell everything we produce...”¹³

Even during the state of emergency there was an amount of weapons transported from the factories of the defense industry: “It was transported for the buyer, the company from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) International Golden Group (IGG). In six flights, with two Boeing C-17 Globmaster III airplanes of the UAE Air Force, in the period between 22 and 26 of April, the arms were being transported - among others from Krusik as well. This factory has been in the spotlight because of an affair that had to do with illegal exports of arms in which the highest state officials were involved.¹⁴ Otherwise, A. Vučić visited this factory on March 9, 2020 as a part of the constant elections campaign and that day all the workers gathered at the factory, even though the pandemic had already started!

A private company also exported arms to Armenia, as well as Azerbaijan, in May and June. As far as Armenia and Azerbaijan are concerned, these two countries have been in conflict since 1988 over the province Nagorno-Karabakh. On July 12, 2020 two Azerbaijani soldiers got killed from the grenades (produced by Serbia) thrown by the Armenian side.¹⁵

The arms and military gear trade “flourished” with the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East, while the number of companies who deal with this profitable business is ever growing: “From **185** in 2016 the number grew to **213** in 2017, which shows how lucrative the business really is.” In Serbia there are another **55** companies that deal with arms and military gear production, **42** out of those are private companies.¹⁶ The weapons exported from Serbia ended up in the arms of armed Islamic groups in Yemen and Syria that committed numerous war crimes, while the refugees fleeing from war are seeking for a temporary shelter in Serbia which is exclusively a transitional country on the way to the EU member states.

¹³ Statement (1.7.2017.)

¹⁴ *The Krusik affair* - broke out in September 2019, when Aleksandar Obradovic, a Krusik worker, submitted documents revealing that Branko Stefanovic, the father of the Minister of Police Nebojsa Stefanovic, was involved in a criminal arms trade. His private company GIM had the privilege of procuring weapons and military equipment at lower prices than anyone else. Proceedings were instituted for allegedly revealing a business secret against Krušik's worker A. Obradović, who was the first to point out possible large-scale corruption in Krušik. A year and a half since the revealing of the Krušik affair, only the man who was the only one to point out corruption is still under attack by the state.

¹⁵ Danas, 22.7.2020.

¹⁶ N. Lunić, Vreme, 5.4.2018.

It's worth mentioning that the state's militaristic character is visible through the following facts: Serbia is the only country in the region that still didn't sign the UN Convention on Cluster Munitions, by which it is preventing a big number of citizens who were victims of this type of munitions during the NATO bombing (1999) to get international aid; Serbia is number one in the region by the number of weapons per capita, Serbia exports arms to countries in war, various dictatorial regimes; it is investing in military needs, in the repressive apparatus instead of investing in civil needs of the population, hence Serbia is ranging at the last place by the quality of healthcare in Europe etc. In the times of major turmoils, global and national, the situation is drastically worsening.

III Militarization – on the level of state and society

Militarism cannot be reduced to only visible manifestations of it (war, armed forces, military budget, arms production and trade, etc.) but the atmosphere of fear and insecurity is maintained by *militarization*, i.e. “the process of transmitting military/militaristic values to all spheres: blind obedience, hierarchy, machism, xenophobia, racism, autoritariness, uniformity, homophobia...”¹⁷ Militarization is imposing certain cultural models as well, which create an atmosphere of patriarchal control and fear, and these are manifested through different types of (structural) violence:

Producing an enemy – this is a permanent practice by regimes in Serbia, its goal always being the justification of the repressive apparatus of control. The state of emergency and the pandemic were the “perfect chance” for the regime to produce new enemies, to raise tensions and implement a strict discipline. During the state of emergency even the “fight” against coronavirus received drastic manifestations:

Control over media, censorship, repression – demonization and exclusion from public life of those who think differently, who disapprove, who don't agree on blind obedience and idolatry of the regime: “We lived in a madness that led us to paranoia. It is a torture practiced upon our minds”¹⁸ It is best seen in the censorship of information related to the scales of the pandemic. Namely, on March 13 a “healthcare” Crisis Headquarters for Removal and Prevention of Possible Consequences of the Transmittable Disease COVID-19 was founded, the Crisis Headquarters is made of state representatives, managers of the most important healthcare institutions and hospitals, professors of medical sciences (15 members headed by A. Vučić). The Crisis Headquarters was an extended hand to the regime, led by the regime's orders and not by the epidemiological/health needs of the population. The regime threatened (March 28) with an act that would limit the right to provide the public with information related to the pandemic. However, various independent media and social networks reported personal accounts of healthcare workers on the chaos created in healthcare institutions. The media who reported

¹⁷ 'Antimilitarism and women', published by Women in Black, 2009

¹⁸ Ana Lalić at the conference 'The Ogre of Corona'

objectively and professionally on the pandemic scales were immediately targeted. Here's only one example of such repression: journalist *Ana Lalić* was arrested because of an article she wrote (at the Nova S portal, 4/1/2020) on the conditions in the Clinical Center of Vojvodina and the adequate medical protection the medical staff lacks. The journalist was accused of "spreading disinformation whose only goal was to spread panic." Thanks to the pressure made by the domestic and international public the journalist was released.

The misuse of the pandemic for pre-election purposes - even though the elections were scheduled for April 26, 2020, they were postponed to June 21, 2020. During the state of emergency the election campaign was constant: "Our media monitoring showed that the state officials took up 91% of the time on media. The two last weeks of March this percentage was as high as 99%. Out of those every second person to speak was President Vucic."¹⁹. At the parliamentary elections (held on June 21) the absolute winner was the Serbian Progressive Party that won 60% of votes (188 of 250 places in the Parliament). Most of the opposition parties boycotted the elections because of the medial disbalance, pressures on voters and their blackmailing, as well as because of manipulations with official statistics related to the pandemic, which served the election campaign.

Strengthening of repressive legislation: the Government of Serbia passed an act on April 1 by which the court trials were to be held virtually, via Skype. The Serbian Bar Association considers this type of trial going against the law and Constitution. The regular courts didn't practice it but some other "courts martial" did practice it - giving out verdicts through Skype, up to 3 years in prison for allegedly breaking the measures of the state of emergency.²⁰ There were **32** initiatives submitted for the evaluation of the constitutionality of the decisions brought during the state of emergency. The Constitutional Court declared the state of emergency to be in accordance with the Constitution of Serbia. On May 21 the Constitutional Court rejected the initiatives for instituting proceedings for the evaluation of the constitutionality of the decision to declare a state of emergency.

During the July protests the protesters were subject to police brutality and then to judicial persecutions. "Those that caused the riots weren't targeted, many of them being related to the regime, but the target were students and young people, the majority of whom participated in protests for the first time ever. The regime treated the peaceful protesters as hooligans and terrorists."²¹ The number of how many people were taken in by the police during the protests in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis, Kragujevac etc. is still not known. Nobody gave the media answers to these questions.

¹⁹ Rasa Nedeljkov, Program Director of CRTA (Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability) at the conference 'The Ogre of Corona Goes Around the World'

²⁰ Nastasja Radović 'The Covid-19 Pandemic and the state of emergency in Serbia - the state of chaotic state of emergency', May 2020.

²¹ NIN, 23.7.2020.

Demonization, stigmatization, blaming the 'irresponsible ones', disobedient citizens, criminalization of civil society organizations - these mechanisms of control and intimidation have taken drastic forms:

Accusing Serbian citizens who returned to the country - about 400,000 citizens (mostly economic emigrants or precarious workers) returned from abroad, because they lost temporary jobs there due to coronavirus. The regime complained why it "allowed" them to enter Serbia, challenging the constitutionally guaranteed right of every citizen. The highest state officials accused the citizens of Serbia who found themselves outside the borders of their country of being the transmitters of coronavirus!

The militarization of consciousness provoked among the citizens reactions of suspicion of others, aversion to all allegedly possible sources of infection, which is confirmed by public opinion polls during coronavirus: "Half of the respondents would report to the police fellow citizens returning from abroad, who violate the measure of isolation" ²²

The militarization of consciousness was also manifested during the protests, in response to brutal regime violence, manipulation of fear, feelings of humiliation and powerlessness. This also caused distrust in non-violence as a strategy of struggle during the anti-regime protest: "Three days of street riots frightened the authorities more than the previous years of peaceful walking (...) There is no use from sitting." A lot of people are really angry, they just can't walk or sit anymore..." It is clear that anger frees from the need for rational analysis, and the lack of any vision of change leads to an attitude by which nothing is worth except for the use of pure force ('an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'). Justified revolts fueled by anger can produce difficult to predict and even risky results, and mobilizing anger, by itself, is by no means sufficient for social change. The underestimating attitude of left-wing protesters towards pacifism and non-violence ignores the fact that "non-violence is not just a spiritual commitment - it is the most rigorous analysis of the situation and the most accurate assessment of the current situation and the balance of power" (ML King) or that "you can never tear down the master's house with master's tools" (Audrey Lord).

Punishment, accusation, stigmatization of the victims of violence instead of the perpetrators of violence – in a morally perverted political system, the victims are always 'guilty': this has manifested itself in the brutal repression of the most vulnerable categories during the state of emergency and pandemic:

Violence against women took on dramatic proportions, victims of violence were held captive by the perpetrator, and most women did not have the opportunity to report the perpetrator in

²² Danas, 27.4.2020.

solitary confinement: 'A woman calls the police and says the perpetrator threatens to kill her, the police fines her with 50,000 dinars because she violated the ban on movement'²³

The Roma population, especially those living in informal settlements, without access to drinking water, cannot maintain even minimal hygiene, many are engaged in collecting secondary raw materials and cannot work in a state of emergency, which shows a systematic and systemic discrimination against Roma. There are also social assistance beneficiaries, the homeless, precarious workers - the poor for whom isolation is a luxury... In addition to racist hatred, fascist attacks and violence against refugees, some politicians, both ruling and opposition parties, spread conspiracy theories, claiming that refugees transmit terrible diseases and pose a threat to the countries they come to.

Blaming 'irresponsible' citizens - absolving the state from responsibility - the state shifted all responsibility to the citizens. If the numbers of infected people grow, it turns out that it is because of irresponsible citizens, and not because of state measures: The statement made by the Minister of Health who claims that 'we're as good as we behave' is unacceptable. In this way, complete responsibility is shifted to individuals, and the state (healthcare system, Crisis Staff) is absolved of responsibility. At the same time, both the state and society demand ever stronger repressive measures: all those who do not have absolute confidence in epidemiological measures and the 'protection' of the state are exposed to various forms of rejection and repression at the state and society level. People's anger is often directed at those who do not 'adhere' to the measures, which was drastically manifested during the older-than-65 ban: An avalanche of discrimination against the elderly by everyone - young people, politicians, others at risk, not only on the Internet, but also in public (in stores, on the bus, everywhere). On the other hand, the citizens' distrust of epidemiological measures is growing, which is fertile ground for conspiracy theories, populist right-wing movements, especially the anti-vaccination movement.

Criminalization of civil society organizations – Autonomous civil society organizations / CSOs have been the target of attacks by both state and non-state actors, especially since A. Vučić seized power for the second time (2020). Human rights defenders operate in a highly hostile atmosphere, without the protection of state authorities, exposed to a reckless campaign and media lynching, in anticipation of attacks by regime-instructed fascist groups. The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering, which operates within the Ministry of Finance (July 2020), asked banks to inspect all financial transactions of certain critically oriented public figures and NGOs, in order to detect possible money laundering or even financing of terrorist activities: the list of numerous organizations and individuals dealing with investigative journalism, protection of human rights, film production, development of democracy, rule of law and charity

²³ Tanja Ignjatović, Autonomous Women's Center, at the conference 'The Ogre of Corona Goes Around the World', June 2020

leads to the conclusion that this is a political abuse of institutions and a dangerous attempt to further undermine the rule of law in Serbia." ²⁴

It is worth mentioning that Women in Black have been exposed to both attacks and threats since the beginning of their work, which have intensified in the last five years through numerous attacks, from physical attacks, threats, insults, to disrupting rallies and other types of intimidation. In connection with these attacks, 13 proceedings were initiated before the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia, and none of the perpetrators were punished.

V The militarization of language during corona

The regime resorts to permanent militarization through war metaphors, the virus is spoken of in war terminology: every day we are bombarded with numbers of infected, dead... the whole world has turned into a battlefield. All over the world, during the pandemic, propaganda resorted to war metaphors, war terminology (coronavirus = enemy, etc.) in order to create an atmosphere of threat and insecurity, causing fear and panic. Of course, that was and is aimed at justifying repressive measures and the controlling of citizens.

Instead of talking about a severe health crisis, the regime led by A. Vučić (March 15, 2020) is actually announcing a state of war: 'Serbia is at war today against an invisible adversary. Our Serbia must win (...) this will be the most difficult battle for our people, the battle for our sick and elderly, they are the target of this fierce attack (...) Surrender is not an option for Serbia.' The whole regime, reinforced by convicted war criminals, follows a war rhetoric: "Now we need to apply a formula to succeed in the war against coronavirus, and that is: unshakable, unbreakable, unquestionable unity of army, people and state leadership," said General V. Lazarevic. ²⁵

War metaphors serve to militarize consciousness: "An extremely convenient and effective means of persuading us to be in a state of war, and when a state of war is in force, then citizens must act as obedient and loyal soldiers. In this context, the virus is an 'objective threat' to be 'eliminated', to be 'fought against' (...) Any critical word within that metaphorical framework is an open expression of disobedience, a lack of patriotism, a so-called national betrayal."²⁶

The basic feature of the metaphor of war is deepening polarization in society, causing feelings of threat, fear and panic, insecurity, and the long patriarchal tradition of one-minded regime serves to abolish basic civil liberties and human rights, silencing different voices: "Increased repression is always legitimized with claims that it's caused by 'a higher force'. That higher force is now the

²⁴ Statement 140 NVO, jul 2020.

²⁵ Vladimir Lazarevic, a former general of the Serbian Army, was sentenced before the Hague Tribunal for war crimes committed against Albanians in 1999 in Kosovo to 15 years in prison, and after serving his prison sentence (3.12.2015) he was given a state reception, holds lectures at the Military Academy, etc.

²⁶ Nadežda Silaški, linguist and professor of English at the Faculty of Economics, BU, Danas, April 23, 2020

epidemic and justifies the denial of freedom. The epidemic exposed the autocratic and manipulative nature of the regime."²⁷

The militarization of the medical vocabulary is also noticeable, and it is even proposed to 'start a reserve medical force. Joining medical forces with military forces is also mentioned as a possibility.'²⁸

In order to demilitarize consciousness, it is necessary to dismantle war metaphors and their function because: "We do not live in war, we are going through a severe health crisis," says Ines Olsa, a researcher at the Institute of Culture and Society at the University of Navarre, Spain.

Alternative?

The repression will not help protect against the pandemic, restricting the freedom of speech and expression, abolishment of parliamentary oversight - it will not contribute to protecting public health. **On the contrary, attacks on freedom and restrictions on democracy aggravate the epidemiological situation.**

Only through democracy can citizens' trust in public institutions be strengthened, only free media can play the role of quality, objective and accurate informing, careful monitoring and supervising government decisions and suppressing misinformation.

Not to mention the need to invest in healthcare (instead of in the repressive apparatus and the arms industry)!

(This analysis was presented at the meeting of the Women in Black Network, Vrnjačka Banja, September 17-19, 2020)

²⁷ Ivan Čolović, Vreme, 9.7.2020.

²⁸ Vreme, 26.3.2020.