

Repression against human rights defenders

Women in Black

June 2021 - March 2022

"Women in black never talk about weather. Women in Black made a political decision that was motivated by deep feelings of guilt and shame to always talk about the crimes committed in our name and about the victims and survivors of those crimes. It was not easy to make such a political choice, and it has been difficult to insist on it for thirty years."¹

Miloš Urošević, activist of Woman in Black

Women in Black is an activist group and network of feminist-anti-militarist orientation, consisting of women and men of different generational and ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, social status, lifestyles and sexual choices. Women in Black was founded on October 9, 1991, in Belgrade.

Since the beginning of Women in Black (1991), they have faced various forms of repression, from both state and non-state actors.

This report will document cases of attacks and other forms of repression against activists of the Women in Black organization, in the period from June 2021 to March 2022.

July 10, 2021, "We will never forget the genocide in Srebrenica"

On July 10, 2021, Women in Black, as every year, organized the commemoration of the anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, on Republic Square in Belgrade. As every year, the rally was duly reported to the police on June 25, 2021, well before the legal deadline of five days before the rally. Before the very beginning of the gathering, the area of the Republic Square was occupied by dozens of members of right-wing and pro-fascist groups, including the neo Nazi and fascist Leviathan and the People's Patrol. These two groups are known for their violence against migrants and Roma, and also publicly brag about their good relations and cooperation with the police. During the entire duration, they threatened and insulted the participants of the rally. From the beginning, it was clear that a counter rally was organized, because these people were present before the gathering of Women in Black, and also had numerous props in the form of flags with the image of war criminal Ratko Mladic and other war criminals. They also had a loudspeaker, which they used to insult and threaten the participants in the rally. We asked the present police officers whether this counter rally was reported and when, if so, why it was allowed to be held at the same place where Women in Black had already scheduled the rally, but the police did not have this information, which clearly indicates that the rally was not organised according to law. The Law on Public Assemblies provides for the possibility of holding a rally without prior registration, if it is a

¹ <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/svi-pricaju-o-vremenu-mi-ne/>

"spontaneous" rally, without an organizer. From the above facts, it can be seen that this gathering was not spontaneous, but organized in advance. Even if the police treated this gathering as spontaneous in the sense of the Law on Public Assemblies, after realizing that the participants in this gathering insulted and threatened the participants of the duly registered gathering, as well as obstructed the holding of the gathering, members of the police were obliged to ban the said gathering at the same time, because the Law does not allow organizing the gathering, in order to interfere with another gathering. During the entire duration of the Women in Black rally, verbal attacks, insults and threats lasted. All this happened in the presence of the police, which allowed the members of these fascist organizations to approach only a few meters from the participants in the rally, to spit in their direction, photograph them and in other ways harass and intimidate them. They used the loudspeaker to play songs glorifying war criminals. We note that the gathering of Women in Black is of a commemorative type and aims to pay tribute to the victims in a dignified manner and in silence. When the present media representatives were taking a statement from Staša Zajović, the representative of Women in Black, a group of thugs approached only a meter from Zajović, threatening and insulting her all the time, which prevented her from giving a statement, as well as the work of the present media. Dozens of police officers, both in uniform and in plain clothes, were present during the gathering. They set out in a way to prevent physical contact, but in no way reacted to threats, insults and distractions. Their relationship with the perpetrators was friendly, even to attempts of physical attack, their reaction ended in a warning, which acted more as "friendly" advice than an official action. On September 27, 2021, Women in Black submitted a request for access to information of public importance, asking the police for an official note on the event, as well as information on whether the police filed misdemeanour or criminal charges. In a letter from the Ministry of the Interior dated December 6, 2021, we were informed that the police filed misdemeanour charges against four people on the occasion of the said event, but without any additional information about the identity of the persons or the misdemeanour for which they were reported. Our request to provide us with an official note was rejected, due to the fact that the said official note "contains private data of persons", and that submitting the note would violate their right to privacy. We remind you that according to the Law on Police, members of the police are obliged to make an official note of each of their actions. These notes contain a description of the event, as well as the actions taken by members of the police. In the previous period, the police did reveal official notes on Women in Black request on several occasions. We also note that when submitting information of public importance, there is a legal possibility that in the case of private data of persons of non-public importance, they may be omitted or obscured, which is a regular practice in such cases. In that sense, the refusal of the police not to submit an official note for this reason is not in accordance with the law. We consider this action of the police to be an additional aggravation of the situation regarding the availability of information of public importance.

22./23. October 2021, Attack on the premises of the Woman in Black

On the night between Friday and Saturday, 22/23 October 2021, unknown perpetrators spray-painted the following in black spray on the front door of the Women in Black office, located at Jug Bogdanova Street No. 18: Whores in Black, Ratko Mladic, as well as five signs "four S's" (Serbian nationalist symbol). The police were informed about this attack and they conducted an investigation. As we did not receive a notification from the police even after two months about the actions taken to find the perpetrator, or whether the perpetrators were found, on December 27, 2021, we filed a criminal complaint against N.N. perpetrators for the criminal offense "Destruction and damage of property" under Article 212,

paragraph 1 and "Violent behaviour" under Article 344, paragraph 1 and paragraph 2 of the RS Criminal Code. The First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, by a decision of December 29, 2021, rejected the criminal report, on the grounds that "the stated criminal offenses are not criminal offenses for which are prosecuted ex officio." The explanation states that the allegations in the criminal report do not show that "there was a significant threat to the peace of citizens", and that for that reason it is not a criminal act that is prosecuted ex officio. We note that according to the Criminal Procedure Code, the submitter of the criminal report is not obliged to qualify the criminal act in question, nor is the prosecution obliged with legal qualification stated in the criminal complaint. In terms of this law, a criminal report is information that a certain event has occurred, and the prosecution has an obligation to take action within its competence to determine the circumstances of the event and in case of reasonable doubt, to file an indictment. The decision does not state that the prosecution performed any action, which, given that it rejected the criminal report within only two days of receipt, was not even possible.

November 13, 2021, Attack on activist Miloš Urošević and abduction and destruction of a banner

On Saturday, November 13, 2021, after the protest "Mural must fall", which was held on Cvetni trg from 6 pm to 7 pm, on the occasion of the government's refusal to remove the mural of war criminal Ratko Mladic around 7.30 pm, in Kraljice Natalije Street, Belgrade, two unknown perpetrators approached Women in Black activist Miloš Urošević, from behind and by using force stole his bag with a banner that reads "We will never forget the genocide in Srebrenica." Then they fled the scene. A few hours later, a video appeared on social networks where several people at an unknown location were burning the said banner. Although the news about this event, as well as the footage of the arson were published in the media, no one from the prosecution or the police came into contact with the Women in Black. On December 27, 2021, Women in Black filed a criminal complaint against N.N. perpetrators for the criminal offense "Destruction and damage of property" under Article 212, paragraph 1 and "Violent behavior" under Article 344, paragraph 1 and paragraph 2 of the RS Criminal Code. Two months after the filing of the criminal complaint, there is still no information from the prosecution, nor has the injured party Miloš Urošević been contacted. We note that during the event in question, which Milos Urosevic attended, a large number of members of fascist and violent groups, such as the Leviathan and the People's Patrol, were present, as well as a large number of members of the police. As the banner, which is 10 meters long was used at the mentioned gathering, and then it was folded into a bag, without the possibility of determining the contents, it is obvious that the attackers were present during that gathering and that they followed Urošević when he left the gathering.

November 29, 2021, Attack on the premises of the Woman in Black

On the night between Sunday and Monday, November 29, 2021, at the front door of the Woman in Black office, unknown persons spray painted: Stasa Ustasha (Croatian Nazi colaborators), Ratko Mladic, Ratko Mladic hero, Whores in Black, Fuck Antifa, and four signs "four S ". The incident was reported to the police, who conducted an investigation. As we did not receive a notification from the police even a month after the event about what actions were taken to find the perpetrator, or whether the perpetrators were found, on December 27, 2021, we filed a criminal complaint against N.N. perpetrators for the criminal offense "Destruction and damage of property" under Article 212, paragraph 1 and "Violent behavior" under Article 344, paragraph 1 and paragraph 2 of the RS Criminal Code. Even after two months from the filing of the criminal report, we did not receive any notification from the

prosecution. We note that the same evening, at Kalemegdan park, some ten minutes walk from the Women in Black office, a monument and a tomb to national heroes were desecrated with similar inscriptions. As these are messages of the same content, written in the same colour, as well as in a very similar handwriting, we have a well-founded suspicion that the perpetrators are same. We also note that before, as well as after these events, messages of similar content were written all over Belgrade, as well as the images of war criminal Ratko Mladic, which indicates that this is an organized campaign.

December 6, 2021, Threats during the feminist action "Stop killing women!"

On the occasion of the International Day against Femicide, Women in Black organized an action on the Republic Square in Belgrade. On that occasion, a man, known as a member of the neo-Nazi organization Leviathan, together with an aggressive Staffordshire dog, broke into the central space where the artifacts of the action were placed, kicking them and saying: "Fuck you and your violence". Shortly afterwards, plainclothes police stopped him and then identified him. We have no information on whether the police filed a misdemeanour or criminal complaint against this person.

February 26, 2022, - Obstruction of the "Stop the War in Ukraine" rally by the police

On February 26, 2022, Women in Black organized a protest against Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Knez Mihajlova Street in Belgrade. On that occasion, about a hundred people gathered, including a large number of citizens of Ukraine and Russia who live in Belgrade. At the very beginning of the protest, the police surrounded some of the participants who were standing next to the banner with the inscription Women in Black Against War. In this way they separated this group of participants from the others. They also did not allow anyone to approach this group and returned anyone who tried, or after convincing and insisting that they wanted to join the protest, they let them. The organizers of the rally immediately drew the attention of the members of the police that this separation of the participants of the rally is hindering its holding. Police responded that it was a high-risk gathering. When asked by the representative of Women in Black, if it is really a high-risk, why then they "protect" only part of the participants, while the other part is not protected, police responded that we "do not interfere" and do not tell them what to do. Until the end of the rally, they continued to disrupt the rally in this way.

Campaign against Women in Black in pro-government media and social networks

Authorities-controlled media have been campaigning against Women in Black for years, spreading false information, threatening the safety of activists. Here are some examples of this propaganda.

On September 5, 2021, Novosti published an article entitled "WOMEN IN BLACK" DEFEATED IN CETINJE: Milo's hooligans were supported by Nenad Canak and Stasa Zajovic, but they are returning home in their own style - as losers."² This article claims that Women in Black, led by Stasa Zajovic, took part in the protests held in Cetinje against the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije Micovic. As a proof for these false claims, a private photograph of Staša Zajović in Cetinje, taken about a year before the mentioned event, was used. We note that this photo was on the Facebook profile of another person, who is not a public figure, which indicates that it is a deliberate and planned action, because the photo is available, and its existence is known only to a small circle of people. The fact that this is a coordinated attack is also indicated by the fact that an almost identical text was published by another pro-

² <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1033548/zene-crnom-porazene-cetinju-milove-huligane-podrzali-nenad-canak-stasa-zajovic-ali-kuci-vracaju-svom-stilu-kao-gubitnici>

government newspaper, Alo, entitled "WOMEN IN BLACK" DEFEATED AND IN CETINJE. Stasa Zajovic is returning home with unfinished business."³

On February 28, 2022, the Informer published an article entitled "WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THEY LEAD THE STATE ?! 'Women in Black' are asking for Serbia to go to war with Russia!⁴, in which they make a false claim that Women in Black at a rally against the war in Ukraine demanded that Serbia go to war with Russia.

On February 11, 2022, the Informer published an article entitled "ĐILAS'S AND WOMEN IN BLACK TOGETHER IN PROTEST! In the greedy fight for power, do not stop cooperating with the chauvinists who recognize the GENOCIDE in Srebrenica!" This text used footage from the environmental protest in front of the Presidency building, which shows Stasa Zajovic shaking hands with opposition mayoral candidate Vladeta Jankovic. The text contains false accusations that Women in Black claims that Serbs are a genocidal people and that Stasa Zajovic tells the worst about the Serbian people for foreign television.⁵

On March 1, 2022, TV PINK published the news: "Women in Black organized a protest in front of the Russian Embassy. Stasa Zajovic states that they gathered because of the tyrant Putin, and she calls Serbia's decision not to impose sanctions on Russia shameful. Vladeta Janković, Djilas' candidate for mayor of Belgrade, was also at the protest." This news was repeated several times after that. This is false news, because Vladeta Janković was not at the protest in front of the embassy, and the photo that illustrates the news and which shows Stasa Zajović and Vladeta Janković was taken at the environmental protest on February 10, 2022.

At the same time, in the number of thousands of posts on social networks, Women in Black as a whole, as well as Stasa Zajovic and Milos Urosevic, are insulted and threatened. None of these threats have been prosecuted so far. What is further worrying is that this campaign of threats and insults on social networks is often carried out by accounts directly related to the government. It is known that the government uses social networks to spread its propaganda, using so-called troll factories, which multiply content in an organized way and flood social networks. As an example, we cite a Twitter account called Lie Detector.⁶ This account often creates content that spreads lies about Women in Black, and then, through an army of bots organized by the government, these contents are shared up to hundreds and thousands of times.

In addition to the direct threat that such campaigns cause to Women in Black activists, another important consequence is a kind of social ostracism of Women in Black. A large number of people avoid being brought into any relationship with Women in Black, because this inevitably leads to accusations of "working against the people, insulting or hating the people" and the like. This can be clearly seen in cases of attacks on Women in Black. In the past few months, there have been several attacks on activists who have expressed disagreement with the promotion of war criminals and the denial of war crimes. In similar cases of attacks, individuals, as well as organizations and political parties, condemned the

³ <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/540868/zene-u-crnom-porazene-i-na-cetinju-stasa-zajovic-vraca-se-kuci-neobavljenog-posla/vest>

⁴ <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/681266/kuku-lele-sta-bilo-kad-ovi-vodili-drzavu-cuta-zene-crnom-traze-srbija-zarati-rusijom>

⁵ <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/676152/vladeta-jankovic-stasa-zajovic-protos-genocid-srebrenica>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/LaziDetektor/status/1498633475150200834>

attacks, but when Women in Black were attacked, this reaction was absent in many cases. Even in cases where support was expressed privately, there was no public support for fear for "reputation".

Obstruction of monitoring court proceedings

Part of the activities of Women in Black is the monitoring of court proceedings of interest to the public. This activity is often obstructed by the judiciary, using a number of excuses and tactics to prevent the presence of Women in Black activists at hearings. As an example of such practices, we cite the trial against the accused director of "Namenska" from Lucani, Radoš Milovanović, for the death of two workers. This trial is being conducted before the Basic Court in Ivanjica. Women in Black have been following this process from the beginning. Since January 2021, the Trial Chamber has, in various ways, prevented the presence of Women in Black activists at six hearings (January 28, 2021, March 12, 2021, August 27, 2021, November 30, 2021, January 19, 2022, March 16, 2022). In all these cases, Women in Black officially addressed the Court, in most cases no answer was received, so that upon arrival in Ivanjica, the presence was prevented by various excuses (insufficient courtroom capacity, pandemic measures, etc.).

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Belgrade, March 2, 2022