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Hate Speech in Serbia



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Attacks against Sonja Biserko as a classic example of hate speech against female human rights defenders

In today's modern world, *hate speech and acts of hate* stand for the promoting, glorifying or justifying crimes committed against social groups or their members because of their race, skin color, religion, national, i.e. ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, property, health or marital status, parental status, political views, age or other personal features, or the urging of such crimes; presenting or broadcasting the idea of superiority or submission of one social group or its members; using salutations, symbols, i.e. using of other means which may cause the disturbance of public order, which urge hatred against social groups and their members, or the writing of messages or symbols of a discriminatory nature in public places.

Hate speech and acts of hate often have a consequence of felonies with the elements of violence, whose motive is hatred toward a certain feature, i.e. a person's affiliation to a certain group, i.e. *hate crime*. Having said that, hate crime, even though it is not regulated by the Serbian legislature, in certain countries is a qualified form of all felonies with the elements of violence.

For years, female human rights defenders have been targets of *continuing campaigns*, based both on *their activities* and *values* that they uphold. Direct attacks against them are carried out by print and electronic media, politicians and political analysts, and the attacks often take place in the Serbian Parliament, what substantially contributes to the shaping of stereotyped attitudes toward them in the broad public..



The most influential NGOs in Serbia are mostly led by women, who, in an active and constant public activity bravely tackle burning issues which represent a burden to today's Serbian society, such as: war crimes, transitional justice, Kosovo, organized crime, corruption etc. The most prominent woman HRDs leading these NGOs include: **Nataša Kandić** (Humanitarian Law Fund), **Staša Zajović** (Women in Black), **Sonja Biserko** (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia), **Biljana Kovačević - Vučo** (Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights) and **Borka Pavićević** (Centre for Cultural Decontamination).

These attacks often represent direct and indirect forms of *hate speech*, stemming from activities of the human rights defenders, and often because of their gender, too. Hate speech is often followed by *hate violence*, against the activists as well as against other members of those nongovernmental organizations. Methodology of these attacks varies, ranging from direct physical violence and open threats, to creating an *atmosphere of hatred* against female human rights defenders and creating a sense of their insecurity. That way, they are being stigmatized; female human rights defenders are exposed to permanent danger.

The second half of September was marked by a strong wave of hate speech against Sonja Biserko, Chairperson of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, but also against other representatives of nongovernmental organizations who have the status of *Human Rights Defenders*.

Those attacks filled with hate speech, even including elements of violence, i.e. Hate Crime, were again caused by the writings of one of the political analysts close to DSS, **Prof. Slobodan Antić**, who presented a series of opinions in the *Pečat*¹ weekly starting on September 12, 2008, which contained clear features of hate speech, in regard to the *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights Report for 2007* which critically views the negative role of the Serbian nationalist elite, particularly the professors of the Belgrade University Law School. On this occasion, an entire propaganda campaign was orchestrated which, instead of a critical review of the Report, was focused on a verbal persecution and witch-hunt against the *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights* Chairwoman Sonja Biserko, while branding the reference in the Report to perpetrators of hate speech among Serbian elites "*a list of unfit persons who should be eliminated*". Basing their "criticism" on such a premise which *a priori* disqualifies any form of dialogue, an open space was created for hate speech and calls for violence against Sonja Biserko.



Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Chairwoman Sonja Biserko



B. K. Vučo, Borka Pavićević, Sonja Biserko and other members of the Coalition for Tolerance, January 2008

In a campaign as massive as the one waged in Serbian media in this context, it is difficult to enumerate all texts against **Sonja Biserko** that have featured outspoken hate speech. We therefore single out several of them as the most characteristic. We underline the fact that *all media* have been

^{1 1} This weekly is owned and published by Milorad Vučelić, general manager of the state-owned Serbian Broadcasting Corporation (RTS) during the 11990s wars.

part of this orchestrated campaign, whereby some of these attacks have been more sophisticated and less brutal.

At this point, we will present a few classic examples of hate speech against representatives of Human Rights Defenders' organizations, particularly the attacks and hate speech against Sonja Biserko in the Serbian media.

In the September 24 issue of the "Pravda" daily, Belgrade Law School professor **Kosta Čavoški** compared the *Helsinki Committee* with the Inquisition, stating that Sonja Biserko wants a new Goli otok². Member of SANU (*Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts*) Prof. Čavoški is not surprised that the Helsinki Committee Report contains a list of unfit professors, writers and journalists, nor by the fact that he himself is on that list. "...I am surprised that Sonja Biserko did not go a step further and recommend the reestablishing of concentration camps, such as Goli Otok, which would be the most practical way of removing the unfit..." – Čavoški stated, explaining why "the Helsinki Committee is worse than the medieval Inquisition". According to him, "the Roman Pope established a list of forbidden books in the 16th century, primarily those that were considered heretic. The works of Niccolo Machiavelli were on that list for more than 300 years. However, the Catholic Church only put books on that list, not people. Unlike the Pope, Sonja Biserko does not ban books, but people, like the Bolsheviks and Tito's Communists once did"

In the September 26 issue of the same daily, **Isidora Bjelica**³ joined the orchestrated propaganda, in a piece entitled "Biserko's Pearls", using all existing negative stereotypes, with additional humiliation of Sonja Biserko. According to Bjelica, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights Report is a "...newest list of people for elimination"...which..."primarily describes the state of her (Biserko's) brain and the true state of human rights in a state where half-literate, totalitarian, paranoid pamphlets can be published without reactions by the state organs for spreading national hatred, targeting people and urging their removal and censorship"... "The fact that *Comrade* Biserko hit the wall was clear to anyone who even remotely follows her work. Boris Tadić still has not realized that the actions of Comrade Biserko damage him most of all, and not us who were listed in this report for elimination". "While efforts are being made in the UN involving a diplomatic offensive in the struggle for Kosovo, Comrade Biserko, on the cover of her Helsinki soap opera, shows Serbia as a glacier without Kosovo and Metohija which is, first and foremost, against the constitution." "Such a list, of this scope, of people Comrade Biserko demands to be excommunicated and removed, is primarily an evidence of a severe paranoid state of this Comrade who in all those people sees a conspiracy theory and actual conspiracy, which in any civilized society would result in providing her with adequate medical assistance by the competent ministry, free of charge". "...It remains to be seen how this nonsense will be accepted by the Comrade's bosses – Soros and other stingy sponsors. If someone is to worry about this expression of severe paranoia, it is the President⁴ himself, because this lousy book is a knife in his back."

The September 26 issue of the Pravda daily published an article by **Milorad Vučelić**, former Radio Television of Serbia General Director (during the period of the fiercest war propaganda) entitled: „*If only Eichmann, Himmler and Pavelić were alive*”, in which, among other statements, he claims: "...It seems as though Serbs have become callous to every anti-Serbian monstrosity, especially to those coming from Sonja Biserko and her friends, known as "the four riders of the

² Goli otok was established after the breakup with the USSR and became the embodiment of torture over pro-Soviet political opponents to Tito.

³ Isidora Bjelica is a media "star" who always has something to say, and on any topic. She hides her hard nationalism with her trademark provocative manner and eccentricity, whereas the hate speech she most often uses is hidden by her alleged liberality.

⁴ Referring to Boris Tadić



apocalypse”⁵. The dream of all secret services in their campaign against Serbia was almost completely fulfilled when it comes to the media. According to the new Serbian journalism, victims have less rights than the successors of methods of the inquisition and purges.”

Vučelić shifts his attacks in which he consciously spreads intolerance and hatred, to other representatives of the nongovernmental sector, i.e. *Human Rights Defenders*. Commenting Sonja Biserko’s appearances in the media, Vučelić, without even an attempt to hide envy and ill temper, quasi-ironically attacks Sonja Biserko claiming that she is discontent about not having enough space in the media and ...”the only media company she does not complain about is B92, which is understandable because that TV station is a part of the unit organized as a unified anti-Serbian movement. They cooperate closely on the same job.” Also, Vučelić emphasized that ...“Had the vengeful Jews by any chance not dared to execute Eichmann, he would have ended up as a frequent guest in TV shows and newspapers. What a great opportunity did Ante Pavelić and the ustasas Ljubo Miloš and Artuković miss by having died – they would have been stars on our TV screens. All creators and executors of Auschwitz and Jasenovac would have been true media stars in Serbia”. “...We would give them the opportunity of being understood, and we would just accept their “argumentation”. It is not good only to brand ustasas and members of the Gestapo. A surviving victim of mutilation and his/her henchman...! And everything is being done in a principal and professional manner, so that those who do the murdering and slaughtering have the possibility to explain their standpoint.” “...the media star Sonja Biserko will fade a bit along with them (war criminals). On Serbian television and in Serbian newspapers, they will be able to thoroughly explain and argument why they have killed, tortured, exterminated and slaughtered Serbs, Jews and Roma”.

That is how Sonja Biserko became a focal point of the attacks by all printed and electronic media. On the last day of September, about a hundred members of “Narodni pokret 1389” (“National Movement 1389”) organized a protest walk from the Republic Square to the offices of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, to allegedly “hand over” a protest letter, a *swastika* and a map of Serbia to the Committee’s Chairwoman. Chanting “Kosovo is Serbia, we don’t need the EU”, followed with an outburst of whistles and banging on the Committee’s door, the demonstrators called for Biserko to step outside and accept their “gift”. Prior to this, the demonstrators gathered on the Republic Square for the 71st consecutive day, in front of a banner in support of Radovan Karadžić. A protest speech was held in which Sonja Biserko was called “*collaborator of the occupier*” and “*hater of her own people*”. That way, this protest which was filled with hate speech, turned into a hate crime, too, by a direct personal threat to Sonja Biserko, but also to other members of the Helsinki Committee. All media, without exception, reported on this aggressive assault calling it a „protest without incidents”.

Towards the end of September, YUCOM and *Women in Black* addressed a *letter of solidarity* to Sonja Biserko, regarding the hooligan attack against the Helsinki Committee by the violent group which calls itself “Pokret 1389”. On the same day, the letter was supported by more than 30 nongovernmental organizations. Demanding to meet Serbian President Boris Tadić and Interior Minister Ivica Dačić, these nongovernmental organizations reminded them that the media persecution against Sonja Biserko regarding the Helsinki Committee Human Rights Report for 2007 is going on for days and that Mrs. Biserko herself is exposed to an unprecedented pressure, discrimination and chauvinist attacks...and that she is actually being denied the right to opinion, in the name of alleged defense of a right to opinion, in a harangue that brands her an outcast from “homogenous Serbdom” and that by intimidating Sonja Biserko, all those are intimidated who

⁵ Reference to NGO activists and HRDs: Sonja Biserko, Nataša Kandić, Biljana Kovačević Vučo and Borka Pavićević

remember and want to reveal facts and demand responsibility for crimes committed in the name of us all during the 1990s, because an attack against them represents an attempt to cover up facts presented in the Report.

Nongovernmental organizations also urged state organs to finally start observing the Serbian Constitution and laws and to stop treating legal issues as ideological and political, and, in accordance with the Constitution and laws, which also replies to ratified international documents, to finally start implementing regulations pertaining to the *ban* of those organizations which in their work promote the ideas of hatred, discrimination, racism and all other forms of intolerance and hatred, without any political tricks, calculations and speculations.

During the entire month of October, attacks and hate speech in the media were continued against the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights Chairwoman Sonja Biserko. One of the strongest attacks was published in the *“Tabloid”* weekly, in an article titled *“Human Rights Defenders Cost More Than Human Rights”* and *“A Lesbian’s Vengeance”* in which *Milica Grabež*, a wannabe journalist, openly accuses Sonja Biserko of being a Croatian spy and assaulting and sexually abusing persons of same sex. While publishing her home address within the framework of that article, the author alleges her close relatives have been members of the *Zenge*, a Croatian military unit in the 1990s wars. This text is joined by an article by “journalist” *Milica Grabež* entitled *“Lesbian Seeking Revenge”* which, among other things, claims that Sonja Biserko *attacks and sexually harasses members of the same sex. ...*”Ms. Biserko is a lesbian and she has had several relationships, with girls who were thirty years younger than her. She is very generous to her lovers; she seeks them among the Serbian refugees...” In the same article, Sonja Biserko’s home address and other personal information were published, making her a “legitimate target” for all who can be affected by such hate speech.

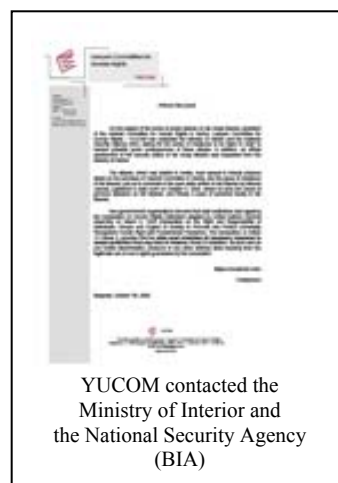
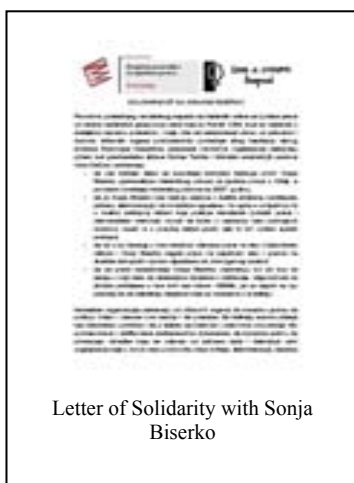
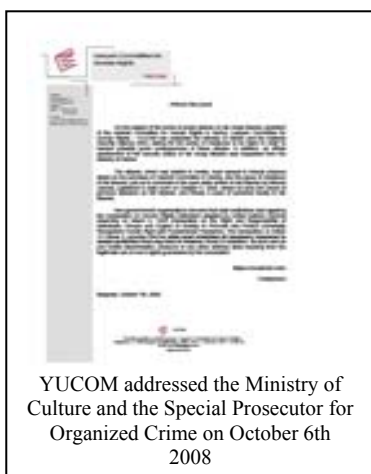
The October 4 2008 issue of the *“Pravda”* daily published a text by *Olga Stojanović*, *“Socrates’ Defense and Death”*, in which the author uses the case of Sonja Biserko to attack human rights defenders who until then already were frequent targets of her comments. Olga Stojanović wrote...”The ladies wanted a prosperity of unimaginable proportions and their homeland became small to them, so they found a bigger one, hoping that in their sixties they would achieve the fame of Simone de Beauvoir.” Going after those who defend Sonja Biserko, Olga Stojanović went on: ...“As if it matters how the press and the media, despised by them, in their own way, will comment the Report, the person, the *oeuvre*, the slit on the skirt and the non-Helsinki attributes by this, truly unimportant, but untalented female communist. In such a context, the Serbian Kundera – Momo Kapor – is being called a *“dangerous clown”* (Biljana Kovačević⁶) for only two reasons: because he used the term “Shiptar” and because he managed to stay funny in his later years and wrote somewhere that “Sonja Biserko will never wake up pretty and smart!”...I wonder, why is it allowed and legitimate to call this “brand” of the Serbian literary and the poetics of the urban modern writing a “clown”, while it isn’t allowed to question, even in a metaphor, something that is very questionable: Sonja Biserko’s wit and beauty?! However, when someone is being defended by Kovačević (pretty, smart, even uses slang) – anything goes, even the elimination of Vučelić⁷,

⁶ Chairwoman of the Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM)

⁷ Director General of Radio Television Serbia during the wars in former Yugoslavia. He never had to face criminal charges, even though during his tenure, RTS used to be the most monstrous propaganda machinery. He became wealthy under suspicious circumstances and today enjoys the reputation of one of the more important public figures.

Tijanić⁸, and the affirmation of every citation, every “ibidem” and every footnote of her client Vladimir Popović⁹”.

However, the persecution of Sonja Biserko continued on October 6 2008 when the “*Kurir*” daily published a letter of the prime defendant in the murder of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in which Ulemek, citing the *right to opinion* presents a whole series of the most *vulgar* and *primitive* qualifications of *Sonja Biserko*, Chairwoman of the *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*. Even if one would ignore the offensive language he uses with the aim to disqualify Mrs. Biserko, for example: “illiterate maggot“, “old, ugly, horny, arrogant“, ... “when she sees herself in the mirror in the morning and sees what she looks like, she hates the whole world and most of all, herself“..., something much more dangerous is to be found in this letter. *Legija*, a man multiply convicted for several political murders, including the murder of Prime Minister Đinđić, unambiguously *urges violence* against Sonja Biserko, accusing her of lack of patriotism and of offending the church and other institutions which he believes to be a measure of national pride of Serbs and Serbia. Legija, as a man of the underground, connected with the state security, surely did not write this letter inspired by the prison atmosphere after the analysis of the Report by the *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights*, but with the aim to *cause harm* to Sonja Biserko and to make her a *legitimate elimination target* by those same patriots as himself, who are numerous in the deeply criminalized Serbia. It is because of these attacks that YUCOM from Oct 6 to 9, 2008 has written to the *Special Prosecutor for Organized Crime, Interior Minister*, the *BIA* and *Minister of Culture* (who is simultaneously in charge of the media).¹⁰ In a letter addressed to the Interior Minister and the BIA security risks assessment for Sonja Biserko was demanded.



On that occasion, YUCOM addressed the *Special Prosecutor for Organized Crime*, the *Minister of Internal Affairs* and the *Minister of Culture*, in the period between October 6 and October 9 2008.¹¹

⁸ A loyal servant of every regime. He was Information Minister during Milošević, in the Mirko Marjanović Government; media advisor to FRY President Vojislav Koštunica, now the Director General of the public broadcasting service RTS.

⁹ Vladimir Beba Popović, close associate of Prime Minister Đinđić; he was Head of the Communication Bureau in the Đinđić Government; after the assassination of the Prime Minister he was proscribed to the extent that his basic safety was compromised. YUCOM handled his case as a strategic case of jeopardizing basic human rights and securities.

¹⁰ Saopštenja i pisma mogu se naći na web-site YUCOM-a: www.yucom.org.rs

¹¹ Announcements and letters can be found at the YUCOM website: www.yucom.org.rs



The attacks were also continued in the “*Pravda*” daily. In a text entitled “*Helsinki Committee Chairwoman Again Spits on her own Country*” published on October 24, “Pravda” suggests the *expelling* of Sonja Biserko, because at an international conference held in Priština, as claimed by this daily, she “advised the Kosovo ‘Government’ how to win over Serbs for the project of independence”. In this article, *Velimir Ilić*, Head of the oppositional New Serbia party, who has a long history of attacks against human rights defenders and Sonja Biserko, says: “It is high time to take some action so that individuals are prevented from spitting on their own country and its institutions.” *Elena Božić Talijan*, member of the Serbian Radical Party stated: “Biserko makes her living by dragging her country and the Serbian people through the mud”, adding that “...no one reacted to the previous report of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, either, which was of a fascist nature...” and that it was...”tragic that someone makes a living by disgracing their state and the Serbian people”. DSS official *Dragan Šormaz* joined the attacks, advocating the rule of law and democratic principles, but then shifted the whole case to the issue of non-transparent financing of NGOs (one of the classic stereotypes against NGOs). This article was accompanied entitled “*She Found an Example in Fascism*” with a statement by lawyer Toma Fila¹² in which he informs Sonja Biserko that before making such statements, she should have “visited Serbian graves”¹³, adding that the idea was not hers and not original (divide Serbs and conquer), because something similar was done with the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during World War II.

* * * * *

YUCOM sent a written request to the Security and Information Agency (BIA – formerly: State Security Department) demanding that it – pursuant to its competences defined by law – make a security risks assessment for Ms. Biserko, with a view of taking necessary protection measures since Ms. Biserko has also been threatened physically. The Security and Information Agency **never replied** to this request – an eloquent indicator of state authorities’ attitude to human security as a fundamental human right.

¹² Close friend and associate of Željko Ražnatović Arkan, defense attorney to several indictees before the Hague Tribunal and current special advisor to Interior Minister Ivica Dačić

¹³ The subject of Serbian graves has been relevant ever since the beginning of the wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia; in a way, it was installed by Dobrica Ćosić, who connected the Serbian identity and Serbian national interests to places where there are Serbian graves.