

THE SECURITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SERBIA AND POLITICAL AMBIENT IN WHICH THEY WORK, AFTER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF KOSOVO

After a decade of unsuccessful negotiating between the representatives of international community, officials of Serbia and Kosovo Albanians, on February 17, 2008, the Parliament of Kosovo has declared its independence from Serbia. During that same day, the first incidents of violence have been registered on the streets of Belgrade, when a group of around 300 mostly young persons, members of various football fans clubs, clero-fascist and chauvinist organizations, instigated by statements coming from political elite in Serbia, such as various members and representatives of Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), New Serbia (NS), and Serbian Radical Party (SRS), given during the day in connection to the Kosovo independence, have blocked the streets of Belgrade, and stoned and partially demolated the US Embassy and the Embassy of Slovenia.

Since that moments, an »organized call to lynch« started against all those who are supposed to think differently from this group and this part of political scene, on the issue of Kosovo independence, and against members of other ethnic, national, religious, political and other minorities, and particularly against *the part of Serbian NGOs that deal with promotion, protection, and advance of human rights*.

This is how on February 18, Serbian Minister for Kosovo and Metohija, Mr. Slobodan Samaržić, has given a statement that the strikes of Serbs from north Kosovo on police checkpoints on administrative border between Kosovo and Serbia is "legitimate. Maybe not nice, but legitimate.". During the same day, another minister in Serbian government, Velimir Ilic, has legitimized the incidents at the US Embassy stating that "The Serbian youth has not disappointed us... Some tend to call then hooligans, this should not be done, they came to express their revolt, they surely had good intentions.", and commenting that *"braking the windows can not be called violence, nor the grouping of such persons hooliganism"*.

The large parts of actual ruling political parties, opposition, political annalists close to those political circles, the so-called "independent intellectuals", tabloids and state-controlled (or controlled by various non-state actors) media, are almost unanimous in claims that some Serbian NGOs – before all the NGOs of human rights defenders (hrds) – have always been, in the past and now, "inside enemies and foreign servants" that "work on" the destruction of Serbian state. This is a way to manipulate the facts and create an atmosphere of clear separation in public that ends in open discrimination and publicly accepted violence toward hrds, thus putting this group into a highly dangerous situation that completely diminishes the security of their work.

During the times of Milosevic's regime, the public manipulation with terms "traitors" and "foreign servants" has frequently been explained by the lack of public understanding of the ways, methods, and goals of work of NGOs, hrds among them. The emergence of the same kinds of stereotypes about hrds as artificial Western fabrication cannot be rationalized today, 8 years after Milosevic's period, when the current government of Serbia, instead of taking serious steps toward democracy and values of civil society, is still using political monopoly as a tool for physical violence, and is spreading hatred and



violence against its political opponents, supported by right-wing nationalists, clero-fascists and chauvinist organizations and individuals.

This situation exists in Serbia for a couple of years, but has reached its climax after the populist meeting "Kosovo is Serbia", co-organized in Belgrade by the Government of Serbia, President of Serbia, Serbian Parliament, featuring the speeches of Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, SRS's president Tomislav Nikolić, and a number of other prominent public figures and (quasi) intellectuals. That was the meeting that ended in the spread of violence on Belgrade streets, torching the US Embassy, attacks on the embassies of Slovenia and Croatia, UK and Turkey, demolishing McDonalds restaurants, burning and rioting the shops with foreign goods, all disguised as logical reaction on unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo.

One of the speakers and participants on this meeting, the well-known director Emir Kusturica has directed the anger of citizens toward political opponents, hrrs, and several media, asking where "are domestic mices tonight, who lie for salaries and speak that we are nobodies and nothing, and who, for the small amounts of money, claim that our values are not civilized values", and where "are those who mock the Kosovo myth, and confront it with Holywood? I know where they are – they are in their holes!".

On February 22, as one of the results of such a situation, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights started receiving phone threats. The case has been reported to police immediatelly, after which one of the police inspectors has visited YUCOM offices.

The Web-page of SRS, as a part of forum discussion "LDP's (Liberal Democratic Party's) headquarters demolished", among other, issues the following comments:

"Veran Matić (director of RTV B92) and those four stooges (meaning Nataša Kandić from Humanitarian Law Center, Sonja Biserko from Serbian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, Biljana Kovačević-Vučo from YUCOM and Borka Pavićević from Center for Cultural Decontamination) have to remember the day of Kosovo "independence"!"

"Now nicely everyone bats in hands and snakes in our heads and every last one of traitors out of here ...".

Similar discussion appeared on the Facbook internet service, where a group named **„Extradite Nataša Kandić from Serbia“**, as a reaction on appearance of Natasa Kandic in Kosovo Parliament on February 17, states the following:

"The women have to definitely be proclaimed the enemy of the public, as well as the two other bitches (meaning Biljana Kovačević-Vučo and Sonja Biserko). The witches should be burned in public, the hunt on the witches should start immediately!!!!"

"And what to do with other two bastards, those Biserko and Vuco? If I was to decide, a small amount of gasoline and a match would solve the problem!!! This trio fantastico will anyhow eventually burn in hell!!!!"

This Internet forums and discussions not only represent uncensored hate speech, but also open calls to violence against Natasa Kandic and representatives of other hrd NGOs.



Finally, another discussion on Facebook service appeared under the name "Burn B92", where this media house is defined as "The worst traitor TV in Serbia, headed by the American scum Veran Matić! The group that assembles all anti-Serbs, such as Ceda Jovanovic (LDP), Natasa Kandic, Sonja Biserko and others", with comments:

... "greetings to Kandic, Pavicevic and other international stooges. Unfortunately, the poor Serbia lacks any poor Serbian TV channel!!".

"Flame, flame, flame and fire! But with care, culture, education, and flammability ...".

The campaign against political opponents was continued by Serbian Minister Velimir Ilic, who has given a statement on February 27, broadcasted by a number of Serbian media, answering the journalist question if the persons who think differently are safe in Serbia that ... "we cannot defend people who run the action that Kosovo is not ours, not to be beaten by someone from Kosovo". Answering the claims that he used to instigate violence by his statements in the past, Ilic has said that his political opponents are "those who had organized violence", when seen how many citizens have come to a "Kosovo is Serbia" meeting. Even the attacks on journalists during that day, according to Ilic, were parts of scenario directed from outside in order to bring hatred against those who fight for the dignity of Serbia.

These Ilic's statement were followed by the reaction and press release by 44 Serbian NGOs on February 28, where the following is written:

Forty four nongovernmental organizations harshly condemn last in a row of statements of Velimir Ilic, Minister for Infrastructure that is exceeding all of his previous ones, because it directly and openly instigates and invites on violence against political opponents, foremost against parliamentary group Liberal Democratic Party. In its statement dated on February 27, 2008, Minister Ilic stated that the state can not defend persons who "go and lead the action that Kosovo is not ours, from being beaten by someone who came from Kosovo" and by that statement called on reckon with individuals that have different approach towards Kosovo.

We must emphasize that, in the history of Serbia, never happened such a direct instigation on violence against persons with different standpoint, from an official position in the Government. Even during Milosevic period we didn't have members of the government openly calling on assault and violence, as we are witnessing today.

44 NGO are demanding from the Public Prosecutor to set in motion the procedure against Minister Ilic and instigates the responsibility of the Government of Serbia and background of these attacks. We are also demanding from President of Serbia Boris Tadic to react and to take a clear position towards these calls on violence that are increasing in the last weeks.

The letter is sent also to relevant international, European institutions, and embassies in Serbia.

During the same day, once popular rock singer, Borislav Djordjević, well-known for his extreme views, in his column in daily Politika, titled Chain Reaction, is writing: "The little that is left of traitors that were bought by either money or promised is inside their mouse holes (every society has its weeds). They can my".



The attacks on hrds continue during this week. This is how the director and editor in chief of one of the most popular Serbian dailies "Večernje novosti", Manojlo – Manjo Vukotić, in his author text "The bridge above the abyss" is, among the other, writing: "It is not that we, as various snakes who are paid for that claim, are asing for war and new isolation if we try to defend Kosovo. ... What a commotion has been started by "goodminded" just for a broken glass". And those "goodminded" persons, "Europeans", **non-governments**", "unionists" do not see, not even today, wonderful Belgrade buildings, just a couple of meters from those embassies, that have only concrete and stone skeletons, for the bombs flu through there in 1999, sent by planes and ships of the same countries of those "burnt" embassies".

In Serbia, after the declaration of independence of Kosovo, a false patriotic homogenization escalates to new levels. The stable and democratic government, insisted upon, in the past, by EU countries, but also the US, has ended in the stability of power of prime minister Vojislav Kostunica and lack of confronting and ambivalence of president Boris Tadic, who are in a way racing for the backing and popular support of the most extreme parts of the right-wing and nationalistic corpus. It can even be said that the democracy in Serbia has been annihilated by installation of Kosovo as untouchable legend, so that this irrational atmosphere is disabling any rational discussion and reaction on the themes of European integrations, human rights, and Kosovo. It is thus that in Serbia today the only legitimate political opinion on Kosovo is one of the Serbian Radicals and Vojislav Kostunica, while all the others are not different opinions, but treason. In Serbia today only exist self-proclaimed patriots, and scared and disoriented civil society, which was forced before, by the international community, to partnership and service for the proclaimed stable democratic government.

In such a situation the security of hrds, in the atmosphere of retaliation, lynch, and accusations for treason, is very grave. In the atmosphere of continuous extreme violence of verbal and physical nature against hrds, it seems that it is only a question of time when the calls on violence will turn to hate crime against a part of civil sector labeled as "traitors" and "foreign servants".

The situation has still not escalated to the level that we consider leaving the country, but this nevertheless remains open as a possibility. We deem the first step in enhancing the security of hrds should be issuing visas for longer time periods for the organizations threatened.

