

Human Rights and Democracy Violation

Early Warning *Weekly Newsletter* No. 2

With the mounting propaganda offensive related to Serbia's refusal to accept the Kosovo independence and parliamentary and local elections (scheduled for May 11) on the horizon, political life in Serbia is certain to assume a new quality and gain additional intensity. It is to be expected that these circumstances will have considerable impact on both the human rights condition and (dis)respect of democratic standards, principles and institutions. A number of events recorded during the elapsed week testify to this expectation.

1. Kosovo-related cases of disregard of human rights and democratic rules continue to increase in number and graveness of consequences they produce. A truckload of drugs and medical supplies intended for a hospital in a Serb-controlled town in Kosovo was stopped at the border due to incomplete paperwork: the UN customs officers could not let the drugs in unless a certificate issued by *Kosovo Drugs Administration* accompanied the documents. Serbian authorities refused to apply for the certificate because that would imply that they recognize the Kosovo authorities, i.e. Kosovo independence. During the ten-day standoff the recipient hospital ran out of supplies and a humanitarian catastrophe started dawning. It was only after an intervention by the *World Health Organization* that the blockade was lifted. This case clearly shows that consequences of Belgrade's refusal to recognize official institutions in Kosovo can be gravely detrimental to the Serb community inhabiting Kosovo, especially its parts closed in isolated enclaves. The storming of the *County Court* building in Kosovska Mitrovica on March 13th by its employees who had been discharged after the takeover of Kosovo by international authorities (UNMIK) 1999 represents not just example of this manipulation, but also a clear breach of the *Security Council* Resolution 1244 on Kosovo.

2. **Vladimir Putin** and Russian ambassador to Serbia **Aleksandr Alekseyev** were March 14th proclaimed honorary citizens of Požarevac, a small city where **Slobodan Milošević** was born and today lies buried. Požarevac is thus the 15th city (along with Novi Sad, Niš, Vrbas, Sombor, Loznica etc.) in Serbia to award honorary citizenship to **Putin** – another demonstration of Belgrade's servility toward the Russian *brother*.

3. The 5th anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister **Zoran Djindjić** was marked on March 12th with a special program broadcast on state television. Announced as an



investigative effort to shed light on the media environment in which the murder took place, the program turned into an uncritical and clumsy exercise in "defense" of journalists' self-appointed righteousness and abolition of all those who took active part in the media harangue that had preceded the murder. The program was dominated by individuals such as the present General Manager of the state-owned *Radio-Television of Serbia* (RTS) **Aleksandar Tijanić**, formerly a minister in a **Milošević** government and media adviser to PM **Koštunica**, famous for his fierce attacks on PM **Djindjić** prior to the latter's death ("If Djindjić survives, Serbia will not" – **Tijanić** wrote in a newspaper commentary just days before the assassination). In what amounts to a grave misuse of a public utility, **Tijanić** called upon the Special Organized Crime Prosecutor on March 16th to open an investigation of the alleged role of [former Head of the Government Communication Bureau] **Vladimir Beba Popović** in the conspiracy to kill the Prime Minister. In a statement widely publicized on state-owned RTS and its website, as well as in other media, **Tijanić** uses the very same arguments the defendants' lawyers have been using during the **Djindjić** murder trial, where these arguments were not accepted. It is symptomatic that **Tijanić's** newest outburst comes not only at the outset of an election campaign, but – more importantly – simultaneously with the appeal procedure before the *Supreme Court*.

4. March 12th also marked the 65th birthday of the No. 2 on the ICTY list of most wanted war crimes indictees, Bosnian Serb Gen. **Ratko Mladić**. Numerous posters and graffiti with congratulating messages were displayed throughout Belgrade, while several newspapers – including the high-circulation *Večernje Novosti* politically very close to the Government – carried uncritical reports.

Belgrade's *Justice Palace* – a complex housing several courts of law and prosecutors' offices – has become a playground of a series of false bomb alarms – five during the last two weeks. Phone calls alarming the police or justice authorities are usually placed during office hours while important deliberations are held. Chairwoman of Serbia's *Supreme Court* **Vida Petrović-Škero** said in her comment of the affair that "making such calls has become fashionable".

5. Belgrade's 4th Municipal Court fined March 11th **Zoran Petakov**, an anti-fascist activist from Novi Sad, €1.200 for alleged insult. The fine will be substituted with jail if not paid as ruled. **Petakov** was sued by Vojvodina's Bishop **Irinej** who was cited as one of *Serbian Orthodox Church* (SPC) dignitaries who support extreme rightist and neo-nazi groups in Serbia. Judge **Miroslav Bošnjak** passed the verdict and sentenced the defendant without having heard any evidence – including that of the plaintiff. In explaining the sentence, he insisted that **Petakov** –himself a victim of a brutal physical assault by neo-nazis during an anti-fascist manifestation - had "insulted the Bishop's impeccable personality" and thus "inflicted pain not only on Irinej, but all Christians including myself as a baptized Christian". The judge insisted that SPC "is not just an institution – it's much more than that" and refused to hear **Petakov** and his attorneys (YUCOM lawyers) who



submitted evidence that the neo-nazi groups enjoy support and protection of the Church. This verdict shows that freedom of expression is in great jeopardy in Serbia if critical attitude towards unacceptable activities and procedures is considered subversive and their perpetrators placed above the law by judicial authorities.

6. The Management of the Belgrade University *Law School* refused on March 11 to give its permission to a student group called *Europe Has No Alternative* to mark the 5th anniversary of the **Djindjić** assassination with a public panel on European integrations. The explanation of the ban argued that “the complex political situation related to Kosovo” and “upcoming parliamentary and local elections” did not create good conditions for an event like that, adding that “the Faculty does not want to drag itself into politics”. Over the years the *Law School* has been the venue of numerous highly politicized events staged by *Nomokanon* – an extreme rightist student group – and other neo-Nazi organizations. More than 50 LS professors are members of a Committee to support [the Bosnian Serb war criminal] **Radovan Karadžić**.

Outlook:

The dissolution of Parliament and the already ongoing fierce election campaign in Serbia against the background of “patriotic” homogenization around the *Kosovo is Serbia* slogan, represent a favorable environment for practices inconsistent with the uphold of human rights and democratic values. “Equipped” only with a caretaker government with no parliamentary control, Serbia’s feeble democracy is bound to fall prey to regressive political ideas and forces, providing ample room for cheap demagogy and **unscrupulous** manipulation and blatant violations of basic rights and liberties.



YUCOM