



YUCOM

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Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Weekly Newsletter* No. 6

1. Serbia's *Constitutional Court* ruled Apr. 8 to sustain a petition by the extreme nationalistic *Serbian Radical Party* (SRS – the strongest party in (the now dissolved) Parliament, holding 81 of 250 seats - challenging the constitutionality of a *Republic Election Commission* (RIK) decision aimed at affirmative action towards ethnic minorities. The hitherto applied rule stipulated that ethnic minorities' political parties supply 3,000 signatures needed for their election ticket to be admitted, whereas other contending parties and groups needed 10,000. Although this decision is based on the law, it is unacceptable to alter the election criteria in the middle of an election campaign, to the detriment of groups who, having already suffered various forms of discrimination, counted with unchanged rules on the occasion of these elections, too. Ethnically based political parties will thus be deprived of possibilities they were guaranteed at the last election 2007. The *Constitutional Court's* decision, passed in a closed session, caused discomfort and condemnation in ethnic communities who tend to view it as yet another indication of their discriminated position in a political climate marked by „patriotic“ homogenization around the over-heated Kosovo issue.

This decision is politically motivated, since it questions the very idea of ethnic Albanian, Roma and Montenegrine parties' participation in the election and, consequently, leaves them without representation in Parliament.

2. After the acquittal of **Ramush Haradinaj**, Former Prime Minister of Kosovo, of all charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity before the *International War Crimes Tribunal* (ICTY) at The Hague, a wave of condemnations and hostile propaganda against that institution was set in motion in Serbia. Amidst the already fierce propaganda partly due to the upcoming parliamentary, provincial (Vojvodina) and municipal elections (scheduled for May 11), the decision by the UN-founded *Tribunal* was denounced by prominent politicians, jurists, international law experts and journalists as yet another proof of a broad-based conspiracy against the Serbs and a clear sign of sympathy with what the Serbian establishment tends to view as enemies of the Serb nation. Prime Minister **Vojislav Koštunica** – himself a jurist with a Ph.D in Constitutional Law – accused the European Union of plotting against Serbia, and called upon it to „reexamine the injustice“ done to Serbia and „start a procedure of evaluating the legitimacy of the ICTY in The Hague“. This move is followed by a flood of media reports accusing the *Tribunal* of complicity with the USA, NATO and EU in an attempt „to humiliate Serbia, ...





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deprive her of the last atom of self-respect, and then maybe let join Europe ... in a horrible criminal design of the West“, says Editor-in-Chief of the Belgrade daily *Press* in his editorial. In many of such reactions the demand is put forward that Serbia suspends or abolishes the *Law on Cooperation With the Hague Tribunal* and terminates any cooperation with it.

3. In separate interviews to the *Alo* and *Gazeta* tabloids **Milan Obradović** of the extreme rightist organization *Obraz* reiterated his organization's intention to make it out to the streets on the occasion of the Eurovision Song Contest *Eurosong* (Belgrade, May 2008) and prevent expected LGBT manifestations if necessary by force (see *Newsletter* No. 5): „We're talking about the most normal response of all Serbian men and women who are concerned about their people's health and sanity ... We will not allow any sort of fagot parade, they are free to do whatever they want in their homes, but that won't be possible in the streets of Serbian Belgrade“, he said. **Obradović** repeatedly bragged about his organization's „success“ in preventing the Belgrade *Pride parade* 2001 when gay participants were brutally beaten.

A joint letter by YUCOM and *Queeria*, urging the Public Prosecutor and the Interior Ministry to act in accordance with the law, remains unanswered. Websites of extreme rightist organizations such as *Serbian Nationalists* (www.srpskinacionalisti.com) meanwhile turned into tribunes for fierce attacks on LGBT, announcing „20,000 fagots coming to Belgrade – get ready!“, and calling them „the disease which must be exterminated“.

4. A comprehensive survey organized by *Gay Straight Alliance* in Belgrade and carried out by the *Center for Free Elections and Democracy* (CeSID) shows that the attitude of the Serbian public towards LGBT issues and population is predominantly homophobic: 70% of the respondents are convinced that homosexuality is an illness.

Having in mind the importance of this topic and the fact that the survey reflects various phenomena characterizing contemporary Serbian condition, the *EWS* will highlight the most interesting findings and document them in one of the next issues of this *Newsletter*.

5. During a youth organization's public performance in Novi Sad on Apr. 11 **Dinko Gruhonjić**, a journalist and President of the *Independent Journalists Association of Vojvodina* (NDNV) was hindered by the police while performing his journalistic work, and subsequently taken into custody for identification. A group of 30 nongovernmental organizations issued a communique condemning this assault on media freedom, but their protest found absolutely no resonance in the media – an indication of professional solidarity development level in present-day Serbia. It is very symptomatic that a vast majority – including even NGO representatives and journalists themselves – do not view it as a problem if





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journalists are detained while on assignment. Although the law explicitly stipulates that law enforcement officers are allowed to demand ID from any person only in specific situations and on grounds specified by law, the public in this country does not seem to know that such actions on the part of authorities represent acts of repression.

6. Novi Sad was a scene of two violent incidents accompanying the election campaign: **Jelena Gregurić**, Chairperson of the *Liberal Democratic Party's* (LDP) youth organization was attacked and brutally beaten on Apr. 8 by unidentified bullies while handing out LDP fliers in a suburb of Vojvodina's capital.

7. **Branislav Ristivojević**, *Democratic Party of Serbia's* (DSS) candidate for Mayor of Novi Sad and Legal Advisor to the Prime Minister **Koštica**, stormed an LDP information stand in Novi Sad on Apr. 11, threw its propaganda material on the ground and tore posters off a wall.

8. A picket line organized by LDP activists in front of the seat of one of the tabloids especially active in demonizing pro-European forces, the demand was set forth that ownership of that and all other media be made public and transparent. This action was met with disapproval in most media, majority of political parties and journalists' organizations: **Nadežda Gaće**, Chairwoman of the *Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia* (NUNS) dismissed the demand as an „act of pressure on media freedom“. President **Tadić's** open letter to the *Politika* daily on the occasion of the newspaper's highly questionable report on the alleged wealth of the deceased Mayor of Belgrade, was also denounced as a form of pressure on media freedom.

9. According to an exclusive report carried by the *Blic* daily on Apr. 9, unidentified „former operatives of the State Security of the Republika Srpska“ had conspired to kill the War Crimes Special Prosecutor **Vladimir Vukčević** and two Government Ministers in Belgrade. The Prosecutor's Office was informed of that by an insider who decided to cooperate. Government circles did not comment the report, although names of Ministers **Djilas** and **Dinkić** were mentioned.

10. Employment State Secretary in the Ministry of Economy and Regional Development, **Vladimir Ilić**, presented a draft law on employment of handicapped persons and announced the adoption of the law as soon as a new Parliament is in place after the upcoming elections. **Ilić** stressed that 10% of Serbia's population is considered to be handicapped, whereas 75% of persons with special needs live in „difficult material conditions“. The new law will oblige entrepreneurs with more than 20 employees to employ one such person. For additional 50 workers another one will have to be employed. Failure to observe these provisions will be fined, the draft law stipulates.





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11. A Municipal Court in Zrenjanin pronounced all three parties in a lawsuit litigated after an exchange of charges pressed between **Ivan Danikov** (Editor in the *Art Project Publishers*) and **Dalibor Bubnjević** (Editor-in-chief of *Zrenjanin Magazine*) on the one, and Prof. **Vladimir Ilić** (University of Belgrade *Faculty of Philosophy*, Director of the *Zrenjanin Civic Society Development Center*) on the other side, guilty of insult and slander. The case had to do with Prof. **Ilić** protesting **Bubnjević's** appointment to the post in the *Zrenjanin* magazine, and his view that appointing a person who openly favored neo-Nazi ideology is unacceptable.

The book contained the political program of the *National Front* (Serbian chapter of *Stormfront*) advocating abolishment of parliament, a ban on racially mixed marriages, denial of civil rights to persons of „inferior races“, racial segregation, etc. Prof. **Ilić's** condemnation of the book and of the decision to publish it, as well as his opposition to **Bubnjević's** appointment was used by the latter and **Danikov** to press charges, whereupon Prof. **Ilić** filed his own lawsuit on grounds of slander and libel. The Court ruled that all three parties were „guilty of publicly insulting each other and making their insults available to the public by means of statements in the media“ – a disturbing example of equalization of advocates of neo-Nazi ideology and its opponents.

12. Children's magazine *The Little Knight*, issued by the Belgrade *Knight* agency and distributed in grammar schools (pupils of age between 7 and 12) throughout Serbia carried in its April issue a comic strip with messages dealing with Serbia's relations with Russia and the US, whereby the former is glorified as „the strongest nation in the world“ and the latter ridiculed as simple-minded and obsessed with materialism. Ministry of Culture issued 2001 a certificate proclaiming the magazine to be „a publication of special importance for education and culture“. The *Little Knight's* Advisory Board includes some of the staunchest advocates of militant xenophobic Serbian nationalism and opposition with Serbia's integration in the community of free and democratic nations.

Outlook:

Use, misuse and abuse of the media and an extremely „creative“ interpretation of media freedom, coupled with the election campaign in an highly electricized „patriotic“ environment - whereby journalists themselves often fail to recognize where the mission of impartial and unbiased information work gives way to uncritical servility to powerful figures in politics and business – will continue to contaminate the media space of Serbia for a long time to come.

