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## Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Weekly Newsletter* No. 11

1. During the month of May, as the international *Freedom of the Press Day* is observed, a series of events occurred that vividly testify that Serbia is still far from being a media environment where fundamental principles of professional ethic are respected:

Several schools in Belgrade, Pirot and Novi Sad were venues of serious cases of violence where teenagers bullied, intimidated and molested their peers in a humiliating way, including sexual abuse. These incidents were filmed by participating or by-standing youths with cell-phone cameras and put up on the Internet. Instead of initiating a broad social debate on the increasing presence of violence as one of the dominant models of behavior in Serbia today – especially in schools<sup>1</sup> - these cases were widely reported in all media in a sensationalistic way reducing the problem to students who either slipped out of their parents' or school authorities' control, or are beyond "measures of normative, repressive or punitive character", as **Biljana Lajović**, a psychologist in the state-run *Institute for the Advancement of Education*, put it. Media reports were accompanied with photos and detailed descriptions of the course of events. Reactions on the part of the Education Ministry and other relevant authorities were mild and aimed at diminishing the scope and consequences of these phenomena. The minister did not find it necessary to express his stand in public.

2. The *Kurir* daily carried May 22 an article (Headline: Car Smashes Kid to Pieces) about a teenager killed in a car accident. A detailed description of injuries was obtained from the police, the tabloid wrote, was accompanied by a photo of the mutilated victim lying in an open-lid coffin, contained his full name and showed numerous members of the deceased's family. Neither representatives of the authorities nor journalists' associations reacted to this outright violation of both victim's and his family's rights and basic principles of professional ethic.

3. *Freedom House* published its *Freedom of the Press Index* 2008 list. Of 195 countries and territories reviewed, Serbia was classified as "partly free" and shares ranks 84 to 88 rank (2007: 84 to 86), whereas it occupies rank 12 on the list of 28 countries of Central

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<sup>1</sup> According to UNICEF 65% of school children have been victims of some kind of violence over the last three months, 25% experience some sort of systematic violence, whereas 30% have complained over their teachers' and professors' violent behavior and attitude towards students.





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and Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union. Both lists and detailed country reports, as well notes on the methodology applied, can be viewed at: [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

4. The Hague-based *International Court of Justice* starts May 26 deliberating genocide charges pressed against Serbia by the Republic of Croatia. The charges, pertaining to atrocities committed by the then *Yugoslav People's Army* (JNA) and Belgrade controlled paramilitary units during the war in (Croatia 1991-95) are challenged by the Serbian Government on jurisdiction inapplicability grounds: Belgrade maintains that the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was neither a UN member nor a signatory to the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* at the time the lawsuit was filed.

Several days before the case was opened it was used to launch a new propaganda offensive against NGOs dealing with transitional justice issues, primarily against the *Humanitarian Law Center* (HLC) and its founder and Director **Nataša Kandić**. Ms. **Kandić's** activities in investigating warcrimes in Croatia and HLC's cooperation with similar organizations there were pointed at in the *Kurir* daily May 23 and used as „proof“ of their involvement in a campaign against Serbia, aimed at „condemning the entire Serbian nation“.

5. Director of the Government's *Office for Human and Minority Rights*, **Petar Ladjević** said in an interview May 16 that no one can estimate the level of homophobia in Serbia. In what amounts to a misuse of this official capacity to express his personal views on homosexuality, Mr. **Ladjević** equalized the activities of extreme conservative circles with those of gay and lesbian organizations: „The first reason being that no precise surveys have been conducted, and, secondly, it is my deep conviction that the surveys that have been carried out have not dealt with fully representative samples. What is certain is that there is homophobia, but the question of homophobia cannot be resolved only by putting it on the agenda merely as a question of homophobia. Human rights as a whole should be promoted: it is by means of enlightening activities that people should be made to understand that such a thing is natural and by no means sick or something like that. As far as homophobia is concerned, I personally don't object only to the way ultra-conservative organizations react; I am equally annoyed by those who promote the right to homosexuality or differing sexual orientation, whatever it may be, who always attach an overemphasized ideological significance to it, and do not deal with it as a human rights issue and each individual's right to free choice.





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6. As the actual negotiations on a new coalition government in Serbia in the wake of the May 11 parliamentary election are yet to begin, a coalition around the *Socialist Party of Serbia* (SPS – founded 1990 by **Slobodan Milošević**) appears to have assumed the role of a king-maker. While waiting to see what way the Socialists will turn, the Serbian public is witnessing a range of inappropriate reactions to the alleged „reform course of a modern and progressive SPS“ and its satellites such as **Dragan Marković Palma**, President of the small *Unified Serbia* (JS) party and a close associate of the notorious war criminal **Željko Ražnatović Arkan**. Instead of presenting an eventual coalition with the DS as an opportunity for the Socialists to transform themselves and renounce the policy of continuity with and loyalty to **Milošević**, there is a wave of euphoric tastelessness in praising the SPS, that carries in itself the danger of imposing the value standards still dominant in the SPS on a future coalition for a European Serbia and thus render all strivings towards a European Serbia absurd. A recent (May 19, 2008) statement by President **Tadić**: „It is my job to work for national reconciliation in Serbia, to have the political forces of the 1990s and those that lead Serbia after 2000 join together around common goals, to ... reduce tensions and misunderstandings...” indicates that even the Democrats are not immune to putting culprits and victims of the disastrous policies of the 1990s on equal footing.

7. Hundreds of people queue in front of police stations in Novi Sad – the second largest city in Serbia - already during the evening hours, hopeful to be able to get their turn next morning and file an application for the issuance of a new identity card. The only two precincts authorized and equipped to accept and process these applications have the capacity of 44 (forty-four) day in a city with a population of over 300,000.

Possession of an identity card is a must in almost any interaction between citizens and authorities, as well as in commercial transactions, banking operations etc. The law stipulates that citizens are to carry their ID-cards on their person at all times – the failure to do so is punishable.

### Outlook:

Increasingly frequent examples of school violence and similar extremely sensitive incidents involving children and their families, and the authorities' careless and indifferent attitude towards such blatant disrespect and violation of human rights, indicate that there is insufficient awareness of the magnitude and importance of the problem. The sensationalistic coverage of these topics in the media testify to the (low) level of professional ethic in a profession that is vitally important for the overall social advancement. Serbia has so far had a disappointing track record in both areas.





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