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Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Weekly Newsletter* No. 25

Željko Vasiljević¹, State Secretary in the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, gave a peculiar contribution to the debate on demographic trends in present-day Serbia. With the alleged view to alleviating the problem of the so-called “white plague” – decreasing number of births – he suggested that 100,000 young women from geographically (and politically) close countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus), but also from Vietnam, Laos Cambodia, be imported and married to Serbian bachelors in some rural areas of the country. Mr. **Vasiljević** “substantiated” his plea with arguments such as: “Asian women cherish a birth cult” and “Buddhism is close to Serb Orthodox Christianity”. The initial proposal was made several months ago, Mr. **Vasiljević** said, but now it has a shape of a 120-page project that includes suggestions as to what institutions would be in charge of implementing it.

The proposal was met with fierce criticism coming mostly from NGOs, but it was soon shared by both Ombudsmen's offices of Serbia and Vojvodina, and articulated into a demand that Mr. **Vasiljević** be relieved of his duty in Government because what he was advocating was “institutionalized human trafficking”. However, his superior, Minister **Rasim Ljajić**, while sharing the condemnation of Mr. **Vasiljević's** views, insisted that he can not dismiss him, “since such a step would bring Government's survival in jeopardy”.

In a belated statement to the media Mr. **Vasiljević** apologized for “whatever damage” he might have caused, insisted that the views expressed had been his alone, and reiterated his conviction that import of young women would contribute to solving Serbia's demographic problems.

Mr. **Vasiljević** continues to perform his duties in Government.

On the occasion of Sep. 15, the International Democracy Day, *Coalition for Free Access to Information* issued a statement concerning Serbian authorities' failure to respect one of the basic principles of democracy –citizens' right to launch legislative initiatives.

¹ **Mr. Vasiljević**, who prior to joining the Government held a seat in Parliament on the *Socialist Party of Serbia's* (SPS) ticket, is also known as founder of a paramilitary unit called *Prince Lazar's Guard* and advocate of a return of Serbia's military to Kosovo.





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2. The *Constitution* of the Republic of Serbia guarantees its citizens' right to launch legislative initiatives independently from political parties and/or state authorities. The *Coalition for Free Access to Information* collected and on December 7, 2007 submitted to Parliament 72,000 signatures of citizens petitioning to amend the *Free Access to Public Information Act* and a draft *Declassification of Information Act*. According to the provisions of the Parliament's *Rules of Procedure*, its Speaker is obliged to forward such initiatives to all MPs, parliamentary committees and the Government immediately upon receipt.

Nine months on, these proposals are not listed with other legislation pending debate or adoption in spite of the fact that they had been submitted in full accordance with regulations foreseen by law, nor is it known whether they have been made available to all addressees mentioned above, as stipulated by the *Rules of Procedure*.

Unfortunately this is not the only example of outright disregard of citizens' initiatives aimed at upholding and implementing their rights enshrined in the Constitution.

3. Since the parliamentary election held on May 11, 2008 Serbia's *People's Assembly* has met only twice and managed to agree only on its own agenda, as well as to ratify the *Stabilization and Association Agreement* (SAA) with the EU and an *Energy Agreement* with the Russian Federation.

Throughout the election campaign – dominated by pro-European rhetoric of the parties that presently constitute the government coalition – harmonization of Serbian legislation with EU standards was in the forefront of contenders' programmatic declarations.

However, since its constitution on June 11, 2008 Parliament has not been able to pass any laws – a fact that directly questions Serbian political class' declarative commitment to European integration.

A total of 49 laws should be enacted if Serbia is to continue along the path towards EU membership. Out of 13 such laws that should have been adopted by the end of July only six have been drafted by the Government and submitted to Parliament. Adoption of additional 19 bills was foreseen for September, drafts of only two await parliamentary debate. Remaining seventeen laws should be debated and passed by the end of the year, none of which has been submitted to Parliament, and the drafting of eleven² is in its initial phase.

The outstanding pieces of legislation regulate areas essential to not only Serbia's EU accession, but also her further development as a viable democracy with functioning

² Data published in: *Politika*, Aug. 6, 2008, p. 07.





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institutions. These areas include: data protection; border and aliens; environment protection; organized crime, corruption and money laundering combating.

The delay in legislative activities was caused by inter-party conflict and endless bargaining between parliamentary parties, as well as their disagreement on Serbia's priorities that eventually resulted in a complete paralysis and a six-week recess. It remains to be seen whether the resumption of Parliament's work will bring a turnaround in this trend.

Outlook:

Irrespective of the urgency of numerous problems burdening not only Serbia's accession to Europe but the entire complex of her speedier modernization, political elites seem unable to define clear priorities in economic policies, institutional reform, regional and foreign policy: privatization lags behind, institutions are looked upon as mere instruments of party politicking, Kosovo is used to prevent any serious debate on the country's future, relations with the immediate neighborhood are at the lowest level since the 1990s Balkan wars, and a dubious "both-Russia-and-Europe" approach to foreign policy seriously impedes Serbia's integration into modern international affairs.

