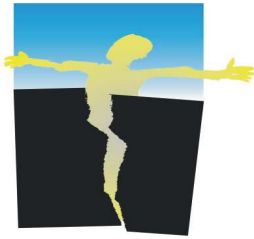


# HELSINKI Bulletin



*Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*

Rige od Fere str. #20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia  
tel./fax +381 11 30 32 408; e-mail office@helsinki.org.rs ;  
www.helsinki.org.rs

*Nº 44 • October 2009*

## **Radicalization: A Constant Threat to Democratic Forces**



In the second half of 2009 violence in Serbia was among key topics prevailing in the media and political circles alike. Despite the fact that neo-Nazi and “patriotic” organizations, well-organized groups of football fans and other movements ideologically close to them are here both main promoters and executioners, the public discourse often turns a blind eye to those clearly defined actors and refers to “extremists” or, generally, to “violence” as such and “the violent character of the Serbian society.” Given that no relevant researches have dealt with the activities of afore-mentioned organizations so far, the only relevant insights into the phenomenon of violence can be obtained from media reporting and actions taken by governmental authorities on the one hand, and reports by domestic NGOs and international human rights organizations on the other. Speaking of the state’s actions against violence, one cannot but note that fascist phenomena are being relativized, a clear-cut critical stance ab-

sent and extreme rightist ideologies by certain intellectual circles propagated without reservations.

In addition, a number of violent incidents never reach the general public since the media show no sensibility for such cases. For instance, repression against Roma is rarely tackled by the media except in the flagrant situations such as the one marking the Belgrade Universiade (July 2009). The same refers to homophobia. The LGTB population is not only exposed to verbal violence but also to brutal, physical assaults and abuse by neo-Nazi groups. And, one cannot but be concerned over the fact that every second woman in Serbia is subjected to either psychological or physical violence the perpetrators of which are men in 90 percent of all cases.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> According to the Statistics Bureau, family violence in 2008 has triples when compared with 2004, and its victims are usually women. Minister of Labor and Social Policies Rasim Ljajic presented the official statistics on violence against women at the press conference on September 18, 2009, in the Media Center, Belgrade.

The general public inclines towards stereotypes stemming from the predominant concept of “national unity” that excludes any diversity (sexual, religious, ethnic and even political).

### The roots of violence



In 1990s several generations have been raised by the model of unpunishable violence. Sociological roots of violence – characteristic of transition and the wars in 1990s – indicate several relevant factors that have been in play in Serbia simultaneously and continually: poverty of a considerably part of the society, social disorganiza-

tion, omnipresence of fire arms and inefficient fight against crime.

Though largely responsible for the wars in 1990s, the state of Serbia has been denying its involvement in them since. Such attitude firmly established an opportunistic model of social behavior – avoidance of any responsibility whatsoever. The continued violence in the public sphere – which became “legitimate” and normal behavior as time went by because it met no critical response or punishment – practically desensitized the society about violence as such.

National institutions such as the Serb Orthodox Church and political parties promoting ultra-conservatism provide the backdrop against which extremely nationalistic groups such as *Obraz*, *Nacionalni Stroj (National Front)*, *Dveri*, *Krv i Cast (Blood and Honor)*, *National Movement 1389*, etc. are mushrooming.

*The Obraz (Face) Fatherland Movement* is an extreme rightist organization that – the same as *the Serb National Movement 1389* – stages threatening actions and issues lynch calls against persons of different ethnic, religious or sexual affiliation. Declaratively, it advocates the values of Serbhood, national homogeneity and “return” of all Serb lands, “Serb togetherness instead of anti-Serb democracy” and “Eastern-Orthodox piety instead of atheism and sectarianism.” Both organizations reveal their fascist characters through close cooperation with their Russian namesakes.<sup>2</sup> The “Friends” page at the *Obraz National Movement’s* website provides a link to the Russian National Front (a political-educational organization with blatantly racist statutes focusing the safeguard of the white Aryan race.)<sup>3</sup>

Activism of the said organizations came into public focus when their followers – together with “football fans” and some dignitaries of the Serb Orthodox Church – physically assaulted partici-

<sup>2</sup> Organizations protesting outside the Embassy of Serbia in Moscow on October 5 demanding liberation of Miladin Obradovic and Misa Vasic. During the protest aiming at, as they put it, to support all nationally and racially conscious activists, the followers of the two organizations were carrying posters saying, „Serbia to Serbs – Stop to Repression.“

<http://www.ns-russia.org/news/7>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ns-russia.org/statute>

pants of the first Gay Parade in Belgrade in 2001. When another Gay Parade (officially Gay March) was announced for September 2009, *Obraz*, 1389 and *Pokret "Nasi"* (Movement "Ours") promptly reacted with threats to participants in the parade. The leader of *Obraz*, Mladen Obradovic publicly warned that the very attempt to stage such a parade was directed against major sanctities of the Serb nation – religion, Church and family. "Everybody knows what's going to happen if the parade takes place. All the responsibility for whatever might happen will be on organizers. They cannot poke their fingers into the eye of the Serb nation, said Obradovic. As for *Obraz*, it let all and sundry know, "We do not invoke violence, we just warn that Serbs will get into the streets and, the same as their Russian brothers, scatter that satanical meeting."<sup>4</sup>



Articles penned by Bosko Obradovic (secretary of the Management Board of *Dveri*, a non-governmental organization actively advocating homophobia and supporting neo-Nazi groups) are available at the website of *Nova Srpska Politicka Misao (New Serb Political Thought)*, a magazine for "political theory and social research" edited by a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Belgrade University. Promotion of "Serb identity" is preconditioned by denial of the rights of those allegedly jeopardizing it.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Kurir*, June 15, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> „The so-called protection from discrimination of any minority way of thinking and lifestyle was planned as the first step of the long-term strategy for deconstruction of national identity of the Serb people. Criminal proceedings against any public advocacy of any way of thinking and lifestyle opposite to those that are now protected under the law and

The MP from the Nova Srbija (New Serbia) party, Aleksandra Jankovic, known for her homophobic propaganda and stereotypes about a gay-lesbian lobby, said, "The parade is advocated for by the gay establishment, which aggressively sacrifices the rest of homosexual population for its own needs and financial objectives, and which has its investors in various centers. Many gay people wonder how come that some unrepresentative organizations are entitled to stand for them. Many gay activists are not actually gay – they just follow a modern, but most profitable trend."<sup>6</sup>

### **Pride Parade – a challenge for the state**

In the general atmosphere of fear on the eve of the planned Pride Parade, Republican Prosecutor Slobodan Radovanovic called fascists' threats "polemic overtones" and said he saw no reason for his Office to react. "We cannot react at news stories, we can react only at their factual consequences," he said.



In addition to the state's irresponsible reaction, many media outlets, notably tabloids, carried the messages the said organizations were sending to the gay-lesbian community. Actually, this made a part of the campaign for cancellation of the Parade. Some circles of the Serb intelligence society certainly had their hands in all this. Namely, a week

prividged would be the second crucial step. In everyday life, this means that promoters of homosexuality are now not only given a free hand to influence the Serb society but also legally protected against any opposite stand, which will be prosecuted draconically as hate speech and discrimination under the long-term strategy for deconstruction of Serbs' national identity." Bosko Obradovic, [www.nspom.org.rs](http://www.nspom.org.rs)

<sup>6</sup> *Kurir*, June 15, 2009.

before the planned Pride Parade, high-circulation dailies such as *Politika* and *Vecernje Novosti*, were carrying stories that, without any reservation, called for the lynch of the gay population on the set date. The stories expounded the strategy for assault, quoted messages by *Obraz* and 1389, and carried “recommendations” by anonymous sources from security services.<sup>7</sup> All this created the atmosphere meant to mobilize those groups to brutally scatter the announced Parade on the one hand, and to force state authorities to officially ban it on the other. And all this, taken together, was meant to show that the incumbent government was too weak to have any situation under control.

Just before and immediately after the ban on the planned Pride Parade, followers of the extreme rights ideology attacked several foreign nationals. The most tragic of all – when on September 17, 2009, a group of some 20 young persons brutally attacked with metal rods three French citizens – ended in a death of one of the three, Bruce Taton /28/, who succumbed to the injuries in a hospital several days later.



Here is one of the reactions dealing with the latest wave of violence: “Violent behavior of football fans is used as a pretext for violence against patriotic groups, organizations, parties and intellectuals. Foreigners and Serbia’s Euro-Atlantic politicians are worried over the potential of the cooperation between football fans, nationalist organizations and patriotic forces on the one hand, and growingly embittered

<sup>7</sup> „Serbia’s security agencies estimate that on September 20 leftist organizations, parents’ associations and football fans will jointly try to prevent the Pride Parade by the use of force unless its organizers give up on the meeting in the meantime.“ *Politika*, September 15, 2009.

tered victims of a failed transition and the global economic crisis on the other.”<sup>8</sup> Social poverty and working class are being instrumentalized through the propaganda identifying masses of hooligans and aggressively chauvinistic parties as natural allies of impoverished citizens.



### Reaction by the state

The Ministry of Justice initiated the ban on *Obraz*, 1389 and some football fan groups before the Constitutional Court.<sup>9</sup> *Nacionalni Stroj* – a Nazi organization as it declares itself – has not been banned yet and its case is still under consideration. On the grounds of information submitted by the Public Prosecutor the Constitutional Court decides on the ban on these organizations. Oliver Antic, professor at the Faculty of Law, takes that the authorities could misuse the law should *Obraz* and 1389 be banned, and calls a possible ban on football fans groups “senseless” (in saying that he quotes the murder of French citizen Bruce Taton.) “If an organization has a founding act or statutes that explicitly quote Gypsies or Jews as targets, that’s quite another story,” says Antic. “They are just children who like having a political idea or a political course of their own...See, they were marching to Gazimestan, actually doing what the Con-

<sup>8</sup> *Pecat*, Branko Radun, October 9, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the Ministry of the Police and the Public Prosecution have not done enough to prevent violence and overt threats. Leader of *Obraz* Mladen Obradovic was not arrested despite the fact that he should have been prosecuted ex officio under Article 10 of the Anti-discrimination Act, for his lynch calls against the LGBT population, as well as under Article 387 of the Criminal Code (racial and other discrimination). And when leaders of the two organizations were finally arrested, one of them, Misa Vasic, along with 34 of his comrades, was taken into custody for „disturbing public order and organizing a meeting despite police ban“ and only after cancellation of the Pride Parade.

stitution provides. On the other hand, you have a gay activist advocating recognition of Kosovo's independence...Such statement opposes Serbia's territorial integrity and is contrary to the Constitution...Those kids from 1389 went after him because his statements were contrary to their political logic and Serbia's constitutional provisions," he adds referring to the organization 1389.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to Serbia's judiciary, the Venice Commission's report for 2006 provides the facts that can explain court decisions. Namely, Serbia has no constitutional guarantee for independent judiciary – judges are appointed by the Supreme Judiciary Council the members of which are themselves appointed by the parliament.



The court decision in the case Aleksandar Tijanic, director of the public broadcasting service RTS, vs. NGO YUCOM for "infringed copyrights" is indicative too. Namely, YUCOM has compiled Tijanic's statements – given throughout his political and journalistic career - and published them in a book titled "The Case of Public Servant Aleksandar Tijanic." YUCOM was mostly focused on the statements "telling of his overt misogyny, brutal defamation of political opponents, representatives of non-governmental organizations and some liberal intellectuals, which objectively make him unsuited for the office of the Director of RTS, the office to which he was appointed during Vojislav Kostunica's premiership and which he still occupies."<sup>11</sup> Though all the quotes have been qualified as legal by the Belgrade District Court, which dismissed Tijanic's charge, the Supreme

<sup>10</sup> B92, September 23, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> [www.yucom.org.rs](http://www.yucom.org.rs)

Court of Serbia ruled against YUCOM in a retrial. The decision was obviously politically motivated. The Supreme Court quotes in the explanation of the verdict, "Since the said quotes by the author (the plaintiff) have been taken out of context, the meaning of his authorial work was deprived of its major message, which was replaced by the one with quite a different significance, point and value."

In the section dealing with Serbia, including Kosovo, the Amnesty International's report for 2008 speaks of continued discrimination against minority groups and impunity for ethnically motivated violence. The report also underlines that some information testify of ill-treatment of prisoners of Albanian origin, as well as of the police's unacceptable attitude towards journalists and Roma.

### **Violence against religious communities**

State authorities also manifest irresponsible attitude towards the religious communities that are often targets of extreme rightist groups. This is usually about sects and non-traditional religious communities in the territory of Vojvodina, but also in other parts of Serbia (Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, Adventists, etc.). According to the *Center for Development of Civil Society*, about 90 percent of total religious communities in Serbia are not registered. Further, the NGO publicized that adviser to the Minister of Religions, Aleksandar Rankovic, misguided the OSCE Human Rights meeting in Warsaw on September 28 – October 9, 2009. Namely, Rankovic reiterated his Ministry's stance about all believers in Serbia belonging to traditional churches and religious communities. "The representative of the Ministry of Religions claims that believers of non-traditional protestant churches make up just 0.5 percent of total population of Serbia. That is not true given that census questions about religious affiliation are optional, that many interviewees were not asked at all whether or not they are believers and, in particular, that many Protestants hesitate to state their confession out of justified fear of adverse consequences," says the NGO in its release. The Ministry's representative also

falsely presented the status of the Rumanian Eastern Orthodox Church.<sup>12</sup>

### **Elite's contribution to rehabilitation of fascist ideology**

Right-wing intellectuals relativize the notion of fascism and contribute to rehabilitation of fascist ideology. A court's decision to have Dragisa Cvetkovic, Yugoslav premier on the eve of the WWII, rehabilitated marked a threatening trend in the society. Prince Aleksandar Karadjordjevic called Cvetkovic's rehabilitation "a step towards national reconciliation the Serb nation has crying for the entire century" and said he hoped the Serb public would realize the justice had been done.<sup>13</sup> Allegedly, Cvetkovic did not put his signature under the Triangle Entente but only the Protocol on Yugoslavia's joining the Axis Powers. And, allegedly, there are documents testifying that Cvetkovic acted in the best interest of Yugoslavia since his signature under the Entente secured the "respect for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity." And last but not least, those circles claim that Yugoslavia did not take upon itself the obligation to provide military assistance to the Axis Powers or allow transfer of its troops through its territory.<sup>14</sup> So, the Institute for Contemporary History asserts that it was the coalition Cvetkovic-Macek government that actually signed the pact with the Axis Powers.

Except for Minister of Interior Ivica Dacic no other official condemned the act of rehabilitation. The anti-Semitic character of Cvetkovic's cabinet and the relevant decisions it made long before signing the pact with fascist powers was hardly touched on in officials' statements and the media.

<sup>12</sup>

[http://cdcs.org.rs/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://cdcs.org.rs/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1)

<sup>13</sup> *Tanjug*, September 30, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Momčilo Pavlovic, director of the Institute for Contemporary History, *Vecernje Novosti*, September 29, 2009. New Serbian Political Thought shares his stands.



**Anti-communism plannigly marginalized anti-fascism and promoted the Tchetnik movement as a rightist anti-fascist one. The partisan movement and its resistance to Nazi occupation was thus almost totally bypassed. Historical revisionism equalized executioners and their victims. The same relativization strategy is applied to the 1990s wars.**

**Serbia has not yet articulated a proper response to neo-Nazi and neo-fascist phenomena. Therefore, one can only reasonably expect that racially, religiously and ethnically motivated assaults will spiral as long as state bodies – and the society as a whole – do not distance themselves from these phenomena.**

**Against a backdrop as such, organizations and individuals speaking for the rights of vulnerable and discriminated groups are notably exposed to ill-treatment and assaults. Human rights defenders are perceived as major opponents when they advocate the interests of those who are most jeopardized – Roma, LGBT population, women, etc.**

**The pro-European circles in the governance are doing their best to suppress violence. Whether or not they will manage to overpower the remnants of Kostunica's and Milosevic's times is still open to question.**