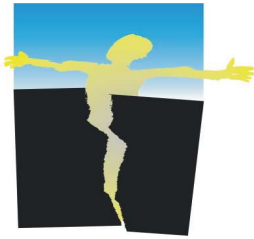


HELSINKI Bulletin



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Nº 30 • June 2009

CRNA REKA: AN ISOLATED CASE OR REGULAR PRACTICE?



Only two weeks after the *Vreme* weekly carried the story about brutal “treatment” of drug addicts in the Spiritual Rehabilitation Center Crna Reka ¹ Serbia’s public seems to have cleanly forgotten the case. State institutions promptly reacted at shocking scenes of abuse against beneficiaries of the Center broadcast or carried by all the media. Ombudsman Sasa Jankovic filed criminal charges against nine persons for quackery and serious injuries, the Ministry of Healthcare dispatched an inspection to the Center, the Municipal Prosecutor of Tutin initiated investigation against the Center’s manager, Archpriest Branislav Peranovic and his deputy, deacon Nemanja Radisavljevic suspected of brutality and violence, whereas the police begun large scale investigation. However, the outcome is as follows: inspectors of the Ministry of Healthcare did not report back any quackery in Crna Reka, the Tutin

¹ *Vreme* No. 959, May 21, 2009.

Municipal Court ruled down detention for Peranovic, the Prosecution Office announced an appeal against such decision and the Center itself continues to provide services. The reaction by the Serb Orthodox Church is noteworthy: firstly the Synod strongly condemned developments in Crna Reka and called the state to start investigation and punish perpetrators, and then Bishop of Raska-Prizren Artemije deposed manager Branislav Peranovic and announced that he would stand church trial for “intolerable methods of punishment of beneficiaries of the Center.”



Obvious ill-treatment and torture of the beneficiaries of the Spiritual Rehabilitation Center Crna Reka raises scores of questions that are not of legal nature only. It seems that no one is looking for answers to those questions. First and foremost, the public was left without an explanation about the circumstances under which the Center was registered. Once the shocking video was televised both the Church and the state hurried to distance themselves

from the community. The Ministry of Healthcare issued a release stating it had never licensed the Center. The media carried the statement by manager Branislav Peranovic about the Center not being a medical institution but the Church's activity carried out under the auspices of the Raska-Prizren Bishopric and with the blessing of Bishop Artemije. The Synod released that it "was aghast at and troubled by the news about brutality against persons suffering from addiction" and "appeals to Bishop Artemije to immediately and without delay disband the illegal in-patient ward for treatment of addiction."² Bishop Artemije, however, denied any connection with the Center and justified it by the fact that monks were not engaged in it.³ He said that was all about "a framed process" against him because he had denied hospitality to US Vice-president Joseph Biden – a decision annulled after Washington's pressure on Belgrade. For its part, the Synod issued a release signed by Bishop of Backa Irinej⁴ testifying that the Center was under the Church's authority. This might hint at a church trial of Archpriest Peranovic but also of Bishop Artemije. On the other hand, the Church gave a sophisticated support to the state, which can also be interpreted as further rapprochement between it and the ruling coalition. Namely, the Bishop of Backa underlines that the Center was not licensed by the Ministry of Healthcare and is not run by medically qualified professionals but by two clerics who are on the Eparchy's payroll.⁵

This was the first time ever that the Synod required relevant state authorities to investigate a case and take steps they are authorized to, and expressed its deep regret to all the victims of violence and their families. Strong language and the choice of words addressed to Bishop Artemije obviously reflect deep divides within the Serb Orthodox Church. However,

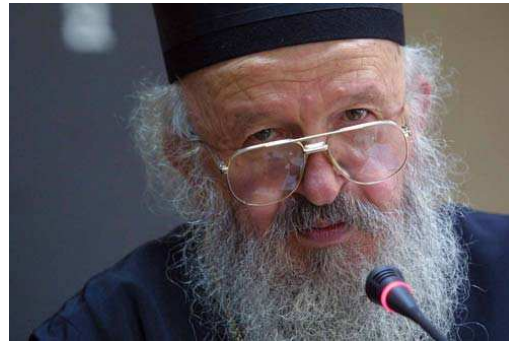
² Fonet New Agency, May 23, 2009.

³ RTS, May 24, 2009, www.rts.rs

⁴ A release by the Synod of May 26, 2009.

⁵ *Ibid.*

if the Synod was "aghast at" the news about brutality in "the illegal in-patient ward," the question is: was the Church in the dark about this illegal activity has it approved it but was unaware that it implied violence? Be it as it may, the grounds for starting investigation and asserting responsibility are undisputed. Or, probably, the Synod was aware of both but believed no one outside the Church would learn the truth. Or it believed the Church would remain untouchable and undisputable forever. Whatever the answers to those questions might be, they do not speak in the Church's favor and seriously question its engagement and organization. Despite the fact that the Church is closed to the public eye and the vow of silence of its dignitaries and clerks, more and more information that leak away raise reasonable doubts about legality of some businesses and individual actions.



The state's attitude is even more problematic. After inspectors' return from the Spiritual Rehabilitation Center Crna Reka, Minister of Healthcare Tomica Milosavljevic issued a release stating that "the fact that the inspection did not assert that anyone was engaged in quackery does not belittle the responsibility for possible ill-treatment of people for which the Ombudsman has filed criminal charges that are being processed."⁶ Underlying that the Center was not a medical institution and was not licensed to provide medical treatment, the Minister reminded that the media had positively featured the Center on several occasions and referred to the procedures implied there as treatment, all of which contributed to a wrong perception of medical treatment of addiction as unnecessary. The Minister concluded that torture was unacceptable at any place in Serbia and that law

⁶ RTS, May 25, 2009.

enforcement authorities should cope with such cases. However, Minister Milosavljevic owes many explanations to the public. First and foremost, why the Ministry of Healthcare did not closed down the Center that works without authorization? Are drug addicts in Serbia not treated as patients and, therefore, left to anyone willing to deal with them rather than have scarce medical funds wasted on them? The Ministry's inspection failed to track down quackery despite the fact that unqualified personnel were providing treatment to heavy addicts. It also failed to note the lack of adequate medical procedures or that beneficiaries of the Center were deprived of the right to proper treatment and nursing care.



Even more worrisome was the Minister statement about the Center being a “non-governmental organization with a role in addicts’ resocialization but only after their proper medical treatments.”⁷ He touched not on the negative effects of torture against persons who are already psycho-socially and emotionally instable, despite the fact that, among others, the Department for Addiction Diseases of the Serbian Medical Society /SLD/ came public saying that any form of violence and aggression, notably against sick persons was unacceptable.⁸ In its release SLD expresses concerned over the fact that “it took so long to reveal such procedure though some members of our Department have repeatedly alerted about it over past four years.”⁹ The public never learned whom was SLD alerting of intolerable and illegal treatment of drug addicts and why was it that doctors have

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ SLD, May 26, 2009, www.rts.rs

⁹ *Ibid.*

never reported their findings to a prosecution office or at least informed the media.

The Crna Reka case is still under investigation but nothing hints so far that citizens of Serbia would ever get answers to those and many other questions: Was Crna Reka registered as a non-governmental organization? If so, what was registered as its main activity? What are its assets and how does it raise and distribute funds, etc.? And, if it is a religious organization, how comes that it acts contrary to canon law and outside the Church hierarchy? Are other spiritual centers also “private estates” neither the Church nor the state has the right to trespass? But the key question is – will this case urge the state to start mechanisms for the protection of citizens and the rule of law despite the fact that basic human rights were violated under the Church’s auspices?

This is something the state should have done long ago – and not to the Church’s detriment but on the contrary: for its benefit as well. Both state authorities and the Church need to come to grips with the widespread quackery, charlatanism, exorcism, etc. that are mostly based on quasi-religious teachings and Middle Ages rituals. On the other hand, it is the state’s responsibility to educate population and ensure conditions for proper treatment and care of all those who are sick, poor, those with any form of disability, old and vulnerable persons. It is the state’s responsibility to secure control mechanisms and to promptly react to any individual case of human rights abuse. A politically mature and responsible government should consider all the aspects of the “Crna Reka case” and take all necessary steps to send a clear-cut message to the society as a whole that all people, without exception, are equal before law. Instead of numberless talk shows, quiz shows, lotteries and vulgar productions, broadcasters with national coverage should finally seriously and argumentatively dig into phenomena that shake this anyway devastated society. In this context, a special burden of responsibility is on the Radio and Television of Serbia that should be a model of professional, creative and responsible public broadcasting service.