

Repression over human rights defenders

Attacks, calls for lynch, campaign against Women in Black



March-April 2014

Dossier No. 1

I Chronology/overview of events

26th March 2014

Women in Black protest – We Remember / Kujtojmë

On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the crimes committed over Albanian civilians in Kosovo: Women in Black –Belgrade, supported by the art troupes The Art Clinic from Novi Sad and Dah Theater from Belgrade, commemorated on 26th March in Republic Square, the 15th anniversary of the crimes committed over Albanian civilians with the peace action “Reconstruction of a crime”.

The announcement contained the following saopštenju je, između ostalog, napisano:

“As a feminist-antimilitaristic group that has always struggled against all forms of militarism, we raised our voices against the NATO military intervention in SRY in 1999. The destruction and human casualties during the NATO bombing affected the entire population of Serbia. On this occasion, we express our deepest sympathy and solidarity with the families of the victims – because of the loss of their nearest and dearest.

The Albanian civilian population in Kosovo was exposed, in addition to NATO air raids, to ethnic cleansing conducted by the regime of S. Milošević. Armed formations (of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia, the Yugoslav Army and paramilitary units) committed countless crimes in Kosovo, which culminated during the NATO intervention: with the banishment of more than 800,000 ethnic Albanians, invariably coupled with the seizure of their documents, subjection to maltreatment, killings of civilians and prisoners, rape of women and destruction of their homes, setting fire to all the facilities, looting, etc...”

Also, demands were put forward to the future government to undertake concrete steps toward serving justice and building trust concerning the victims of the previous regime in Kosovo, etc. There were approximately **35** participants in this action, which unfolded without any incidents and was accompanied with the usual police protection.

27th March 2014

The spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča, called the hooligans (on 25th March 2014) on his Facebook status to crack down on the peace group Women in Black, following their commemoration of the 15th anniversary of the war crimes committed by the Serbian forces over Albanian civilians:

“I think this should not be allowed to take place. With all due respect, gentlemen hooligans, Hardmen, Gravediggers, Labor, The Firm (football clubs' supporters), instead of wasting your fists in mutual brawls, and being great patriots as you are, join forces and give it to those who deserve thrashing”, wrote Počuča on his Facebook profile.



"Women in Black are active only when it comes to spitting on Serbia, by pointing to some alleged and unconfirmed crimes of the Serbian police, army and volunteers", he wrote on Facebook.

Počuča also insisted that he was entitled to express his personal opinion, regardless of the fact that he is a Police official.

28th March 2014

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia (MUP) most vehemently "condemns the act of the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča, who on his Facebook account called for lynch of Women in Black ", said the State Secretary of that Ministry **Vanja Vukić**. Vukić said to the agency Beta that Počuča's service contract was expiring in April and that in all probability, it would not be renewed. "Počuča was engaged in MUP upon service contract, which expires in April and most probably, that is, in agreement with the Police Directorate, that contract will not be renewed. In the meantime, he gave a statement before the disciplinary senior officer, who will launch a procedure against him... Although Počuča made his attitude known on his private Facebook profile, the Ministry strongly condemns this act ", said Vukić.

The Ombudsman of the Republic of Serbia **Saša Janković** forcefully condemned the call for lynch of Women in Black and appealed to the Ministry to react to the opinions expressed by the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča. In his statement for B92, Janković said that he expected the Ministry to verify the authenticity of Počuča's Facebook account and launch disciplinary and criminal procedures against him.

On their official internet presentation, SPP organization "Ours" published **a list of 30 names** of public figures being accused as 'Serb haters and traitors'. The list contains names of actors, film directors, writers, political analysts, journalists, etc.

31st March 2014

The Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights /Yucom have, on behalf of Women in Black, pressed criminal charges against the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča "due to suspicion on reasonable grounds that he has committed the criminal offence of "Racial and other forms of discrimination" contained in article 387, items 2 and 4 of the Penal Code of the Republic of Serbia". Part of the report contained the following: "*The threat and the call to football supporters and hooligans to resort to violence clearly indicate that those were directly motivated by the commitment of the organization Women in Black to the struggle for human rights and equality. His call for lynch is further aggravated by the fact that it was launched by an official of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, and publicly posted on his Facebook account... Individuals and organizations who strive for human rights in Serbia are frequently the target of assaults and threats by dissenters, thus jeopardizing their fundamental human rights...*"

1st April 2014

A text appeared on Facebook "**Online Reporter**", complemented with a fabricated interview, which says, among other things, that Radomir Počuča "found himself under attack of this infamous women NGO, who have voiced threats that he will be publicly raped in Republic Square, until Počuča apologized publicly to them or until he died of exhaustion". The text also contains the following:

"Serbia has allowed this verbal rape to take place, which serves as a proof that fascism and Nazism still thrive in Serbia and that nobody who harbors pathological hatred for Serbs and Serbia is safe in Serbia any longer. Počuča called upon the football supporters to lynch us, and nobody killed him for that..." - says Staša Zajović, leader of Women in Black.

Further on, it says: "Women in Black have decided to kidnap R. Počuča, to tie him up and take him to Republic Square and publicly rape him until he apologizes to them publicly, disbands the supporters and promises that he will no longer react to instances of spitting on Serbia, Serbs and Serbian victims by Women in Black".

"In view of the fact that none of us have been sexually active for several decades now, we are ready for this performance and cannot wait to take part in it..." concludes Zajović, adding that "she will personally enjoy that privilege to begin the public rape of R. Počuča in Republic Square on 1st April, beginning at 11:55 a.m."

On the same day, many comments against Women in Black appeared on the internet, some of which we quote: "a bullet in the forehead..."; "we should ridicule these crows in black, they have harmed Serbia more than the communists"; "you have lost your job because of those crazy women"; "those are heartless disgusting women WHORES! Every single one of them has destroyed their marriages and now they want to destroy Serbia. Fuck their mothers..."; "and you Zajović rape yourself with your very image"; "You are so ugly that Frankenstein himself would turn away from you..."; "they are evil, they have invented those so-called rapes in Bosnia and Kosmet, whereas they would be happy if anyone wanted to rape them..."

4th April 2014

The police issued permission for a rally against Women in Black: "On 4th April, Women in Black received confirmation from the Department for Public Order and Peace of the Belgrade Police Directorate that a rally was supposed to take place in front of the building where our premises are (18, Jug Bogdanova St.), on Saturday 5th April, beginning at 2 p.m. organized by the Serbian Parliament Zavetnici (The Pledgers), as a sign of support to the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča, who called for a lynch of the members of our organization.

We have been informed by reliable sources that the rally was not banned, and we have informed the relevant national institutions and international organizations about this", says our announcement "*The language of lynch precedes lynch*" regarding the pending protest of the Serbian Parliament Zavetnici.

5th April 2014

The protest of the ultra-rightist movement "The Serbian Parliament Zavetnici": in support of Radomir Počuča, and against Women in Black, in the vicinity of Women in Black premises. The entire area had been blocked. The demonstrators demanded that a law be adopted in Serbia, following the Russian Federation model, banning the activities of non-government organizations. Thirty-odd persons took part in the protest, in the presence of twice as many heavily armed police officers. The police had blocked access to the roundabout of Zeleni Venac, conducted ID checks of the residents in the building and thus disturbed the public even more, which was a direct consequence of failing to ban such a rally of the pledgers (Zavetnici). In brief, the residents were disconcerted by the massive presence of police forces in front of the building and inside it during the protest. Here are some of the statements for the media made by the residents of the building:

- I am really scared and I believe that all of us who live in this building are at risk. Any day someone could come up with the idea to throw a bomb at them, says one of the residents.
- I was coming back from school and barely managed to access the building. When I entered, one of the police officers escorted me to my apartment. Although they (WiB) had put up an announcement the day before saying that it was 'with regret that they had to inform us about a protest that was going to take place in front of our building', I had not expected it to be so serious, one of the residents told the media.
- We are afraid, because if they attack Women in Black and set their apartment on fire, the same will happen to our apartments. That is what we fear – said another resident.

5th April 2014

Calls for killing and elimination of Women in Black activists: on the Facebook page of the online magazine "**Press Online**", the following appeal of a FB user under the name of Aleksandar Balaban appeared: "*They have to be eliminated urgently. I offer*

100,000 euro for each one of those whores to the person who eliminates them... the only condition is that they should be slaughtered with an indented and dull knife... the offer is valid as long as they live..."

This was followed by brutal, violent and misogynous comments against Women in Black, accompanied by the demand that Women in Black and all the NGO be banned..." etc.

On 5th and 6th April, Women in Black activist were in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they participated at a previously scheduled peace rally together with the women of Srebrenica and similar associations.

7th April 2014

The arrest of the leader of the organization The Serbian Popular Movement "Naši" and of the former spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia: they were taken in for questioning to the Prosecutor's Office for Cyber Crime. They were taken into custody for drafting "a list of the most notorious haters of Serbs", and because of the statement by R. Počuča against Women in Black. R. Počuča and Ivan Ivanović, member of the organization "Naši", were placed in remand for 30 days. Ivanović was released on 15th April, while Počuča is still detained.

The Prosecutor's Office for Cyber Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia has launched a preliminary investigative procedure concerning the Facebook message referring to the association "Women in Black", as well as the list of the so-called "most notorious haters of Serbs" made up of public figures, which was posted on the website of the movement "Naši",

Hearing of Women in Black activists: The Prosecutor's Office for Cyber Crimes of the Ministry of Interior Affairs of Serbia summoned Staša Zajović, relative to the criminal charges pressed against R. Počuča; she gave a statement in the presence of lawyer Kristina Todorović (Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights).

Due to the constant threats to WiB, the Police assigned a round-the-clock police watch of the building, which continued on 8th April.

8th April 2014

Hearing of Women in Black activists: The Prosecutor's Office for Cyber Crimes of the Ministry of Interior Affairs of Serbia summoned Ljiljana Radovanović and Violeta Đikanović, relative to the criminal charges pressed against R. Počuča. The activists gave a statement in the presence of lawyer Kristina Todorović (Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights).

The campaign for the eviction of Women in Black: As a consequence of not banning the rally, came the information that the residents of the building were signing a petition to evict Women in Black from their premises. This information also appeared on the website of "Serbian Parliament Zavetnici", because it was from them that the representatives of the residents had sought help. In their announcement, the Serbian Parliament Zavetnici pledged to "support the efforts of the residents in 18, Jug Bogdanova St, to free themselves of NGO 'Women in Black' and lend them all the legal assistance and other forms of support in that process".

It is worth mentioning that Women in Black have been renting an apartment in this building ever since 1997 and that they have always maintained very good relations with the neighbors. However, the climate of lynch against Women in Black has contributed to the fact that many of the tenants in the building where WiB premises are situated feel quite upset, while some of the are under the influence of the organization "Serbian Parliament Zavetnici". In that sense, the chairperson of the residents' assembly said: *"After this interview given last night, on 7th April 2014, by this leader of yours (Staša Zajović) and Sonja Biserko, in the television B92 news, it will be even worse for us, especially after the court ruling that Radomir Počuča stay in remand for one month. This will exacerbate attacks against you, that is to say, against us. I cannot tell whether some of my windows will get broken or whether someone will break into my apartment when my children are alone. We will submit a petition to the Ombudsman and elsewhere that you leave this place..."*

The harangue against WiB is daily being joined by numerous printed media - tabloids with headlines such as "No one likes Women in Black, move them out of here", "Women in Black deplore Albanian victims, disregarding Serbian victims", "We will do everything we can to make Women in Black leave this building...".

11th and 14th April 2014

The Higher Prosecutor's Office launched a preliminary investigative procedure against the suspect Radomir Počuča: questioning of the witnesses, WiB activists Ljiljana Radovanović, Violeta Đikanović and Staša Zajović in order to collect evidence against R. Počuča for committing the criminal act of security threats. These WiB activists invariably gave their statements in the presence of lawyer Kristina Todorović.

It is important to mention that the qualification of the criminal offence has been altered to the criminal offence of security threats, which incurs a lower sanction than the offence that was mentioned in the report submitted by the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights. The WiB legal team, made up of outstanding female lawyers, will pronounce themselves on this matter soon.

The internet harangue has been continued, led by the Red Star, Reality and similar supporter groups.

II Public reactions

of human rights organizations – local and international, representatives of international and national institutions, political parties, etc...

The civic society of Serbia immediately expressed unequivocal support to Women in Black. Solidarity support actions have been numerous, thus confirming the good reputation that Women in Black enjoy within the community of civil society organizations/CSO, and also in order to defend their own survival and dignity. Here are some of those reactions:

- **The Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies/CEAS and the Lawyers' Human Rights Committee/Yucom** launched an appeal on 28th March, condemning most forcefully "the call for lynch coming from the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča, against Women in Black", coupled with the support in pressing criminal charges by the Lawyers' Human Rights Committee (YUCOM). It has also been emphasized that the numerous attacks against Women in Black so far have been treated with impunity, and that "football supporter groups, actually paramilitary units, are being used to crackdown on political opponents and proponents of dissenting values". This appeal has been joined by dozens of CSO from Serbia, and also from the entire region. At the CSO meeting in WiB premises in Belgrade, four teams have been formed: a legal team, a promotional team, a logistics team and a team in charge of street/protest actions in cooperation with art associations. The public will be timely informed about all the forthcoming actions.
- **Amnesty International** condemned (on 28th March) the calls for lynch of WiB and called upon Aleksandar Vučić, first Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia to "publicly condemn the call for lynch of Women in Black and to instruct the Ministry of Interior to ensure that all police officers and officials are made aware of Serbia's international obligation to investigate all persons reasonably suspected of crimes under international law. AI consider that there is "urgent need for the Serbian government to express a political will to confront the impunity for the crimes committed during the Kosovo conflict".
- **Representatives of international institutions** also voiced their concern, expressing their revolt at the attacks and also their support. Those were primarily: Luca Bianconi, First Secretary and Head of the Political Section of the Delegation of the European Union in Serbia and Marija Rauš, UN Human Rights Representative in Serbia.
- **The Anti-Fascist League of Serbia**, in their report (3rd April) views the calls for lynch against Women in Black as attacks against all the anti-fascists, against all individuals fighting for the truth about the committed crimes and that all that "can justifiably be regarded as a premeditated and organized campaign of extremely rightist provenance".

- **The Libertarian Club Libek** sought that the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs be immediately dismissed because of his calls for lynch of the members of the nongovernmental organization Women in Black. Libek consider that impunity in the case of this act of the Police anti-terrorist unit spokesperson would set a dangerous precedent, which would clear the way for extremist of greater proportions, because it would have become clear that the Government of the Republic of Serbia, directly or indirectly, incites violence instead of protecting their citizens against violence.
- **Ombudsman Saša Janković** strongly condemned (28th March) the call for lynch of Women in Black and called the Ministry of Internal Affairs to react to the contents posted by the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Radomir Počuča. Janković said that he expected the Ministry of Internal Affairs to launch criminal and disciplinary procedures against him. Also, in a telephone call to Staša Zajović 28th March, Janković expressed his support to WiB.
- **Commissioner for Equality Nevena Petrušić** severely condemned today the publishing of a list of public figures whom the organization Serbian Popular Movement (SNP) "Naši" labeled as "Haters of Serbs and traitors", as well as the call for lynch of the non-governmental organization Women in Black.
- **Branko Ružić, minister without portfolio in the technical government of Serbia** in charge of European integrations and Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), denounced today the death threats to the members of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) and the call for violence against the activists of the non-governmental organization Women in Black (4th April)
- **The League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV)** called the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia to *sanction the responsible Police official who did not ban the protest of "Zavetnik" today, adding that "the fact that the protest was not banned indicates that there are still individuals in the Ministry of Internal Affairs who fail to see anything foul in the supporter groups joining forces against Women in Black"* (5th April), etc.

III Political context

– the circumstances under which violence against human rights defenders is taking place

Ever since its inception (1991), Women in Black has been confronted with various forms of repression, both on the administrative – state level and on the social and cultural level.

The majority of acts of violence and repression against Women in Black is related to our attitude to war, war crimes, and confrontation with the criminal past – as a women's peace group, the problems we confronted have been predominantly related to our insistence on all the levels of accountability for the wars and the war crimes that were committed in our name. This is also what happened this time, after our action of 26th March 2014, "We remember the crimes in Kosovo". However, we have very often been the target of attacks, which is also the case at present, because of our struggle for human rights of the others and the different (regarding their ethnic allegiance, political affiliations and sexual preferences).

Forms of continual and intensified repression – during the Milošević regime, in addition to physical assaults against our activists, the main forms of repression were: questioning by the police, searches of the activists' homes and WiB premises, unlawful arrests, issuing arrest warrants, placing in police custody, administrative bans... After 5th October to this day, there have been reports of attacks on premises, life threats, organized harangues, black lists, calls for lynch ...

The perpetrators of violence are both state and non-state actors – while until the year 2000, the state apparatus conducted repression directly, in the period that followed, violence has been inflicted by supporter groups, and clerical-fascist, neo-Nazi organizations incited, supported or else tolerated by certain segments of the authorities. In this case, the perpetrator (R. Počuča, the spokesperson of the anti-terrorist unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia was a civil servant, and after his dismissal, brutal and open violence was unleashed against Women in Black by pro-fascist groups and individuals. This is indicative of the perverted system of values, of the continuity of values and politics in which the perpetrators of violence, who

glorify war crimes are still being regarded as 'heroes and patriots', whereas human rights defenders and anti-fascist are labeled as "traitors", "extremists" and even "criminals". Therefore, the source of violence and the system of repression has remained both vertical and horizontal.

Unsanctioned violence and violence with impunity - although we have been pressing criminal charges, the Prosecutor's Office has never reacted to a single one of them, nor has the state reacted appropriately to any of the cases of assault and repression. Likewise, this latest instance of violence was not addressed by the Prosecutor by virtue of office, so that Women in Black pressed criminal charges.

Condoning violence and blaming the victims of violence instead of the perpetrator – instead of banning the rally of the "Serbian Parliament Zavetnici", because its purpose was to lend support to R. Počuča, perpetrator of violence, a climate of fear and insecurity was created. The broadening of the policing powers under such circumstances has created space for abuse of power, so that the victims of abuse of the freedom of assembly and policing powers are actually Women in Black. The petition of the residents of the building for the eviction of Women in Black seems to be a logical consequence of the permitted assembling of pro-fascist, and may be indicative of the intent of the authorities to crack down on our activists, as an undesirable element in our society.

Stigmatization and vilification of Women in Black – human rights defenders – is a form of persecution, exclusion and banishment from the community and society of those who are discordant with the national consensus, those who express their solidarity with the others, and especially with the victims of the crimes that were committed in our name. In this way, violence against those who voice different opinions is being justified and legitimized, with the aim to 'remove' them from the rest of the population by means of vilification and intimidation. This pattern is typical of all authoritarian regimes – and it is not only about turning victims into culprits, i.e. the victims are invariably guilty and responsible for the violence they are exposed to – but also about juxtaposing diametrically opposed political options and values – of the fascists and the anti-fascist, of the violent and the non-violent, etc. – as equal and equally dangerous. In the case of Serbia, this is related to the nationalist-militaristic ideology, to the denial and relativization of the crimes committed by the Serbian regime.

These attacks have a markedly misogynous connotation, with the calls for violence usually coming from men, although women as well are very often instrumentalized by repressive mechanisms.

Charges of 'high treason' – especially on social networks, create a climate of headhunt and lynch of some of the defenders. This, as it was the case in numerous other cases of attacks against WiB, is related to the Kosovo issue, while at the same time, the highest ranking Serbian officials are negotiating with the representatives of the state of Kosovo. The authorities are sending out one type of message outside of the country, towards the EU, and another to the domestic scene – they are looking for 'scapegoats' in justification of their state policy. The only change for the better is the fact that Serbia is no longer capable of disturbing the peace and development of its environment and neighbors – the effects of the Serbian nationalism are concentrated in Serbia, on its 'internal enemies and traitors'.

Nationalism is presently somewhat on the defensive, but it has not been defeated, because there is no critical mass in the society that could impose a different matrix of political thinking.

The state institutions of Serbia are very cooperative, or rather, obedient, in their relations with the international community. On the one hand, they comply with all international instructions, in order to remain in power, but on the other hand, in order to maintain their 'patriotic image' before the voters, they condone violence against human rights defenders, or even justify it.

It remains to be seen whether the Prosecutor's Office, who have for the first time launched criminal procedures in this instance, will adhere to the spirit of the law and persevere, or decide cover up the entire event, as it has often been the case in some analogous situations.

Prepared by: **Staća Zajović**

Women in Black, Belgrade, 23rd April 2014

