



Serbia: Human Rights Defenders at risk
HLC Report
4th April 2008

The United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals.

In Serbia, however, human rights defenders carry out their activities in an oppressive climate of fear and with considerable risk of reprisal. The radicalization of the Serbian political scene and society since Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February 2007 has put the country's human rights defenders, liberally-oriented politicians and investigative journalists in an especially vulnerable position.

Commenting in parliamentary session the day after the declaration of independence, Leader of the opposition Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), Ivica Dacic, demanded the work of "all political parties and NGOs who recognize independent Kosovo" be banned.

The next day, the Socialist Party of Serbia announced that it had begun collecting signatures to bring a criminal complaint against human rights defender, and Executive Director of the Humanitarian Law Center, Natasa Kandic solely because she was in the Kosovo assembly when the Declaration of Independence was adopted.

After the adoption of the Declaration of Independence in the Kosovo Central Assembly, several articles published in high-circulation newspapers attacked Ms. Kandic because she was present at the session of the Kosovo Central Assembly. Articles such as Natasa, the Woman Who No Longer Exists, published in the daily *Vecernje novosti*, and Kandic at the Siptar Celebration, Traitor, and Allegedly a Guest, all found in the *Kurir* tabloid, echo those published before the assassination of Serbian journalist Slavko Curuvija at the beginning of the NATO bombing in 1999. These articles, also published on the Internet, resulted in reader comments full of hate speech and open demands for attacks on Ms. Kandic.

During protests on 19 February in all major cities in Serbia, attended by hundreds of people, demonstrators reportedly called for the murder of ethnic Albanians. In Kragujevac a fast food restaurant run by Gorani (a Bosnian speaking ethnic minority from Kosovo) was vandalized. In Bor, windows of a confectionery shop also run by a Gorani were smashed, as were those of cars. The riots in Belgrade and other cities in Serbia were followed by attacks on journalists. According to various media sources, TV B92, TV Studio B, TV RTL and Public Broadcasting Service of Serbia were attacked. No arrests were made in relation to those attacks.

Hate speech by the Serbian government officials and members of the National Assembly and against human rights defenders has not been followed by proper reaction of relevant officials. Following the declaration of independence of Kosovo, some public officials even justified violence on the streets of Serbia. In the TV show *Poligraf* aired by TV B92 on February 18, 2008), Mr. Slobodan





Samardzic, the Minister for Kosovo, said that he does not support violence but justified attacks on checkpoints at the Kosovo border as “legitimate and in line with the policy of Serbia.”

On 24 February 2008 *Politika* carried the statement of Infrastructure Minister, Velimir Ilic, in which he demanded the arrest of Ms. Kandic and others. “There are traitors in Serbia who legitimize themselves. Who was standing next to Hashim Thaci when he announced the independence of the false state? I call on the responsible organs to arrest the trash that has been an embarrassment to Serbia for years”. Since then, people approach Ms. Kandic on the street and threaten her using the exact words that Minister Ilic used.

On 28 February 2008, the Infrastructure Minister accused the Liberal Democratic Party of organizing disturbances and said that “it is a traitorous group which would sell the country for a sack of pork scratchings” [sic]. Responding to the question: are people that think differently from the government safe in Serbia, the Minister replied that the authorities could not defend people “who say that Kosovo is not ours”.

The campaign of the tabloid press against the Humanitarian Law Center and its Executive Director, calling on citizens to take concrete measures against “traitors”, has already yielded worrying results. Serbian fashion designer V.R. ordered her retailers not to permit Ms. Kandic to enter her shops. A restaurant owner has also sent a message to Ms. Kandic telling her not to come to his restaurant.

From the Hague Tribunal, Vojislav Seselj, leader of the Serbian Radical Party, charged in 14 counts of the indictment with the crimes committed in about a dozen locations in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina (Serbia) has since his trial began in November 2007 led a sustained attack on Ms. Kandic.

Most recently the Serbian dailies *Politika*, *Pravda* and *Glas javnosti* in their 3 April 2008 issues all devoted extensive coverage of Vojislav Seselj’s cross-examination of protected prosecution witness VS003, in which Seselj accused the witness of having been prepared by the Humanitarian Law Center, of having been paid by the Humanitarian Law Center to give testimony against him, and of having collaborated with Ms. Kandic and investigative journalist Dejan Anastasijevic in the bomb attack on Anastasijevic’s home on 14 April 2007. Such accusations are intended to discredit the important work of the Humanitarian Law Center and its Executive Director which aim at combating impunity for war crimes and human rights violations perpetrated in the armed conflicts in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia.

The comments and actions of the Socialist Party of Serbia, the Serbian Infrastructure Minister, the Serbian Minister for Kosovo, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party and the tabloid press have radicalized a population already in the grip of nationalist fervour, and seek to marginalize voices of civil society and the non-governmental sector that promote the protection of human rights and justice for victims. Such comments and actions, which are contrary to the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, therefore not only push society to the extreme right of the political spectrum and create a climate in which violence is acceptable, but also pose a significant threat to the security and work of human rights defenders.

