

THE INTER-ETHNIC INCIDENTS IN SERBIA IN 2006

FURTHER REDUCING IN THE RUN-UP TO SOLVING THE STATUS OF KOSOVO

Kosovo and the interethnic incidents in Serbia

The connection between the ethnic relations in Kosovo and the ethnic incidents in the territory under the control of the Government in Belgrade is unquestionable. On 16 March 2004, the day before the escalation of the incidents in Kosovo, the German weekly magazine “Der Spiegel” announced in a certain way the interethnic incidents in Vojvodina as a region characteristic as the most multiethnic one in Serbia. Since that time on the situation regarding the ethnically motivated incidents in Serbia, especially in Vojvodina, has gone through several phases. The process of reducing the incidents has had an uneven rhythm and a spiral course. The main trend was marked by relieving the ethnic tensions in Vojvodina and Serbia after the international factors had interfered in solving the problems.¹

The forthcoming elections in Serbia scheduled for 21 January 2007 and even more solving Kosovo status which is to come soon after, call for a permanent monitoring not only of the exercise of the rights of national minorities in Serbia, but of the entire state of inter-national relations as well. The eruption of violence in Kosovo in 2004 gave rise to an abrupt and great increase in number of ethnic incidents in Serbia.

This short report based mainly on press clippings will show the situation regarding ethnically motivated incidents in Serbia in 2006. The absence of an adequate field control throughout Serbia is a result of the lack of financial resources. The part of the report about the situation in Central Banat (Srednji Banat) is based on field research supported by Provincial Secretariat of Sport and Youth. “The dark number” is obviously bigger than the one shown; however, a detailed research would have meant a combined use of data collected from the state organs, press, NGOs and fieldwork as done in 2004 and 2005.

¹ http://www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/ethnical_fn.doc, http://www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/ethnic_engl.doc,
http://www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/internat_engl.doc, <http://www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/Ethnic,okt.2005.doc>

Basic finding until December 2006 inclusive:

The trend of reducing the number and intensity of inter-national incidents continued in Serbia in 2006 as well. This favorable trend was recorded as early as in 2005 when the number of incidents was reduced in comparison with 2004 when the ethnically motivated violence transferred from Kosovo to the rest of Serbia controlled by the government in Belgrade.

Previous escalation

At the beginning of 2004 and during the next few months there were more ethnically-related incidents in Vojvodina than in the last seven years of Milošević's rule (except the episodes from August 1995 and during the NATO bombing) and three years of Đinđić-Živković's Government (2001-2003). The two main paroxysms of ethnically based incidents were March 2004 (regarding the violence over the Serbs in Kosovo) and September 2004 (caused by the rise in political tension before the local elections and provincial elections in Vojvodina).

During the six day period, from 17 to 23 March 2004, the police reported more than 40 incidents on ethnic grounds only in Vojvodina. There were 10 policemen injured in these incidents. Some communities, like Slovakian and Ruthenian, became the target for the first time. The religious premises of religious minorities were attacked and devastated (mosques in Belgrade and Nis), which the police did not want to protect. Crowds of hooligans attacked the Ashkali settlement Adice and Veliki Rit in Novi Sad and were dispersed only when tear gas was fired. There were demolitions in Sombor and Apatin (according to the published police records, in the former municipality there were 14 ethnically based incidents during these 6 days and in the latter 13), and accidental demolitions took place almost throughout Vojvodina.

Even before the events of March 2004, there was a series of ethnic incidents recorded having the members of various minorities as targets.

Reactions of the international community prior to reducing ethnic incidents

The interventions of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly of 3 October 2004, of the special rapporteur of the General Secretary of UN on 19 October 2004, monitoring of the OSCE (end of October 2004) and the EU (beginning of February 2005), the report of the General Secretary of the Council of Europe of 16 December 2004, the visit of OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Vojvodina on 16 February 2005, extraordinary session of the Committee for South-East Europe of European Parliament on 6 June 2005, have brought the positive changes in number of incidents and the attitude of the authorities towards them. In 2006 the international organizations (OSCE, CoE, EU) have continued to focus their attention either through monitoring missions, visits of special reporters or otherwise.

Independent Serbia – legal and institutional framework for protection of national minorities²

After the declaration of independence of Montenegro on 3 June 2006 the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro ceased to exist. On 8 June 2006 the Government of the Republic of Serbia abolished the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights of SCG. By its Decree which entered into force on 9 June 2006 the Government of Serbia established the Office for Human and Minority Rights.³ Having in mind this reorganization and especially the capacities of the newly established Office and the absence of nearly any work of the Council of the Government of Serbia for National Minorities, the administration organs met reduced possibilities to react adequately on institutional level in cases of undesirable changes in protection of the rights of the members of national minorities.

² The Fund for an Open Society from Belgrade is preparing a monograph on the rights of national minorities and the position of Roma as part of its project “Monitoring of the Process of Approaching Serbia to European Union and Europeization of Serbia”. The monograph will contain the result of researches and analysis carried out by the Fund for an Open Society, the Center for Development of Civil Society and the League for Roma Decade. Beside the analysis of the legal and institutional framework for exercising of the rights of national minorities and the report on exercise of these rights, the monograph will also contain the reasons why majority of national councils of national minorities (9 out of 13) could not support the new constitution of Serbia without any reserves.

³ “Official gazette of RS”, No. 49/06

The protection of national minorities has also lessened on the level of legal regulations in independent Serbia. According to the interpretation of most legal experts, when the Constitutional Charter and the Charter on Human and Minorities Rights ceased to exist the level of human rights and their protection was reduced. Some experts in constitutional law established that Serbia inherited Charter on Human and Minorities Rights from the legal system of the State Union, but the authorities in Serbia tried to find the way how to eliminate this Charter from the legal system of Serbia.⁴

Still, the provisions of the constitutional acts of former Serbia and Montenegro which preserve the achieved degree of human and minority rights have become the integral part of the constitutional system of independent Serbia without declaration, according to some experts; even formally, because the National Assembly of Serbia adopted the Constitutional Charter of SCG and the the Charter on Human and Minorities Rights on 27 January, i.e. 28 February 2003.⁵ However, according to another legal proposal made by the Government concerning cessation of enforcement of the laws of SCG, parts of inherited acts which were not harmonized with the Constitution and regulations of Serbia would not be enforced (the parts of the Charter on Human and Minorities Rights).⁶

The new Constitution of the Republic of Serbia was proclaimed on 7 November 2006.⁷

Inter-national incidents and reactions of the authorities recorded in media during 2006⁸

January 2006 – A smaller explosive device was set off outside the Embassy of Albania, police launched investigation, no further information so far; The inhabitants of Beška (municipality of Inđija), who signed the initiative for replacement of the Radical Party authorities in the Council of the Local Community Office continued to be made to appear

⁴ Danas, 04/10/2006

⁵ Danas, 15/ 06/2006

⁶ According to the interpretation received from the office for Human and Minorities rights, the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities (2002) is still in force.

⁷ See footnote No.2

⁸ This report does not contain the incidents which involve Roma as a national minority. However, there have been incidents involving Roma in considerable number and several organizations carry out their monitoring. It is worth mentioning that Serbia is one of the participants of the Decade of Inclusion of Roma (2005-2015) and that the Government of Serbia has made special Action plans for advancing the position of Roma. Nevertheless, the key reason why the incidents towards Roma were not mentioned here is that they are not specific for Serbia but for Europe, especially, for South-East Europe: perhaps it should be said once more that the objective of this report is to present the state of ethnically motivated incidents in Serbia before the elections scheduled for January 2007 and before solving Kosovo status.

at the police station for an “informative conversation” (interrogation) with a special pressure made on non-Serbian popularity (Hungarians and Croats); Meeting of irredentistic Hungarian organization “Movement of 64 Districts”, extreme right-winged Serbian Radical Party and Democratic Community of Hungarians in Vojvodina in Novi Bečej; Nationalistic grafitti in Novi Sad – the police filed criminal charges for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance; Physical assault on two diplomats of Croatian Embassy in Belgrade, the assailants were arrested, no further information so far; In Zrenjanin the windows of the Hungarian Cultural Artistic Association “Petőfi” premises were broken, the police is searching for perpetrators.

February 2006 – Hungarian language school textbooks with unexceptionable nationalistic content distributed, withdrawn from sale after the intervention of the Provincial Secretariat for Education and Culture of Vojvodina; Anonymous death threats to journalists of the editorial staff of “Hrvatske riječi” (Croatian Words), the only weekly in Croatian, no police statement; Racial and anti-Semite grafitti on memorial camp in Niš, no police statement; In Vrbas an anti-Semite book promotion attended by a member of the Municipal Council (a local self-government organ) responsible for culture.

March 2006 – In the village of Srpski Itebej in Banat, swastikas drawn on houses, the police made a statement; In Nova Crnja three young Hungarians assaulted, without police statement so far; Local government in Ruma appointed a secretary of the local community office a man who had been prosecuted for pursuing Croatian population in this municipality in 1992, after numerous reactions of NGOs and many parties, the decision was overturned; The President of the Assembly of the Municipality of Vrbas (from the Radical Party), also the president of the Council for inter-national relations of the municipality of Vrbas, appeared at the public meeting in a JSO t-shirt (JSO-Special Operations Units-a part of Milošević’s secret police whose members killed the Prime Minister Đinđić in 2003); In Petrovaradin appeared grafitti against Hungarians, Croats, minorities, no police statement; in Bačko Gradište nationalistic grafitti appeared, police made a statement; Having in mind the relevant context here, the leaders of three Hungarian political parties of Vojvodina asked Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, UN special envoy for Kosovo status, for a support for the autonomy of ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina.

April 2006 – In a residential neighborhood of Subotica the inhabitants organized night

civil guards due to frequent robberies and burglaries (according to the information from the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians 120 inhabitants reported burglaries to this party in only ten days), the police came forward with the information that in this year there were 104 reported criminal acts fewer than in the first trimester of the last year; In Bajmok (municipality of Subotica) there was graffiti of “insulting content”, the police filed criminal charges for provoking national, racial and religious hatred; On introduction of temporary measures pursuant to the decision of the Government of Serbia in the municipality of Novi Pazar, three bombs exploded, without police statement so far; The tombs at the Slovakian cemetery were damaged on two occasions in Dobanovci, no police statement; In Subotica the police filed criminal charges in compliance with the article 134 against a person for a fake report of nationalistically-related assault; Regarding written messages “Death to Hungarians” in two villages in Banat only the local self-government reacted, but not the police.

May 2006 – there were no ethnically-related incidents recorded

June 2006 – In Subotica, some minors distributed tickets for the party named “Hungarians, stop”, a criminal charge filed for provoking national, racial and religious hatred; Threats to Slovaks at the football game in Bački Petrovac, not prosecuted; In Vršac, graffiti of nationalistic content; Vehabia supporters (radical Islamic group) and the football club “Novi Pazar” supporters halted the concert of Balkanika in Novi Pazar, a criminal charge filed against one perpetrator for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance; a Radical Party deputy insulted from the Assembly platform Minister I. Dulić- Marković by calling her “ustasha” which was not punished in any way; On the Internet appeared a poem which openly glorified genocide in Srebrenica and called for further extermination of Bosniaks, the Humanitarian Law Center reported; The initiative of the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina and the Croatian Cultural and Educational Society from Vrbas to broadcast a program in Croatian on the municipal radio station was rejected (the Radical Party is at power there); 10 tombs at the catholic cemetery in Temerin desecrated, no police statement; In Pirot, an assault on the house of Croatian citizens, no further information; At the protest in Preševo “Stop discrimination and marginalization of Albanians in Preševo”, a few hundreds of Albanians demanded regional self-government for the three municipalities in the south of Serbia; Committee

on Defence and Security of the Assembly of Serbia adopted a report of BIA on security where it was said that “the security in Serbia is stable despite...increased security risks in Kosovo and Metohija above all, the south of Serbia, Raška region and Vojvodina...where the extremists from national minorities abuse the actual political processes...to satisfy their hidden separatistic demands through new initiatives”; The democratic Party of Sandžak (SDP) forwarded a protest to the Ministry of Justice because the prisoners of Bosniak nationality had been beaten up in the Niš prison.

July 2006 – Unknown perpetrators destroyed the equipment at the transmitter of RTV Preševo; In Sombor the board with the notice of Croatian Cultural and Artistic Association “Vladimir Nazor” was painted over; The Municipal Board of Serbian Radical Party in Kula issued an announcement in which they condemned “some 17% of nationalistic oriented Ruthenians and Hungarians who decide on the president of the municipality of Kula election” for the failure of their candidate at the elections for the president of the municipality, without any reactions from the authorities; Stoning of the catholic church in Smederevo for the fourth time this year, perpetrators of previous stoning found; In Niš the activists of one NGO who performed an action on the anniversary of the massacre in Srebrenica assaulted, assailants arrested, no police statement; Anti-Serbian grafitti in Senta; A deputy of SRP and the president of the Assembly of the municipality of Leskovac in the local parliament called Minister I. Dulić- Marković “ustasha”, the police did not react, but the political party G 17 + filed criminal charges; Fight in Medveđa between the young Serbs and Albanians who “made up at the intervention of the OSCE and the local authorities”;

August 2006 – The County Prosecutor’s Office in Leskovac rejected the criminal charge of the Vice-president of the Government Dulić-Marković against the president of the Assembly of the municipality of Leskovac “because there was no criminal act of provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance”; Minister of Religions in the Government of Serbia said that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church could not be registered in Serbia or build religious premises in its territory and also voluntarily raised the census from 75 to 100 citizens needed to register a religious community; The County Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade rejected the criminal charge of G 17+ against a SRP deputy in the Assembly of the Republic for provoking national, racial and religious

hatred; The police in Novi Sad stopped the performance of Italian artists because the bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church reported it was a satanic manifestation; On a road near Gornji Milanovac the police stopped a vehicle with the mufti of Sandžak and carried out a search which took 95 minutes for no reason whatsoever; In Belgrade, due to his Jewish origin, an Israeli citizen was attacked; the assailant gave in to the police.

September 2006 – The police in Novi Sad said they were searching for unknown persons who had written graffiti “of insulting nationalistically-related content” on the catholic church in Bačka Palanka in the period between 5 August until 5 September; The Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Novi Pazar accused the activists of the coalition List for Sandžak that they had damaged the premises of Islamic community, the police confirmed the allegations; During extraordinary local elections in Novi Pazar a candidate for the Assembly deputy of the coalition List for Sandžak was killed, a member of SDP was arrested; In a Belgrade tabloid appeared two texts against the Vice-president of the Government’s Croatian origin, criminal proceedings brought against it, but the prosecutor rejected the request to react made by the Ministry of Culture; The Bosniak national council (BNV) stopped a cooperation with Islamic community of Sandžak because of “its interference in the political life in Novi Pazar” and pointed to SDP for its damaging political activities”; In Novi Pazar the house of an activist of SDP was shot at.

October 2006 – RTV Vojvodina dropped the charges which had been filed against the producer of the program in Croatian language “Tragom hrvatskim” (Following Croatian trail) allegedly because of the hate speech; In the municipality of Vrbas where official languages are Serbian, Hungarian and Ruthenian, there appeared new signs with street names written only in Serbian and in Cyrillic alphabet; In Čačak at the football game there was racial savagery of the supporters against a black player, the police reacted, a criminal charge was filed for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance; In Belgrade at the football game between Belgrade and Novi Pazar clubs the supporters yelled “Knife, wire, Srebrenica” and “Serbia to the Serbs, out with the Turks”, the police reacted, a criminal charge was filed for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance; The police in Novi Sad said that it pressed charges against an unknown perpetrator for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance because graffiti of “undesirable content” was written; In Niš two persons insulted and

threatened the believers in a mosque, urinated at the front door of the mosque and inside it, the police reacted; In Novi Sad the procedure against 18 members of a neo-Nazi organization National formation ran, meanwhile a book “The national formation case” was published and advertised whose author was the first in the list of charged persons in this case; the anti-Albanian protest in Belgrade, insulting messages aimed to Albanians, NGOs and political parties which advocate for the boycott of the referendum, no reactions of the authorities; On several occasions the cathedral of St. Theresa Avilaska in Subotica, without police statement; Three Albanians harassed at the petrol station near Novi Sad, the police reacted, the County Prosecutor’s Office filed criminal charges against unknown perpetrators for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance.

November 2006 – The County Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad filed a motion for opening an investigation against one person from Bečej on suspicion that he provoked national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance; Nationalistic grafitti in Vrbas, the police arrested two persons and pressed charges for provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance; An armed conflict in the Arab-mosque in Novi Pazar between the believers and Vehabia-Islamic extremists, the police pressed criminal charges; Neo-Nazi grafitti in Telep (a residential neighborhood in Novi Sad now inhabited by ethnic Hungarians), in the police the journalists of Beta press agency could not get an answer as to whether there was an investigation or not; a catholic church in Kać was damaged and nationalistic grafitti appeared in Futog (municipality of Novi Sad), the police made a statement; hate speech at the press conference of SRP in Sombor against Ivane Dulić- Marković because of her origin; a bomb was sett off outside the house of an activist of SDA in Novi Pazar, no police statement, a suspect arrested; in Niš the activists of a pro-fascist National formation distributed a proclamation with the messages “Serbia to Serbs”, “A Serb for a Serb”, no reactions from the police.

December 2006 – a starting point for measuring future changes?

It is undoubtful that after the intervention of the international organizations (EU, Council of Europe and OSCE) not only the number of ethnically-related incident has

been reduced in Serbia, but also the police have started to press charges and the judicial organs have performed their work more vigorously than in 2003 and 2004. On the other hand, the police still does not make well-timed statements about the incidents on ethnic grounds which affects the feeling of security among minority communities and makes manipulation possible. This year the decentralization of the police has failed to be predicted in the Constitution and the Law on police. The judicial organs still do not react every time, and if they reach a decision, they are too mild. The police and the prosecution do not speak publicly about the official data about the number of incidents on ethnic grounds.⁹ There is no communication between authorized state institutions regarding the number of inter-national incidents.

The number of incidents declines¹⁰ and their structure shows a decline in physical assaults, although graffiti and signs with nationalistic content and damages of the tombs still appear here and there. The field findings point to more and more frequent damaging of the signs with the names of towns and cities in Vojvodina which are not mentioned in the media. Local self-governments react in different ways to this kind of damages. Some of them (e.g. in Zrenjanin) react promptly and condemn it publicly and fix them while others (e.g. in Nova Crnja) do not react to damages and vandalism and thus in fact get the multilingual signs out of use.

As for Vojvodina, there is still a noticeable trend of geographical transfer of the location of the incidents, which are becoming fewer, from the northern part of Vojvodina to its central part which is exposed to a quicker process of ethnic homogenization of the population. Besides, the southern third of Vojvodina (Srem and Južni Banat) has almost become nationally homogenous and the same could soon happen to South Bačka and Central Banat.

The fertile soil for tensions on national grounds is a dispute between the Serbian, Montenegrin and Macedonian Orthodox Churches. The Romanian Orthodox Church is

⁹ The data received from the prosecution and courts for criminal acts of provoking national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance for 2004 and 2005 can be seen in YIHR, *Implementation of Transitional Laws in Serbia* 2006, Belgrade.

¹⁰ Data about the number of ethnically motivated incidents in some periods are very much different; stating very different data received from the former Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, the police, Provincial Secretariat for Regulations, Administration and National Minorities of Vojvodina, Assembly Committee on Defence and Security or the reports of NGOs like Human Rights Watch would entirely confuse the readers. The review of the incidents can be found at web sites given in footnote 1.

not recognized in the new Law on Churches and Religious Communities (adopted in 2006) either, which was also the case before. In spite of the dispute between the Serbian and the Romanian Orthodox Church and the open question about ethnic composition of the population of East Serbia¹¹, the Republic of Romania has blocked the initiative of the MPs from Moldavia and Lithuania in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly for putting Serbia under monitoring.

One of the phenomena, which according to the previously made field experiences is connected with ethnic incidents, is separation of the young on ethnic grounds in nationally mixed areas. Among ethnically diverse young people there is a great interethnic distance, “living parallel lives”. This finding corresponds to the fact that young people are actors in most (about nine tenths) of inter-national incidents.

The tensions within Bosniak population in Sandžak, infrastructurally the least developed region in Serbia, have risen since April 2006. In disputes between Bosniak parties, Islamic community and Bosniak national council the state organs do not act impartially.

A frequently seen phenomenon of naming Croats “ustashas” from the platform in the Assembly of Serbia, in some local assemblies and tabloids in 2006 has not been punished by the judicial organs in spite of declarative condemnation in most part of the political public.

As seen according to the types of incidents their structure shows hate speech in 17 cases, graffiti in 15, physical assaults in 11, damaging of churches and cemeteries in 6 and of property in 6, too, death threats in 2.

According to the nationality of the damaged parties there are 12 Hungarians, 12 Croats, 5 Albanians, 3 Jews, Slovaks 2, Ruthenians 1, Montenegrins 1. In the conflicts among Bosniaks there were 7 victims, during extraordinary local elections in Novi Pazar in September 2006, 4 of them.

The presented structure shows that the police reacted in 24 cases and did not react in 20 cases. The prosecution failed to react in 4 cases.

There are still most incidents in Vojvodina (33, mostly in Novi Sad -9 and in

¹¹ The number of ethnic Vlasi in East Serbia varies, depending on the concrete census of the population, between 1500 and 100000. At the last census (2002) twice the number of them was registered than at the previous one.

Subotica -6). In Novi Pazar there were 7 recorded incidents¹², in Belgrade also 7 and in the parts of Serbia inhabited with Albanians-3 and in the rest of Serbia-9.

Generally speaking, the incidents in 2006 as in the previous two years were periodically focused in Vojvodina on Hungarians and Croats above all and in Serbia on Albanians and Bosniaks. Reviving and intensifying the hate speech towards Croats by the Serbian Radical Party is obvious. High officials of SRP called “ustashas” not only the members of the Croatian minority but also their political opponents even at the sessions of the National Assembly of Serbia and in numerous media appearances.

The opportunity to legalize the work of the Romanian Orthodox Church by the new Law on Churches and Religious Communities (April 2006) was missed. In spite of the appeal of the Romanian President the position of this Church has not been legally regulated until today. It is worth mentioning that unlike the Government of Serbia, the Executive Council of Vojvodina has financially supported the Romanian Orthodox Church for years treating it as a traditional church in the territory of Vojvodina.

Different attempts made by the state organs of the Republic of Serbia (and especially thorough actions of the Executive Council of Vojvodina) to develop international confidence deserve a separate report and analysis which will complete the picture. Such an analysis should combine official data with active collecting of information in the field, as the case is with the incidents themselves.

Official data and press reports sometimes speak louder about the desirable and intended results than about realized ones. Despite the efforts to increase the share of the members of the national minorities in especially sensitive state services (police, prosecution, courts), even in the municipalities where minority population makes 80-90% of the total population (e.g. Kanjiža, Senta) there are almost no civil servants who speak the language of majority of the local community. This is especially obvious in the two south municipalities (Preševo and Bujanovac) where the ethnic Albanians make a majority of population.

The key recommendation regarding the relations towards the inter-national incidents in Serbia, especially actualized before the elections and solving Kosovo status is the same as one year ago: It is quite necessary that the organizations of the international

¹² Attention should be paid to the incidents among Bosniaks again.

community continue to carefully observe the exercise of the rights of the members of national minorities. Regarding the experiences from March 2004 when the wave of violence was transferred from Kosovo to Belgrade and Niš and Vojvodina, such an attention of the international organizations can have invaluable importance in the period to come.

18 December 2006