



YUCOM

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Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Weekly Newsletter* No. 50

Human Rights Defenders Meeting, Niš, July 7th 2010

A meeting of human rights defenders was held in Nis, on July 7th 2010, organized by UNOHCHR, OCSE and YUCOM. The meeting was attended by representatives of the *Nis Human Rights Center*, the *Niš Human Rights Committee*, *Network of Committees for Human Rights in Serbia* – CHRIS, *Committee for Human Rights* from Leskovac, *Women in Action* from Velika Plana, *Women for Peace* and the *Shelter for Women and Children Victims of Family Violence*.

As the number of human rights defender is decreasing, as well as the sensibility of civic society organizations when it comes to protection of human rights, the first consulting meeting outside Belgrade was held, in Niš, with the aim to represent a first step in spreading the network of human rights defenders. Also, the general goal of these and future consultations is the improvement of human rights defenders' activities, as well as composing recommendations which would be addressed to authorized state organs and international institutions and organizations, in order to improve the position of human rights defenders. In a broader sense, this gathering and the meeting which will follow are aimed to strengthen this segment of civic society organizations' actions and increase their recognizability and presence in the public.

At the meeting, concrete problems faced by human rights defenders on a daily basis were presented, as well as concrete suggestions on how to overcome those problems. It was stated that everyone who is active in human rights protection, on any level and in any region, is faced with problems in their work. However, these problems are far more apparent in provincial areas where there are institutional and non-institutional resistances.

As a direct result of this meeting – over the course of which, many concrete examples from the participants' experience were presented – the following problems were emphasized and the following recommendations were formulated:



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- There is a clear problem of cooperation between human rights defenders with state institutions. Currently, there are various mechanisms on paper which create the illusion of cooperation between NGOs and state institutions. But in fact, NGOs active in human rights protection are hindered by numerous administrative hurdles in conducting their planned activities, regardless of the previous consent by state institutions.

- A clear and public support by international organizations to the work of human rights defenders is necessary. Such support would also influence state institutions to realize the seriousness and importance of the defenders' work.

- The human rights defenders' community in Serbia is small and fragile, and the solidarity between the actors in the civic sector is ever-decreasing, so therefore it is necessary to work on the improvement of the relations within the civic sector. Forming a network of human right defenders could provide a possible solution.

- Because of the work they do, human rights defenders are directly jeopardized by institutions and individuals of authority who violate human rights. There are a large number of cases in which institutions and individuals of authority lead numerous court cases against defenders because of their work on human rights protection, which often includes the harassment of their family members, as well as personal confrontations with the defenders.

- Personal jeopardy of human rights defenders represents a large and acute problem. It is all the more apparent given the fact that the state does not recognize them and protect them as defenders.

- With the aim to deal with the said problems in an organized, systematic and effective manner, it is necessary to form a team of trained and specialized lawyers who would in a sustainable manner provide legal aid to human rights defenders who are jeopardized by the institutions because of their work and their activities. It is necessary for that team of lawyers to acquire an adequate visibility and weight, as well as to be very selective when choosing the cases it leads in order to emphasize the specific weight and importance of their actions. YUCOM's legal aid was stated as an example of good practice.

- It is necessary to insist upon the training of judicial organs, who are still unaware of their commitment to directly implement ratified instruments, as well as universal rules of international law.



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- The lack of understanding and the lack of interest by the media for the work done by human rights defenders is very apparent. Because of that, the cooperation with the media is of great importance, with the aim to render them more sensible and urge them to objective and balanced informing about human rights defenders' activities. That way, there would be less room for the currently dominant negative propaganda and denouncing of human rights defenders as 'enemies', 'foreign mercenaries' etc.

- It is also necessary to recognize the need for psychological support to human rights defenders who, because of the nature of their work and the feeling of isolation and loneliness, often develop the co-called "burn-out" syndrome.

Prognosis:

Bearing in mind Serbia's slow advancing on the road of transition to an open society based on the rule of law and functional democratic institutions, human rights defenders will long remain an important corrective and source of support and help of democratic processes. The task of the State is to provide for them and other civic society organizations security and other conditions for undisturbed work, in accordance with the documents of the United Nations and the European Union¹. That way, Serbia will faster and more successfully fulfill conditions for the membership in the European Union and for joining the family of free and democratic countries.

¹ Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998 and the European Union Guidelines on human rights defenders from 2004.