



YUCOM

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Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Newsletter* No. 36

1. Following an initiative moved by the municipal *Commission on Renaming Streets and Squares* to name Južni bulevar (Southern boulevard) -- a blind alley on the outskirts of the southern Serbian city of Niš -- after **Šaban Bajramović**, a world famous Roma singer who recently passed away in bitter misery, a group of dwellers signed a petition against the initiative. "Arguments" they used to support their step -- such as the claim that renaming their street would necessitate changing personal documents -- could not serve even as rationalization to camouflage the naked racism they are inspired by. The inhabitants of that putrid little "street" that for [incomprehensible](#) reasons was called a "boulevard" openly insisted that they had nothing against that a street -- but not their street -- bears Šaban Bajramović's name and suggested that another street be picked, preferably in the slum area "where he used to live and where his people live today". They thereby insisted that they were no nationalists and had nothing against Roma people.

Ministry of State Administration and Local Selfgovernment issued Apr. 3, 2009 its consent that the Municipality of Niš rename Southern Boulevard into *Šaban Bajramović boulevard*, pending final decision by the Niš Municipal Assembly.

2. A slum settlement with fifty improvised houses situated in the vicinity of the dormitories being built for the athletes to take part in the upcoming Belgrade *Universiade 2009* was crushed and its inhabitants -- Roma citizens who include war refugees from Kosovo -- were forced to leave the place where they have lived many years in miserable conditions. The decision to tear down the settlement was issued by the City of Belgrade Secretariat for Inspection Affairs. Belgrade's Mayor **Dragan Djilas** said on that occasion that „a few hundred people cannot be allowed to halt Belgrade's development, nor can two million Belgraders be held anyone's hostage". Following desperate protests by the Roma community which was left with no shelter, as well as pressure by the public (several NGOs, as well as State Secretary in the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, **Marko Karadžić**, voiced their exasperation), Belgrade City administration tried to solve the problem by means of installing several containers to house those people in a Belgrade suburban village of Boljevcı. However, inhabitants of Boljevcı blocked their village and access roads to it, engaged in a tirade of racist hate speech and demanded that containers intended for Roma citizens be



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taken away: „If you don't remove them, we will torch both them and those who attempt to move into them“, a citizen of Boljevcı exclaimed in front of TV cameras. They also demanded official guarantees from the City of Belgrade that New Belgrade Roma will not be resettled to Boljevcı. Acts of violence, such as an attempt to set a container ablaze, were committed during the Boljevcı dwellers' protest and their action against the Roma newcomers entering the containers. Although this represents an open racist rebellion, media reports insist that „there were no incidents“.

The City of Belgrade authorities announced Apr. 6 that the „Roma from the unhygienic settlement in New Belgrade refused to be resettled to Boljevcı,“ and because they allegedly wished to remain in the city center. On the other hand, media inform that the resettlement to Boljevcı was given up because of Boljevcı inhabitants' intransigence.

Against the background of these events, Mayor Djilas displayed a considerable level of understanding for the protesters in Boljevcı: „I understand the Boljevcı inhabitants' fear, because people could have come to their village who partly don't even have identity documents, and nobody knows who they are“ the Mayor said and added that „all those who don't have legal residence in Belgrade have to return to where they came here from. That is a legal right and it is not negotiable either with OSCE or UNHCR or with nongovernmental organizations“.

Djilas condemned violent acts and threatened with criminal prosecution against those who had attempted to torch a container, but he fell short of deeming it appropriate to address the issue of open outbursts of racist intolerance. According to Djilas, the problem will be „solved,“ by placing a number of Roma citizens in emergency relief centers, whereas it remains completely unclear where the resettlement containers will be placed, since the authorities appear to be impressed by citizens' reactions to hitherto attempts to install them.

What constitutes the most alarming feature in this development is the fact that neither President of Serbia, **Boris Tadić**, nor Human and Minority Rights Minister **Svetozar Čiplić** found it necessary to react to these acts of undisguised racist intolerance against Roma citizens. These events are alarming also because they demonstrate a very low level of sensibility in detecting and recognizing racism as a very dangerous social phenomenon. It has become apparent that Serbian citizens and political elites alike have merely recognized Roma as a key word to underscore the alleged recognition and observance of human rights, whereas concrete incidents which serve as tests of the actual situation show that Serbia's Roma population does not enjoy elementary human protection.



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New Belgrade Roma community's fate thus remains unclear while the City of Belgrade authorities are preparing to organize a huge Roma music festival on the central town square to mark Apr. 7, the International Roma Day!

Outlook:

In the middle of the *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015* and along with declarations of her ambition to join European integration processes, Serbia continues to represent a theatre of open racist outbursts, hate speech and aggressive intolerance against those whose ethnic origin, religious beliefs, political views and sexual orientation does not correspond to the liking of "true patriots". What represents a reason for even greater concern is the fact that highest officials of the state, political parties and law enforcement agencies watch these developments in tranquility and with no condemnation -- some, like Mayor Djilas, even support them -- which additionally encourages advocates of such ideas and perpetrators of what is defined as felony even in the legislation of the Republic of Serbia.