

CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC IN SERBIA AND VIOLATION OF CIVIL RIGHTS OF ITS CITIZENS

This text was written by one of our active members of the YU-Peace network from Serbia. As this text also features criticism on the Serbian government, the writer asked us to publish this text without his /her name, due to fear of government repressions.

I would like to elaborate on the situation in Serbia during corona virus pandemic. Simply put, our lives are in danger twice: first because we are attacked by the virus that could prove to be lethal for some of us, and second because we are attacked by our president Aleksandar Vučić.

Vučić has been a part of the government of this country for 8 years, since 2012. During this time, he was also the Prime Minister of our country, and he has led the country in a highly inappropriate and, at times, deeply disturbing way. We citizens have been doing our best and hoped that we will be able to make a difference in the elections in 2017. We hoped to do so legally, via elections, especially since this government won the 2012 elections fair and square, thus gaining power.

Their political victory in 2017 was less than spectacular, but the circumstances weren't on our side at the time. Many people decided to boycott those elections, convinced that the democratic party would still win. Vučić's party (Serbian Progressive Party, or SNS in Serbian) and every single one of his supporters came out to vote that day, thus winning the elections. In Serbia, any party that has the majority of votes wins, no matter if the number of voters is small. Vučić made a million of his supporters come out and vote, and like good little soldiers they did, helping him and his party win. At that time, his political mentor Tomislav Nikolić became the President and Vučić became the Prime Minister. The constitution of the Republic of Serbia states that the president's authority is limited, while the power and authority actually lies in the hands of the Prime Minister. This is how Aleksandar Vučić slowly leaves his political mentor behind, keeps him content and busy with menial tasks, and takes up a role of a person who is prepared to give his own life for his voters and fellow citizens. In doing so he was so successful that Tomislav Nikolić didn't even run in the 2017 elections, and Vučić became the president and the sole master of Serbia.

Vučić chose Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister, a completely unknown face and name in Serbian politics. Even though her role is supposed to be more important and hold more power than that of Vučić, she doesn't bother to hide her enthusiasm for him, and she is calling him "boss" in public. Ever since 2017, our state has been a state on paper only, because there isn't a single role, a single field, or a single corner in this country where Vučić or one of his family members, haven't stuck their fingers.

Public space (TV, newspapers, the media) are completely in Vučić's hands. In the last 18 months, there were only three newspapers that didn't worship him. These are "Danas" ("Today") daily newspaper, and "Nin" and "Vreme" ("The Time"), a weekly newspaper. In many places, these can't be found because retailers are forced to hide them, or don't sell them. There are only a few internet portals that dare to publish any sort of criticism of this government. There is nothing on TV – not a single criticism, not even a mild one. No,

everything is just perfect as is. In reality, we know this isn't true, but there is no place for this to be said.

There is only one TV station that's not pro-government, N1 TV, and Vucic and everyone else keep targeting them as labeling them as anti-Serbian: It's widely proclaimed that N1 TV are traitors, against our country and its citizens, and that their journalists and reporters are foreign mercenaries. People working for N1 station are often humiliated, delegitimised, and their TV station can't be found on all emitters (and emitters that allow N1 programs are often blocked). Only about a quarter of the country has access to N1 TV station, and these are mostly the bigger cities.

Ever since the president declared the state of emergency, there were news conferences where journalists from independent media were allowed to participate, but this was only because the president wanted to look good in the eyes of Europe. However, since the journalists started asking "unpleasant" questions, the authorities didn't like that at all. It turned out they were withholding important information, violating human rights, covering up the mistakes of their ministers, the holes in the health system and their own bad crisis management, as well as the fact that they are using these tragic circumstances to promote their own political party. The moment the government realized this, they removed the journalists from the press conferences and gave the excuse that the journalists themselves were afraid for their own safety. All independent journalists stated that this was not true, but nothing changed. So nowadays there are no independent reporters in press conferences.

As the pandemic got closer to Serbia, I started paying more attention to Croatian online newspapers. Index.hr portal dedicated a special section to news on corona virus from Italy. The news stated that the virus is highly contagious, dangerous, and that it's spreading rapidly. I expected our country to start preparing, getting more masks and respirators, prepping hospitals and the medical staff. ... Yet, none of that was happening.

Average people who read news online were peaceful because they believed the virus to be contained in China, and even Italy seemed far. By mid-February, the situation became quite serious and that Croatian portal started publishing the number of infected people, yet our media remained silent. At the end of February, there was a press conference that national TV station broadcasted and about 4 million people watched: Vucic and several doctors assured the people that there's no reason to panic. I will quote Gordan Duhanek, a Croatian journalist, who wrote:

"Serbian tragedy started at the end of February, when Vučić called a press conference where he brought Nestorović, who is by then already notorious because of his behavior in public, behavior that no serious expert should ever allow themselves to display.

Nestorović called coronavirus "the funniest virus in history," but the following statement took the prize and already became legendary: "Women, feel free to go on shopping sprees to Italy, they have the best sales at this time, you are protected by your estrogen." These casual and carefree statements were followed by loud laughter and Vučić laughed as well while

standing behind him. Minister of Health Zlatko Lичić took it upon himself to state that "coronavirus is much weaker than regular flu."

This happened on 26th of February and at this time, parts of Lombardy were already quarantined, Italians started panic-shopping, and Italian doctors realized that they were facing something they have never seen before. The number of confirmed cases in Italy was 400.

Croatia's preparations were in full swing for what was about to come while Vučić was laughing to Nestorović's sexist remarks and believed his charlatan judgment. Everything went downhill for Serbia and its citizens from there.

Everything Vučić did from that day onward was a series of minor or major misses and failings, some of which lead directly to the spread of the disease.

About two weeks after this scandalous press conference with Nestorović, Vučić changed his tune and started using apocalyptic rhetoric, claiming along the way that nobody called the virus "the funniest virus in history." The president of Serbia is definitely not the first leader of the state to underestimate the danger that is coronavirus, but he is still competing with the American president Donald Trump on who will deal with the crisis in the more catastrophic way and who will endanger their citizens more."

Everything that came afterwards was a huge disaster. The restrictions were disguised as caring for senior citizens, who were prohibited from leaving their homes: anyone older than 65 was not allowed to leave their home, lest they are ready to pay the fine of 1,300 Euros. With average pension being just 200 euros, this was really like the end of the world. To those who are older and had no one to help, the state was supposed to arrange delivering groceries to their door, but nothing has been done. People were left to fight for themselves.

In the beginning, the curfew was only during the night, but for the past Easter weekend, we had 60 hours long curfew. There were no masks to buy, no alcohol for disinfection, no hand sanitizer, no gloves... Everyone was looking for these things, but the answer faced at the shops was always "we don't have it," and nobody knew when the next batch was expected. The state was not prepared and Vučić started begging to China, Russia, and the EU for help on TV. Press conferences became incredibly dramatic: Vučić was sweating, tearful, sighing, and telling us all over and over again how he's got no break from working for us. He is on TV every single day, sometimes visiting different TV stations in the same day.

Many people came back to Serbia after spending time abroad, and the authorities didn't like that at all. There was a fierce campaign against those people, and was shameful to see the state harassing their own citizens. We were told they should never have returned to the country in this situation, they were the ones who brought corona virus, and that they came back to get medical treatment here.

People who came back to Serbia were never informed that they are potential virus carriers because everything was chaotic, they weren't informed that they should stay in quarantine, and they didn't know they should report their arrival at the municipality. Those in charge of these tasks simply had no capacity to achieve everything that's being asked of them.

The management was very chaotic. Some people decided to self-quarantine for 15 days, some managed to get someone from the health authorities on the phone, some received phone calls that were supposed to confirm they were at home, and some were checked on in person.

A girl, who had recorded a video last winter where she sang a song against the government, was now arrested. We were told this was because she broke quarantine, but she got back to the country even before the state of emergency was declared. Nobody informed her she was supposed to be in quarantine, and when she got back home from her boyfriend's house, she was arrested. She spent 20 days in Serbia's biggest prison, and just a couple of days ago she was finally released because the public kept asking about her and people wanted to know why she was imprisoned. More than 12,000 people signed an online petition for her to be released (myself included), and we received an email where they thanked us for the signatures and asked us to sign for other falsely imprisoned people.

Today, we have even trails via Skype. This is against laws, and these trails are a mockery of democracy. A great reporter from Novi Sad wrote about the biggest hospital in Vojvodina, KBC in Novi Sad. She revealed that the hospital doesn't have masks and gloves for its medical staff, they don't have protective suits for working with Covid-19 patients. After this report she was arrested. She was kept in custody and released the following morning, but her phone and laptop haven't been returned to her. It's been said that she was arrested for spreading panic and that we have more than enough equipment, and she did false reporting in order to make our country look bad. All of us, on the other hand, know that what she wrote was true, that there's not enough equipment.

People are self-organizing and sewing their own fabric masks that can be washed and used again. We wash and iron them ourselves, and doctors and nurses in hospitals are doing the same. I know for certain that this is the case in Sombor hospital. I myself have sent some fabric to a woman who is a nurse so she can make her own mask and some for her fellow nurses.

The Covid-19 Centre for mild cases that's hastily built in Belgrade is a terrible place to be. The number of infected people is huge, tests are few, and the results are out only after several days. A lot of people who are waiting for their results might even be healthy, but they are being kept in the same place as infected people. (...)

A lot of doctors and nurses got infected and the number of people who die because of the virus is 4 times higher than in Croatia. The official information is that we don't have enough tests and lab capacity. (...)

I will again quote the above mentioned Croatian journalist:

"Not even three weeks after finally grasping the implications and dangers did Vučić manage to put together a full-functioning system. He is still operating ad-hoc and without any clear strategy. The question is whether the citizens understand that the current president is putting them in danger with his demented behavior and chaotic politics during this coronavirus pandemic, and is there any way they can stand up and resist?"

Anyhow, it is perfectly clear that Serbia is facing a threat much bigger than covid-19. The threat is called Aleksandar Vučić."

I couldn't agree more with this conclusion and I would like to say that the situation is much more complex than I was able to show in this text, but I did my best to describe the chaos we are currently facing.