

Summer School on Human Rights 2020

Webinar 9: Rising hate in time of COVID-19: The experience of young people

Jelena Nestorović: Hate-speech in Croatia in 2020

Dear colleagues, I would like to greet you all and to thank you for the invitation to participate in the conference which deals with so many important issues.

Here, in Croatia, this year will not be forgotten for a long time. In addition to the coronavirus epidemic, in the past few months we have had 145 earthquakes in Zagreb. The city has suffered significant damage and the consequences of these earthquakes will be felt for a long time to come, perhaps for decades.

We also held two elections: presidential and parliamentary. Both elections were marked by a severe clash between the divided Right and the divided Left, and their result was very unpredictable.

(In the end, left-wing candidate won the presidential elections, and the relative winner of the parliamentary elections is right oriented Croatian democratic Union, which has won enough seats not to have to form a coalition with the far-right options.)

When we talk about hate speech in Croatia, we must know that it is primarily aimed at Serbs but the target of hate speech are also homosexual people, Roma, Jews, immigrants, women etc.

Despite the fact that the Serb community in Croatia today is small in number and represents just over 4% of the population (as opposed to more than 12% in 1991), it is still today, a full quarter of a century after the end of interethnic wars, target of verbal and occasionally physical attacks.

Although life in many interethnic places has returned to normal, and there are no significant political and other conflicts among the general population of different nationalities, some right-wing and far-right politicians still reckon that by regularly calling out Serbs and demanding the abolition of their rights, will gain advantage over competitors.

Given this, it is not surprising that the number of verbal attacks on Serbs intensifies in election years. Unfortunately, this year hasn't been an exception.

This years divisions among the political right occasionally manifested itself as a conflict or competition over which party would be sharper in calling out the Serb community and especially its right to political representation.

Also, for decades, several print and electronic media have been operating in Croatia, in fact they "specialized" themselves in finding "Serbian conspiracies". TW shows like Bujica and newspapers like Hrvatski tjednik present almost every unfavorable social phenomenon as a consequence of secret activities of Serbs, which in various combinations include the president of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS) Milorad Pupovac, but also politicians from the Republic of Serbia.

Thus, depending on the needs, Serbs may be to blame for the country's unfavorable foreign policy position, economic difficulties, negative demographic trends, and even disasters such as fire or

coronavirus. Although absurd in themselves, the accusations are so frequent, and conspiracy theories so branched out, that they seem to influence the thinking of tens or even hundreds of thousands of citizens.

Lately, proponents of "Serbian conspiracy" theories have also got their political representatives in the newly established Homeland Movement of Croatian singer Miroslav Škoro (third political party in Croatia after the elections) and the somewhat older Croatian sovereignists, who are in alliance with Škoro. While establishing themselves, both parties announced the fight against the "privileges" of Serbs as one of their main goals. One of them included in its legal program a promise to ban members of national minorities expressing their national identity.

Their former parliamentary representatives used virtually every session of Parliament to mention the Serb community in Croatia. They have been particularly active around plans for the 2021 census. Apparently, members of the far right want to prevent members of the Serb community from working as enumerators, in order to put additional pressure on the community and further reduce the share of Serbs and other minorities in the population.

It is also important to mention football fan groups in Croatia since they have been regularly involved in inciting national intolerance since the 1980s, especially towards the Serb community. Among this year's incidents are the development of banners and the writing of graffiti with horrible threats to Serbian women and children, graffiti depicting the lynching of a Serbian family, and threats of revenge against Serb children in many Croatian cities. In addition, Ustaša slogans are regularly shouted at matches and the failed puppet Nazi state - the Independent State of Croatia – continues to be celebrated among them.

In mid-May, two young Serbs were brutally beaten in Vukovar with batons and other weapons. Members of the BBB fan group from Zagreb also took part in the attack. The following month, a fight was organized between members one Croatian and one Serbian football fan group near Vukovar.

It is important to note that a significant number of actors, such as politicians and analysts, refused to condemn these incidents, trying to present them as a side issue.

Significantly less media attention was drawn to attacks on the Serb community in smaller and isolated places. Thus, property was damaged in Bršadin and Bobota near Vukovar, Kistanje near Knin, Duzluk near Orahovica, Otočac, Otišić near Vrlika, Banski Grabovac, Islam Grčki and Biljana Donji near Zadar, but also in larger places in Varaždin and Split.

These attacks include the destruction of crops, damaging houses, monuments, spaces of Serbian institutions and Orthodox churches.

During the period of severe measures established to combat the coronavirus pandemic that coincided with the earthquakes in Zagreb, the overall situation calmed down. People were concentrated on their own survival and nothing else interested them. However, due to elections, general situation in Croatia which lasts for years and new economic crisis, this was short-lived and 2020 soon became an average bad year in Croatia, if we speak about the atmosphere of freedom and the possibility to be different in national, religious or any other sense.