



Political Dismissal of the Director of the National Library of Serbia

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“The director of the National Library of Serbia, writer and philosopher Sreten Ugričić was dismissed urgently on the 20th of January 2012 at the so-called “telephone meeting” of the Government of Serbia, on the initiative of the minister of the police, and with the reserved behavior of the minister of culture. The dismissal was preceded by a media campaign of nationalist and state papers after Mr Ugričić signed, together with 25 colleagues, distinguished Belgrade writers, intellectuals and public figures, an appeal for the protection of the freedom of thought and expression, as well as for the ceasing of the just started campaign against the Montenegrin writer Andrej Nikolaidis“. (Kai Ekholm)

The reasons for this unusual dismissal, headed by the minister of the police Ivica Dačić, the former spokesman of the regime of Slobodan Milošević during the bloody wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo in the 90-ties of the XX century, and supported by the coalition partners from the Democratic Party of the “pro-European” President of Serbia Boris Tadić, have been exclusively political. Namely, one has not taken into account the enormous ten-year effort and work of Mr. Ugričić, who managed, as director of NLS in the hard times of the economic crisis, to create, from a national library whose programme and infrastructure had been neglected and which had isolated itself, the greatest cultural institution in both Serbia and the region, and to include it, through modernizing, re-organizing and inventive applying of the most recent ICT and digital technologies, in the circle of the

prominent European libraries. During that period, there were lots of attacks on Mr. Ugričić in nationalist papers and by the right intellectual groups, above all because of his supporting of an open society, democratic dialogue and freedom of expression, as well as of his being against any kind of nationalism, particularly in culture. He was appointed, in 2001, by the Government of Zoran Dindić, the first democratic prime minister of Serbia, who was assassinated by the nationalist parts of the secret service of Serbia. Mr. Ugričić, known in his culture as an excellent writer, novelist and essayist, recently occupied important positions in the most eminent European and world institutions, such as: co-president of the Selection Board of the World Digital Library (WDL), Administrative Board of The European Library (TEL), Administrative Board of the Electronic Information for Libraries Consortium (EIFL), Administrative Board of the Conference of European National Libraries (CENL), European Ethical Working Group, Next Page Foundation.

The event started independently of Mr. Ugričić. On the 8th of January this year, in Banja Luka (a town in the Republic of Srpska, a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina), in the hall of the local sport centre, the police found and removed some armament. A day later the Day of the Republic of Srpska was celebrated in that hall. The political and church leaders of the Republic of Srpska and of Serbia were present there. One day after the celebration the news on the armament was presented – with standard methods of media spinning – as an “attempt of terrorism”. Although no one was really endangered, since the armament had been found quite earlier, and the owner, a watchman in that sport centre, had gone to the police himself, saying that he had it put away in order to later resell it on the black market, the noise coming from the media – in the mainstream dailies and on television – increased to a hysterical scale. There will be elections in Serbia soon, so the ruling politicians thought they would get additional points before the elections by presenting themselves as endangered ones, in the period when the state did not succeed in becoming a European Union candidate because of the relation with Kosovo, in the period of huge problems, such as enormous unemployment and poor legal and economic infrastructure.

In that noise coming from the media, above all the tabloid ones, with few reactions calling to patience until the police should issue the official results of the investigation, the Montenegrin writer Andrej Nikolaidis reacted with a text published on the 11th of January on a Belgrade internet portal. The text remained unnoticed all until the 13th January, when it was established that the author of the text – the text itself belongs to the field of publicist essays and is full of paradoxes and hyperboles – is at the same time the media adviser of the President of the Parliament of Montenegro. Soon after that the text was interpreted as a “support to terrorism”, and one established a connection between that “act” and the policy of the current Montenegrin authorities, marked with mainly disturbed relations between Serbia and Montenegro after Montenegro had been proclaimed an independent state several years ago. Since the author of the text was of Bosnian origin, the tabloids in Serbia raised the whole thing to the level of a regional plot against politicians in Serbia and against Serbia itself, too. While the hysteria lasted none of the media in Serbia issued the integral text written by Nikolaidis, though they cited parts of it providing “confirmations” of the plot, i.e. of the “support of terrorism”. The official authorities of Serbia raised the whole case to the highest diplomatic level, sending a protest to the Montenegrin authorities, which was followed by a clear and calm response to the text of Nikolaidis that it does not reflect the official position of the Montenegrin government.

On the 17th January, the already mentioned group of Belgrade writers and intellectuals, gathered in the Forum of Writers, sent a proclamation to the public calling the media to stop the hysterical campaign and to issue at least, when dealing with a publicist text from the Internet, the integral version of the text, so that the public should be acquainted with it and judge it itself. Mr. Ugričić was one of those that signed that appeal to the public, and he did it as a writer and member of the Forum of Writers. However, certain members of that informal group of Belgrade writers and intellectuals have been a target of the tabloid media for a number of years, mainly because of their criticism of nationalism; so, the tabloids replied now with that campaign against the Forum. They picked the name of Mr Ugričić as the

most prominent one from the list, the one of the director of the National Library (other ones that signed the paper are mainly freelancers, artists or state-independent intellectuals and public figures). In the evening of the 17th January, and especially on the 18th of January, there appeared titles such as: “Director of the National Library of Serbia supports the assassination of Tadić”, the very President of the Republic of Serbia, and similar titles and texts of Ugričić’s “support of terrorism”. On the same day, around noon, the vice-president of the Government and the minister of the police, the already mentioned Ivica Dačić, said in a television broadcast that “the director of the National Library can support terrorism, but from a prison cell”. At the meeting of the Government held in the afternoon, the minister of the police, supported by the minister of the army, asked for an urgent dismissal of Ugričić. The minister of culture was against it, asking for time to clear up the matter and saying that the Government had more important problems to urgently deal with, instead of dealing with signatures of an informal literary association.

That, however, did not calm the political leaders, even though Mr. Ugričić signed himself as a writer in order that the freedom of speech should be obeyed, regardless of the fact whether one agreed with what others said or not, in order that one obeyed the right of publishing complete information so as to prevent fabricating and imposing meanings from happening, as well as in order that the readers independently and with no interpretations imposed in advance, and with no threats either, should read that text and any other one. The signature was interpreted among the ruling politicians and the media supporting them as a signature of a state official, i.e. as a signature of a director of a national institution. In spite of the reserve of the minister of culture and additional explanations of Ugričić himself, on the 20th of January and urgent telephone meeting of the Government of Serbia took place, and Mr Ugričić was removed from his position, without any broader public or any other debate, with no proper analysis and procedure, without even a possibility for anything like that. The nationalist tabloids and the state media acclaimed that decision as a contribution to the fight “against terrorism”. The liberal part of the public in Serbia could do nothing but be disgusted with that return of the policy “quick solutions”,

“emergencies” and “national menaces”. The rightist circles also supported the decision of the Government, regardless of the fact whether they were close or not to the very authorities, while the media mainstream supported the moves of the national “homogenization”.

In the days that followed, the tabloids continued, despite the protests, to attack the dismissed Mr. Ugričić, as well as to search for new targets among the liberal intellectuals that stood against the new nationalistic tabloid hysteria inspired from the top and by special services. In spite of the campaign, media frightening and threats, a part of the liberal intellectuals in Belgrade, with solidarity of the liberal circles in the entire region, continued to protest against such Gleichschaltung policy in Serbia.

The public protest and support for the return of Sreten Ugričić have come from really numerous individuals and organizations from the fields of culture, literature, library science, non-government sector, both from Serbia and from outside: Forum of Writers, Belgrade; Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS), Belgrade; thirty eminent professors from a number of universities in the world; National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croatian Society of Writers; PEN Centre of Bosnia and Herzegovina; PEN Centre of Montenegro. An indication of the state of being frightened and the state of political control is the absence of the reaction of the national association of writers and the Serbian PEN Centre. Some member of the Serbian PEN Centre announced their resignations as members and supported the idea that such PEN Centre in Serbia should not exist. At the moment, the support has been announced by PEN Centres from other countries. At the same time, there has been a number of reactions, protest notes and asking for support by individuals, public figures, artists, journalists, Belgrade University professors, as well as common citizens.

After the murder of its first democratic prime minister Zoran Đinđić, Serbia has sunk deeper and deeper into institutional and political crisis. With an addition of the economic and financial crisis that is taking place with a special intensity in this part of the south-eastern Europe, one can clearly observe a growing populism, demagogy and return to repressive nationalism and xenophobia, instead of a

strengthening of democratic rights and freedom. The “case” of the dismissed director of the National Library of Serbia Sreten Ugričić has been a clear sign of an enormous crisis that took hold of the Serbian state, politics and society.

The author of this report is Prof. Dr. Novica Milić, Head of the Literature and Communication Department of the Media and Communication Faculty in Belgrade. He is the author of ten books from the fields of philosophy and theory of literature, including two books from the field of the media theory. Currently he prepares a book on this case, i.e. on its broader and deeper political and cultural dimensions.