

Kandic Defies Regime

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Human rights activist, Natasa Kandic, appears to have set herself on a collision course with the Belgrade regime

Miroslav Filipovic's conviction has had a far greater impact than the regime anticipated. In jailing the journalist, the authorities have unintentionally thrust the previously taboo subject of Yugoslav army war crimes to the fore.

Filipovic's trial was closed to the public. Officials said this was for security reasons, yet his incriminating texts had already appeared on the popular IWPR Website, as well as in some widely read English-language newspapers.

It was obvious that Filipovic's case was held in camera because of witness reports and facts concerning the scope and involvement of some army and police units in crimes against Albanian civilians when last year's NATO bombing campaign was at its height.

Filipovic's trial was at the same time meant to be a direct warning to anyone who dares to address this subject. Natasa Kandic, the director of The Humanitarian Law Centre, chose to ignore the warning.

In an interview with the daily Danas on August 12, headlined "The Authorities Are Hiding Their Responsibility Behind Repression", Kandic said at least 200,000 people in Serbia are aware that war crimes were committed in Kosovo.

The army top brass responded five days later with an open letter which asserted that Kandic's claims were groundless. Its main charge was that she did not speak about the crimes of "Shiptar terrorists and NATO criminals."

This wasn't the end of the matter. The regime sought to make more political capital out of the episode.

The state news agency, Tanjug, ran a commentary by an anonymous journalist on August 22 accusing Kandic of espionage activities. The commentary, published in all the state media, claimed that for every "false accusation against the army and legally elected leadership" Kandic and her colleagues were awarded the sum of 5000 German marks.

The condemnation of the Humanitarian Law Centre is an assault on all NGOs as well as Serbia's civil sector. It is no longer important what activity a non-governmental organisation is engaged in, the fact that the majority of NGOs are campaigning for a massive election turnout is enough for them to be demonised.

Kandic's response to the army's accusation, published in Danas on August 24, pulled no punches. In a long open letter, entitled "I Do Not Wish to Remain Silent Over The Horrors", she wrote about what she and others saw in Kosovo. The consequence of this very personal and touching letter was far-reaching.

In saying she was ready to publicise what she had experienced in Kosovo, she appears to have set herself on a collision course with the regime.

And she is unlikely to turn back. It is widely known that she is uncompromising when it comes to human rights.

A couple of days later, the VJ general staff press office announced that Kandic would be held responsible for her allegations, which, in effect, means she could be tried.

But the regime has a problem with people like Miroslav Filipovic and especially Natasa Kandic: they were there, they have seen with their own eyes and experienced all that the regime has tried to hide.

One of the reasons why Filipovic was convicted was because he was a previously unknown Yugoslav journalist.

Kandic poses a much greater problem for the regime. She is not only well-known outside Yugoslavia, she also has considerable legal and political credibility in the country.

If she were jailed, her influence and profile abroad would doubtless lead to an international campaign to secure her release.

Her prosecution would also represent the trial of everyone who has protested against the nationalism and war hysteria of their own people over the last ten years.

Natasa Kandic and Miroslav Filipovic have opened up a subject which even the opposition parties are reluctant to address.

However, the die is cast! There cannot be any retreat. Regardless of who triumphs in the election, the war crimes issue is now out in the open. And any attempts to make it a taboo subject again will not succeed.

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