

## **Kandic - The Next Filipovic?**

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A leading Belgrade human rights activist may be charged following an article highlighting Yugoslav Army involvement in war crimes in Kosovo.

The Director of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre, Natasha Kandic, could be tried under Serbia's draconian Public Information Law, after the Yugoslav Army, VJ, high command took exception to her article highlighting war crimes in Kosovo.

The VJ general staff press service announced on August 24 the army's intention to bring charges against Kandic over her article "I Do Not Want to Remain Silent Over the Horrors," published in the Belgrade daily *Danas* the same day.

"Natasa Kandic offers herself as an eyewitness with her own testimony," the VJ statement said, "and she seemingly possesses 'hard evidence about hideous crimes'. This represents an invaluable source of information for the law and VJ, which would help bring the perpetrators of these horrors, about which she cannot be silent, to justice.

"We want the stated accusations backed by proof, otherwise it becomes a question of something else, which also implies responsibility and consequences clearly defined by law."

This ill-disguised threat was clearly designed to remind Kandic of the fate of Miroslav Filipovic, the *Kraljevo* journalist jailed by a military court for seven years on espionage charges. Filipovic too had reported on VJ involvement in war crimes in Kosovo.

Kandic's article contained a number of serious allegations against the VJ over its actions in Kosovo in early 1999.

"I still see the faces of those 20-year-olds," said Kandic of VJ conscripts who on May 14, 1999 approached a column of Albanian refugees and "cried and begged them to take their food, asked them for forgiveness, told them they were not guilty, that their superiors had brought them to Kosovo, that they did not know where they were being taken."

In an interview with a leading French newspaper, Kandic broadened her attack.

"What kind of lessons can be given by a regime which does not issue visas for the investigators of The Hague Tribunal who want to gather testimonies precisely about the suffering of Serbs in the camp *Celebici*? That regime simply does not want the truth and does not want to face reality," she said.

Some commentators in Belgrade suspect the regime of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic may seek to silence Kandic in the same way as Filipovic. Kandic is renowned for her investigative work into war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and is potentially a dangerous witness against Milosevic.

Another theory suggests the attack on Kandic is aimed more widely at non-governmental organisations in Serbia. The NGO sector has generally put up a stronger front against the Milosevic regime than the Serbian political opposition, especially during the run-up to next month's elections.

The NGO community, for example, is prepared to address the subject of war crimes, still a taboo for the political opposition. No support has been forthcoming for Kandic from any high-profile opposition politician.

The Yugoslav Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights, however, said Kandic "had sent an unambiguous message to all of us who are fighting for civil society and the rule of law. We have no right to be silent and we have no right to be afraid."

The head of the committee, Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, said, "The least we can do is to support and express solidarity with Natasa Kandic...Yesterday it was Miroslav Filipovic and today - someone else."

The VJ's statement threatening charges brought to a close a heated exchange between Kandic and the army general staff, played out on the pages of Danas over previous weeks.

On August 12 the paper carried a commentary by Kandic on the Filipovic case. Kandic said the severity of the sentence meted out to Filipovic illustrated the VJ's unwillingness to face up to crimes committed by its soldiers on Albanian civilians in Kosovo during 1998 and 1999. One of Filipovic's reports for the IWPR quoted VJ officers' eyewitness accounts of atrocities committed in the province.

"This case stands out because of the way it is discussed, a way which prevents one from grasping the essence. The essence is that Filipovic was the first to open up the question of the army's responsibility," Kandic said. The debate on the army's role was now irretrievably open, Kandic added.

A few days later, the government-controlled media launched a fierce campaign against Kandic and Filipovic. The Yugoslav state news agency, Tanjug, branded Filipovic a "traitor", "propagandist" and "NATO puppet". Those within Serbian society calling for his release were labelled "pseudo-democrats...under the control of NATO".

In a break from the norm, the VJ published its reaction to Kandic's article in the non-government controlled media. On August 17 VJ spokesman, Colonel Svetozar Radisic, wrote to Danas accusing Kandic of supporting NATO and Albanian extremists.

Interestingly, the letter did not actually deny the VJ had committed crimes. Rather, the letter claimed Kandic "devalued Yugoslav law and covered up the crimes of Albanian terrorists and NATO criminals.

"To accuse the defenders [VJ] and to forget the real criminals and terrorists is an additional crime," the letter went on.

Kandic responded in her article of August 24, "I belong to those who do not want to be silent, not even at the cost of your trial."

Could it be that dissatisfaction with the Milosevic regime has finally created an atmosphere where the topic of war crimes is no longer taboo? There is clearly some way to go, but as Kandic said, Pandora's box is open and no amount of pressure from the regime is going to close it again.

Zeljko Cvijanovic is a regular IWPR contributor.

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