

Serb Thugs Target Roma

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Far-right skinhead groups are scaring Roma off the streets of Belgrade

Katarina Zivanovic arrived at the Rex Cultural Centre on Jevrejska ulica, Jewish Street, last week to find the doors and walls covered with swastikas, SS insignia and anti-Semitic stickers and posters.

It's widely believed the outrage was carried out by Serb skinheads, apparently provoked by a widely publicized and well-attended photographic exhibition on the Belgrade's Roma community in the same building.

This was the latest in a series of racist attacks against the capital's Roma over the last three years. Many blame ethnic hatred stirred up during Milosevic's regime for the intimidation. Zivanovic, curator of the Rex Cultural Center and one of the organizers of the Roma exhibition, told IWPR that she encountered racist attitudes on the streets all the time.

"All sorts of people come up to me, educated people, artists, and ask why I'm holding the exhibition, why I'm not doing something about Serbs and Serbia," she said. "I'm so dismayed by people's reactions."

Zivanovic believes the exhibition has exposed disturbing levels of racism in Serbian society, resulting from years of isolation under Milosevic.

"Milosevic's fierce propaganda turned people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds against each other," agreed the Federal Minister for Ethnic Minorities Rasim Ljajic, himself a member of the Bosniak minority. "Mutual mistrust among these communities is vast."

Police estimate there are about two thousand skinheads in Serbia, based in Belgrade, Nis and Novi Sad. They emerged, as in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe, during the early nineties and were thrust into the headlines in late 1997 after being implicated in the murder of a Roma teenager.

Dusan Jovanovic had walked into a Belgrade store to buy a can of coke and was beaten to death by a group of thugs. The store, close to the university law faculty, had been a renowned skinhead haunt during the 1990s.

Two and a half thousand people turned out for Jovanovic's funeral which was attended by senior members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The gathering suggested there is, at least, some support for the victims of racial violence in Serbia.

Since then, however, the intimidation has increased, much of it directed at Belgrade's Roma street cleaners. They've sought police protection, but their assailants have got around this by targeting suburban areas where the police presence is low.

Earlier this February, a second fatality shocked Belgrade. This time, the victim was the well-known Belgrade actor Dragan Maksimovic, who died after being beaten up by a skinhead gang in the centre of the city. The local media said Maksimovic, a Serb, had been attacked because of his dark complexion.

The new government of President Kostunica has taken a strong stand against racist intimidation. Aside from the appointment of Ljajic as ethnic minorities minister, Kostunica has himself condemned the emergence of Nazi symbols and anti-Semitic slogans.

Kostunica has spoken out in public against the recent violence and apologised to the Roma and Jewish communities. He said the perpetrators were trying to "spoil Serbia's new democratic foundations" and that he intended to crack down hard on them.

The president, who has the backing of most political parties on this issue, found himself the target of the right-wing slurs a few days after his speech: 'Kostunica, the son of a Jew' read a message scrawled on a wall in the city center.

Most commentators seem to agree that though the skinheads employ anti-Semitic slogans and have attacked some Jewish property, the principal target is the Roma community. President of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, Misa Levi, described the assaults on his community as "isolated incidents".

Roma community leaders, meanwhile, have said they are willing to take the law into their own hands to look after their own if the government fails to take adequate measures.

"We know that the authorities in the past have supported the actions of those who hate the Roma," said Roma Congress Party leader Dragolub Ackovic. " We also know that those now in power have promised that we will be treated as equal citizens. They should keep their word. We have no intention of leaving Serbia."

Human rights groups and NGOs are taking steps to bring the skinheads to justice. An ongoing court case in Nis is being seen as a litmus test for the prosecution of racist offenders: for the first time in Yugoslavia, racial motives have been brought as charges in a criminal trial.

The charges are being brought against two twenty-year-old youths and a minor for the attack earlier this year on a 15-year-old Roma boy and his father who had leapt to the boy's defense. One of the attackers, Natasa Markovic, told police after the three were arrested that, " I hate Gypsies. They don't belong in Serbia".

Markovic's vituperative remarks could land her with Yugoslavia's first conviction for racially-motivated crime. "Previously, courts have only dealt with the actual physical attack," said Igor Olujic, a lawyer working for the Belgrade Humanitarian Centre, which is bringing the case against the three skinheads.

Legal analysts in Serbia will be paying close attention to the trial, which begins March 8. A successful prosecution would represent a major victory in the struggle to overcome the ethnic hatred of the Milosevic era.

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