

## **Serbia: Roma Under Attack**

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Authorities accused of doing little to curb growing number of skinhead attacks against Roma.

Saban Mujaric, a Belgrade Roma, is lucky to be alive. Last October, in Medakovic, a quiet suburb of the city, three men beat him unconscious and then threw him on a bonfire. Mujaric miraculously survived, but will be scarred for life.

Just a couple of days later, the body of another Roma, Drakce Maksimovic, was found near the Belgrade-Zagreb flyover in New Belgrade. He'd been beaten to death.

Attacks on the Roma minority in Serbia are on the increase. Since the fall of Milosevic in October 2000, 46 incidents have been officially registered. Dragan Stankovic, president of the support group Roma, fears the true number may be higher, as victims are often too frightened to make an official report. "We are an easy target, as no one protects us," he told to IWPR.

His view is shared by Natasa Kandic, director of the Humanitarian Law Centre in Belgrade, who says the fact that most of the attacks go unpunished suggests that the state doesn't care about the minority.

Analysts in Belgrade put the rise in attacks down to intolerance towards non-Serbs and growing unemployment. The outrages are thought to be the work of Serbian skinheads. Associated with aggression and racial intolerance, they have existed in parts of Western Europe for decades, but first started appearing in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism.

In 1997, a group of skinheads beat a Roma boy to death in full view of passers by in the centre of Belgrade. That was the first of many incidents: last February, the Rex Cultural Centre in Belgrade was daubed with swastikas, SS insignia and anti-Semitic stickers and posters. It's thought to have been provoked by a widely publicised and well-attended photographic exhibition on Belgrade's Roma community held in the building.

The death of well-known Belgrade actor Dragan Maksimovic, in February 2001 sent shockwaves through Belgrade. He was fatally beaten by a skinhead gang while waiting for a night bus in the centre of the city. Local media said Maksimovic, a Serb, had been attacked because of his dark complexion - similar to that of a Roma.

Belgrade's Roma street cleaners have also been targeted. They have sought police protection, but their assailants have merely redirected their attacks to suburban areas where the police presence is low.

Last October, three separate attacks were carried out on Roma schoolchildren and students in the space of eight days. Stankovic cites a recent case where 13-year-old Roma girl was attacked on her way home from class. One of the attackers, described as a skinhead, was heard lusting for "sweet gypsy blood".

Belgrade psychologists blame a general moral decline for the aggression towards Roma and other minorities. Throughout the 1990s, the Milosevic regime promoted an atmosphere of intolerance and mistrust towards non-Serbs. General desperation and lack of economic prospects only reinforces the aggression.

In an interview with Belgrade daily Danas, the leader of the radical nationalist Nikola Pasic Party, Sinisa Vucinic, commented, "Gypsies are the worst thieves and all those so-called human rights activists are just fraudsters." Roma organisations vainly protested against publication of his remarks.

Anti-Roma feeling among ordinary Serbs is quite common, but few of them express such extreme views.

In response to the rise in attacks, Goran Svilanovic, the Yugoslav foreign minister and president of the Serbian Civic Union, has called on DOS leaders to include a charter on human rights in the new Serbian constitution. The federal ministry for national and ethnic communities also called on the public prosecutor to bring charges against "certain media and politicians for inciting nationalist hatred and intolerance". No charges were brought, however. Critics say the moves are woefully inadequate.

Fear of being attacked has compounded the already dire problems faced by Belgrade's Roma, housed in 150 shanty settlements around the city. In one of the worst, Deponija, near Pancevo bridge, around 200 families live in shacks built from cardboard and corrugated iron. Their children play in puddles of faeces from the nearby septic pits.

Roma have already started fleeing skinhead violence in the Czech Republic, Romania and Poland. Stankovic insists that skinheads here should be aware that Serbia's Roma will never seek asylum elsewhere. Instead, he says, they will continue to fight for their right to live in peace in their own country.

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