

State Serves Up Fresh Insults Daily In New War Of Invective

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The state media is whipping up traditional Serb homophobia by accusing the opposition of 'suspected attraction to the same sex'. It's just part of a strategy to further divide and demoralize critics of the regime, and now the police are playing the same g

The Serbian regime keeps adding fresh insults to the invective it hurls daily at the opposition - not only are they 'NATO mercenaries' and 'traitors', but now, it seems, sexual deviants or homosexuals, once unloved teenagers, now diseased adults in failing marriages, "the dregs, the unusable," and so on...

The opposition Alliance for Changes (SZP), the force behind a nationwide programme of daily nationwide anti-regime protests since September 21 is the focus of a new wave of homophobic vitriol, directed through the state run media.

Leading the charge, the Yugoslav Left (JUL) party, headed by Mira Markovic, wife of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, bit back after the SZP organised demonstrators marched past their party HQ on Monday night, stopping briefly to throw stones at its windows.

"This nice, civilised, democratic form of political activism by NATO envoys in Serbia," read a party statement, dripping with sarcasm, "can only attract a few delinquents, neglected adolescents, a certain number of persons with endocrinological illnesses, and the odd person frustrated with his place in politics, at work, or in marriage..."

"These cadres NATO has selected in Serbia are of poor abilities," it went on. "They do not enjoy the respect of the people, they fled the country during the bombing, their family reputation is disreputable. They are suspected of having a weakness towards the same sex. They are known as the allies of the murderers of their own people.

"Perhaps the NATO cadres were looking for better players, but those who are better would not go along with them. What they were left with are the dregs, the unusable, that cannot be used for any other purpose, bar for this..."

After the JUL commentary was read out, during state-run RTS TV's prime time news broadcast, the programme deliberately turned to a report of an announcement by the Yugoslav Association of Lesbians and Homosexuals (Arkadija) backing the SZP.

The announcement, a fake, was printed as a letter to the editor a day later in the pro-state daily Politika. The fake declaration said Arkadija believed that it could achieve its aims in Serbia "only through the Alliance for Changes". The group has issued a denial.

The state knows that these faked views will play on a deep streak of homophobia within Serbian society. They expect that citizens, revolted by the opposition's supposed depravity, will turn against them.

In a country where hostility to homosexuals is endemic and parents may ask whether it would be better for their child to die in a car accident rather than grow up gay, the expectation is not unreasonable.

Back in 1989 Janez Drnovsek, then Yugoslav president, today Prime Minister of Slovenia, triggered a storm when he attended a congress of homosexuals in Maribor. His intention was to demonstrate the state's new tolerance to all sections of society.

The result was rather different. After the congress, it became impossible to persuade most people in eastern former Yugoslavia that Drnovsek was not gay, or that his visit to the congress could be justified. The rumours were skillfully put to use by Milosevic and his allies in 1991 when they needed to undermine Drnovsek's position during the break up of Yugoslavia.

Today the state is taking "political action for the protection of public morals," says the state media. Simultaneously the police now plan to turn up at homes across the country to check that the names and addresses on ID cards, passports, driving licences and military cards are accurate.

According to an aide to the Minister of Interior Affairs, General Lieutenant-Colonel Obrad Stevanovic, the aim is to "improve the citizens' security," to allow citizens to "more efficiently realise their rights," but also, he said, for citizens and police to "exchange data important for the general security".

In reality it is just another means of turning the psychological screws on an already demoralised and paranoid people. Legal experts cited by the independent media here said that since the police issue the documents in the first place, they would only be checking themselves.

Belgrade lawyer Sava Andjelkovic said it indicated that the Serbian regime had decided to intensify its control and instill a kind of terror over citizens more suited to communist days.

The opposition has condemned the police strategy, which allegedly began on September 27, and the Democratic Party, led by Zoran Djindjic, has urged citizens not to allow the police into their homes.

Stevanovic condemned Djindjic's call without naming him this week. "Such people," he said, "have a problem with the people." They were, Stevanovic said, were trying to present the strategy as police repression in a bid to force the people to "confront" the police.

Oddly neither media nor opposition has yet to get a single report of a visit from a policeman checking documents, even though the Belgrade daily Vecernje Novosti quoted police spokesmen on September 29 as saying that the action was "proceeding without problems".

It seems the police think the mere threat of an unannounced call from the police is enough. Indeed, to know that the police can knock on your door at any time of the day is not a pleasant feeling to have here.

Under Milosevic, police and politics cannot be separated and the most important duty of the state media is to remind the people of this fact every day.

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