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SERBIAN GOVERNMENT BANS PEACE MARCH COMMEMORATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY AMIDST KOSOVO BACKLASH

March 10, 2008, Belgrade and Washington DC: In a sign of the growing pressure on Serbian civil society in the wake of Kosovo's declaration of independence, the Serbian government has cancelled a peace march by Women in Black, a partner of the Advocacy Project.

The march was due to have taken place on Saturday in recognition of International Women's Day (March 8). The government was notified well in advance, but an announcement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that the march "would disturb public traffic, endanger the public health and security, and endanger public property."

A statement from Women in Black deplored the decision, which it says "produces fear and insecurity, and creates a climate akin to a state of emergency."

The statement continued: "We think that this type of reasoning allows the state to carry out an attack on our basic civil rights: the right to public gathering and the right to free movement. We believe the ban is an attack on the extremely fragile democratic and civil society, especially upon women's rights.

"In the future, we will continue our work using all nonviolent means possible to continue to support and advocate for democracy, civil freedoms, and human rights."

The banning of the march comes amidst growing political turmoil in Serbia following the February 18 declaration of independence by the Kosovo government, which was greeted with fury by Serbians. On Saturday Serbian President Boris Tadic announced that new elections would be held.

Serbia's nationalist parties have made it clear that they will campaign on a platform of nationalism, and this has ominous implications for civil society organizations and minorities. A February 29 statement by Women in Black described the atmosphere in Serbia as "markedly grim" and cited a text message that is being circulated round the country:

"By opening this SMS, you have killed a Shiptar (derogative term for Albanians). Judging by your smile, you obviously enjoyed it. Forward this SMS! Let us return smile on the Serbians' faces! Long live Serbia!"

Women in Black maintains that the Serbian authorities are waging “low intensity warfare” against its critics and blaming Kosovo on those who do not share the nationalist agenda: “The primary target of the attacks are those who are different, especially those who call for a break from the criminal political regime and demand an accountability for the war and the war crimes committed in our name.”

Women in Black has also noted that the furious reaction to Kosovo’s independence in Serbia was fomented by the government – and that the Minister of Education ordered all schools be closed on 21st February so that the teaching staff could take part in the rally. This contrasts sharply with the decision to ban last Saturday’s march for women’s rights.

Women in Black has warned European governments against assuming that Serbians will be swayed by the vision of economic integration with Europe. While this prospect might appeal to the educated elite, it has little relevance to most Serbians who are struggling against poverty and angered by Kosovo:

“The simplicity of the nationalistic rhetoric that pervades most of the media makes much more sense to the average citizen of Serbia,” said the February 29 statement.

- For more information, and to express solidarity with Women in Black, contact Staša Zajović (tel: 381 63 846 7777) stasazen@EUnet.yu and Marija Perković (381 64 14 42 437)
- For WIB statements, visit the [WIB website](#) or [WIB partner page](#).

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