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Albania

Tirana Promises Albanians Abroad Voting Rights in Elections

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/24/albania-promises-to-emigrants-to-vote-in-the-national-elections/>

July 24, 2020 - Gjergj Erebara, Tirana, BIRN

Changes to the electoral code approved as part of a wider agreement between the parties foresee giving Albanians outside the country the right to vote in elections without having to travel back home – although the exact procedures have yet to be determined.

Albania plans to provide “citizens residing abroad” with the right to vote in parliamentary elections but the exact procedure will have to await further decisions by a five-member commission appointed by parliament, which makes the change unlikely to be operational in elections due next year.

Parliament on Thursday approved the long-awaited Electoral Reform by 100 votes to six, in what is billed as an important step before accession negotiations can open between Albania and the European Union, as well for bringing the main opposition parties back in to political institutions that they are currently boycotting.

The changes were first approved on June 5 at a council of the main political parties in the country.

Under the changes, the Central Election Commission, CEC, “oversees the process of preparing the conditions for ... measures that would make possible voting from abroad in parliamentary elections by voters living permanently outside ... Albania and who have resident address registered in the National Registry of Civil Status, and it requires the CEC to secure voting materials at their homes”.

It added: “Voting from abroad will be administered by CEC after the Regulator has approved all the necessary bylaws”. The Regulator will be a five-member commission elected by parliament later this year.

The next parliamentary elections in Albania are expected to be held in April or May 2021, which leaves little time to implement this change.

Albania's Socialist-Led Parliament Changes Constitution, Ignoring Protests

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/30/socialist-lead-parliament-approves-unilateral-changes-in-the-constitution/>

July 30, 2020 - Gjergj Erebara, Tirana, BIRN

The Socialist-controlled parliament on Thursday approved significant changes to the electoral system without first reaching a compromise with the main opposition parties – as Western allies had urged.



Parliament of Albania on 30 July 2020. Photo: Malton Dibra/LSA

Amidst calls by international partners for a more inclusive approach and despite protests from the main opposition parties, parliament in Albania changed the constitution on Thursday, removing the right of parties to compete in elections through coalitions, a move that critics say will give the ruling Socialist Party an advantage in the next parliamentary elections due in spring 2021.

Socialist Prime Minister Edi Rama defended the move, by emphasizing that electoral systems are an internal matter of sovereign countries.

“Albania is a sovereign country and I am the Prime Minister of a sovereign country,” Rama said, responding to calls by Western partners that advised against changing the rules of the game without seeking a compromise with the main opposition parties.

“Let our friends and partners listen to this,” Rama said in his speech. “What we are doing is to bring the electoral system of Albania within the framework of the one billion inhabitants of the world of the OSCE/ODIHR,” he added, referencing the total population of all countries that belong to the OSCE.

Following the vote, the opposition Democratic Party leader, Lulzim Basha, said Rama had “shown the face of an autocrat who is terrified of the punishment that he expects”. The EU Ambassador in Albania, Luigi Soreca, expressed dismay that Rama didn’t push for a wider compromise but added that the EU would “acknowledge” the changes.

“While we acknowledge the adoption by the Albanian parliament of some changes to the constitution concerning the electoral system, it is unfortunate that no more time was dedicated in the preparatory phase to finding a compromise with all parties,” Soreca said.

It is the first time in about two decades that the country has changed its electoral system without first achieving a broad political compromise.

Albania uses a system of regional proportional representation that divides MPs belonging to each party through a mathematical formula that awards a bonus seat to the party that comes first in the election.

Up till the last elections, parties can obtain a higher number of MPs by running in coalitions, which the changes adopted on Thursday now make invalid.

The two main opposition parties, the centre-right Democrats and the Socialist Movement of Integration, led by the wife of the current President of Albania, Ilir Meta, has now to decide whether to join forces against Rama, or potentially allow opposition votes to be split between them.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia Adopts Budget, Opening Way for Local Elections

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/29/bosnia-adopts-budget-opening-way-for-local-elections/>

July 29, 2020 - Nedim Dervisbegovic, Sarajevo, BIRN

After months of wrangling between the main parties, the upper house of the Bosnian parliament on Wednesday passed a 2020 budget – which includes funding for local elections now due on November 15.

After some two weeks of back-and-forth with the lower house, all 13 present delegates in the 15-seat House of People, the upper house of the Bosnian parliament, adopted a 2020 budget set at 1.8 billion marks, around 900 million euros.

It earmarks 996 million marks for the central government and other state institutions and the remaining 800 million to finance the country's external debt.

It includes 42 million marks to help alleviate the coronavirus pandemic and 4.2 million marks for delayed local elections – with the other half of the required sum for organising the vote provided by lower levels of government.

Local elections due in October were postponed in May for another six weeks as a result of delays in adopting a state budget. But the main Bosnian, Serbian and Croat parties smoothed over their differences and found enough common ground for the lower house of parliament to adopt the budget two weeks ago.

The agreed money does not include 450,000 marks set aside by the lower house in its vote on July 13 to help local governments in western Bosnia grapple with the migrant crisis.

But it does include 745,000 marks that were allocated to parliament's leadership – that the lower house struck out against the wishes of the main Serb and Croat parties – among other things, to buy new official cars.

After the upper house adopted a version of the budget without the lower house's amendments, the two versions had to be harmonised last week. The upper house prevailed and the lower house passed the budget without amendments on Thursday. Local elections in the southern, ethnically divided city of Mostar, not held since 2008, will be held a month later than the rest of the country, on December 20.

The delay is because amended election legislation adopted by the state parliament last month to resolve a long-standing constitutional problem in Mostar did not include a provision allowing the central commission to call elections there in less than 150 days.

Bulgaria

Bulgarians Protest Against Over-Construction on Black Sea

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/08/naslov-bulgarians-protest-black-sea-overconstruction/>

July 8, 2020 - [Svetoslav Todorov, Sofia, BIRN](#)

Bulgarians took to the streets of towns and cities on Tuesday to express their frustration with the damage that seemingly unrestricted construction is doing to the Black Sea coastline.

Thousands of Bulgarians took to the streets of Sofia and other places in Bulgaria on Tuesday to protest against rampant over-construction on the Black Sea coast and over amendments to the Biodiversity Act, which they fear will harm protected zones, delay protective measures and introduce commercial construction work to those areas.

The rallies followed a wave of protests at the end of June, accompanied by other, smaller-scale protests in the last few months. Demonstrations also took place in Aitos,

The protest accidentally coincided with a Facebook video that has gone viral, in which Hristo Ivanov, leader of the opposition party Da, Bulgaria, goes by boat to the secluded private villa of the controversial politician Ahmed Dogan, calling his residence near Burgas and the restricted access to the nearby beach illegal.



Photo: Yordanka Slavova

Protests Continue in Bulgaria Throughout the Night

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/30/protests-continue-in-bulgaria-throughout-the-night/>

July 30, 2020 - Svetoslav Todorov, Sophia, BIRN

Anti-government demonstrations in Bulgaria are merging into one another as protesters block parts of the capital overnight.



Photo: BIRN/Svetoslav Todorov

After another crowded protest in Sofia against Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's cabinet, parts of the capital remained blocked through Wednesday and Thursday morning, mainly the Eagles Bridge, one of the popular protest spots over the decades.

People camped on the boulevard through the night and were still there on Thursday morning, as well as around the Council of Ministers, from where the marches usually start. This has forced changes to Sofia's transportation system and to bus schedules. The E-79 highway near Blagoevgrad was also blocked by a protesting crowd.

"If we block the whole transport system, the cabinet will resign immediately," a young man in an enthusiastic voice told a friend a little after midnight Wednesday as the 21st day of the anti-government protest wave in Bulgaria merged with the 22nd.

The leader of the nationalist Bulgarian National Movement, Defence Minister Krassimir Karakachanov, criticized the protests on Bulgarian National Television, however, claiming they had no leaders and no clear concept about what they wanted.



Photo: BIRN/Svetoslav Todorov

The Minister of Ecology, Emil Dimitrov, also took a critical stance during a morning TV interview. « There are people who don't like government and want early elections. What if they don't like the next one? How long will we have to be without a government?» he asked.

One of the topics discussed between the protesters are also new phone leaks sent to the media by an anonymous source. They allegedly include the voice of Prime Minister Borissov, talking dismissively about President Rumen Radev and the civil unrest, often using curses.

The Interior Ministry has not released numbers of how many people have taken part in the demonstrations. According to one trio of protest leaders, the number may be close to 100,000, though most estimates are closer to 20-30,000.

[Bulgaria Constitutional Court rules to clarify presidential immunity](https://sofiaglobe.com/2020/07/30/bulgaria-constitutional-court-rules-to-clarify-presidential-immunity/)

<https://sofiaglobe.com/2020/07/30/bulgaria-constitutional-court-rules-to-clarify-presidential-immunity/>

July 30, 2020 - The Sofia Globe staff, Bulgaria



Photo: Clive Leviev-Sawyer

Bulgaria's Constitutional Court said on July 30 that it has ruled on the questions asked by the Prosecutor-General to clarify the limits of presidential immunity.

In its ruling, the court said that the immunity from prosecution granted to the president and vice-president did not prevent prosecutors from opening investigations, but the office-holders could not be the target of any activity that may lead to them being charged or infringing on their personal rights and freedoms.

This would preclude direct investigation of the president and vice-president – and invalidate many of the tools used by law enforcement, including warrants, questioning or wire-taps – but the court's ruling appeared to allow other actions such as investigation of alleged accomplices or questioning other witnesses.

Presidential immunity also extended to existing investigations, with the court saying that in such cases prosecutors could not undertake any procedural actions targeted at the president or vice-president or actions that would infringe on their personal rights and freedoms.

The court also re-iterated that while office-holders were not immune from punishment for "state treason" or other breaches of the constitution, such charges could only be levied by Parliament (though impeachment proceedings) and adjudicated by the Constitutional Court.

The prosecutor's office tabled its questions to the court in January, after it **closed** an investigation despite concluding that there was "a high degree of probability that the criminal activity under investigation was abetted by a person in high office, the President of Bulgaria, while the possible criminal activity was not linked directly to exercising the duties of his office."

Kosovo

Kosovo Pushes Ahead with Law to Protect KLA's Reputation

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/30/kosovo-pushes-ahead-with-law-to-protect-klas-reputation/>

July 30, 2020 - Xhorxhina Bami, Pristina, BIRN

Amid concern that the war of independence in the 1990s is coming under growing attack, Kosovo MPs are being urged to support a law defending the values of the war – and the guerrilla force that led it.



A supporter of President Hashim Thaci wearing a hat with the American flag and a mask with the KLA emblem. Photo: EPA-EFE/ Valdrin Xhemaj

Kosovo MPs are pushing to finalize enforcement of a draft law on Protection of the Kosovo Liberation Army War Values, despite US concern that it may violate freedom of speech.

On July 29, the US Ambassador to Kosovo, Philip Kosnett, reminding Kosovo's leaders to focus on the fight against COVID-19 and on economic recovery, on Twitter raised concern that "the proposed KLA Values Law ... criminalizes free speech, intimidates citizens, and is costly". The concern has arisen because the draft law obliges "any public official and citizen of the Republic of Kosovo ... to respect and protect the war values determined by this law in any time and circumstance within the country and abroad".

The draft law attempts to legalize an institutional and civic obligation to protect the image of the guerrilla army that took on Serbian forces in the 1990s, and pioneered the creation of an independent state.

It predicts the establishment of a War Museum, and the Day of Remembrance of the war that ended in 1999 with the withdrawal of Serbian forces following a prolonged NATO campaign.

According to the law, the so-called values of war include the KLA itself as an armed military formation, its veterans, flag, soldier's oath, coat of arms, the General Staff, Political Directorate, Staffs of operational areas and archives, as well as the Adem Jashari Memorial Complex in Prekaz and other complexes.

Budgetary implications, if the Assembly approves the draft law, will be about 2.25 million euros, without considering construction of the War Museum.

The draft law was supported by the government on July 14 and forwarded to the presidency of the Assembly. It was proposed by the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, on April 2018, but delayed by the change of government after former prime minister Ramush Haradinaj resigned in July 2019.

He was summoned by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, KSC, based in The Hague, which was established to try former KLA members for war crimes.

The PDK and the Organization of War Veterans of the KLA are optimistic that MPs will back the law despite their political differences.

The draft law came back to the fore when President Hashim Thaci – who was the KLA's political leader during the 1998-99 war – was interviewed by the Hague-based warcrime prosecutors for four days from July 13. "They can easily conclude that I have not committed any war crimes," Thaci had told the media on July 17 after the interview had ended.

The Hague-based Prosecutor's Office announced on June 24 that it had filed a ten-count indictment with the KSC, charging Thaci, PDK leader Kadri Veseli and other former KLA members with a range of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including murder, enforced disappearance of persons, persecution, and torture.

Unlike the PDK and KLA veterans, Vetevendosje, the largest opposition party in Kosovo, has voiced some objections to the draft law. Rexhep Selimi, head of the Vetevendosje parliamentary group, said on July 18 that the content of the draft law did not match the topic it addresses. Despite that, Vetevendosje has said it support the adoption of a law to protect the KLA and its values.

In late April 2020, former Prime Minister Albin Kurti, from Vetevendosje, dismissed Shkelzen Gashi as his adviser following Gashi's comments about crimes committed by KLA fighters.

Moldova

Moldova Police Pledge to Probe Beatings of War Veterans

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/17/moldova-police-pledge-to-probe-beatings-of-war-veterans/>

July 17, 2020 - Madalin Necsutu, Chisinau, BIRN

Authorities have promised to investigate claims that police used excess force against war veterans protesting in front of parliament on Thursday.



A group of Moldovan war veterans gesture during a protest in front of parliament on July 16, 2020. Photo: EPA/Doru Dumitru

Moldovan police started an investigation on Friday after war veterans were beaten during a protest on Thursday in front of parliament in Chisinau, demanding more rights. "The policemen involved in the altercations at Thursday's protest in front of parliament are targets of an investigation launched by the Internal Protection and Anti-Corruption Service, SPIA," the head of the police inspectorate, Marin Maxian, told a talk show on TV8 station.

The war veterans were demanding more social protection measures, such as free health insurance and a retirement age of 55.

They shouted slogans calling for the resignation of the government and President Igor Dodon, chanting: "Resignation!" and "Down with Dodon!"

Thousands of Moldovans fought in the Soviet war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, when Moldova was still part of the USSR, and also in 1992, when the Transnistrian

region broke away from the newly independent state. Many were injured during these wars and have medical handicaps.

Several protesters got arrested and some were beaten on Thursday after they tried to install a tent in front of the parliament.

Authorities defended the police conduct. "The police were calm and used force after they [the veterans] showed violent behaviour towards them. They do not have the right to use violence against police officers," the General Police Inspectorate said.

Critics said the police used excessive force, including tear gas and rubber batons against the veterans.

"Several veterans arrived at hospital in a serious condition ... there was a need for medical intervention. The police officers hit those to whom we owe the independence of Moldova, who in 1992 went through hell," the opposition deputy Chiril Motpan said. "The war veterans have been subjected to unacceptable moral and physical torment, government after government," he added.

Under pressure, parliament passed a bill on Thursday evening ensuring war veterans free health insurance and a rise in the monthly allowance for the spouses of soldiers killed during wars.

Montenegro

Montenegro Parliament Narrowly Votes to Legalize Same-sex Unions

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/02/montenegro-parliament-narrowly-votes-to-legalize-same-sex-unions/>

July 2, 2020 - Samir Kajosevic, Podgorica, BIRN

LGBT activists welcomed parliament's decision as a historic step for society – while the main pro-Russian opposition bloc deplored what it called an attack on traditional values.



Montenegrin LGBT activists and supporters take part in Pride march in Podgorica, Montenegro. Photo: EPA-EFE/BORIS PEJOVIC

Parliament in Montenegro voted to legalize same-sex civil partnerships on Wednesday, so becoming the first country in the region that is not a member of the European Union to recognise gay and lesbian couples in law.

Parliament passed the law with a very narrow majority of MPs from the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party and the opposition Social Democratic Party. The vote was 42 to 5 in the 81-seat chamber.

LGBT activists praised the decision as a historic step for society. "From today we are one step closer to full freedom and full equality. As never before, we are close to life with dignity and from today we stopped living as second-class citizens," the advocacy group Queer Montenegro said in a press release.

On his Facebook account, Zdravko Cimbalevic, the first openly declared gay man in Montenegro, said the law had finally passed after years of hard work, lobbying, conversations, and despite visible homophobia within parliament and among religious leaders. In late 2013 he obtained political asylum to Canada after he said he faced

serious threats in his home country. “Although LGBTIQ rights in Montenegro are far from good, this today is a historic event that many of us celebrate with a full heart,” Cimbaljevic said.

The passage of the vote was emphatically welcomed by Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic and Prime Minister Dusko Markovic, who stressed that EU candidate state Montenegro was affirming its “European values”. On Twitter, Djukanovic stated that Montenegro was “one step closer to joining the most developed democracies”, while Markovic said Montenegro had made a great step in its democratic maturity and integration processes.

The British and US ambassadors in Montenegro, Alison Kemp and Judy Rising Reinke, agreed that Montenegro had made a historic decision. “This is an important step forward for equality and tolerance for all,” ambassador Reinke said on Twitter.

This was only the latest attempt by the Montenegrin parliament to adopt the law. The country first moved to legalize same-sex unions in 2014 but that first attempt failed. Another law recognizing same-sex unions failed to pass the chamber on July 31, 2019, after deputies from the ruling coalition representing ethnic minorities voted against it.

Together with most opposition MPs, all the ethnic minority representatives in parliament voted against the law on Wednesday – namely the Bosniak Party, the Croatian Civil Initiative, and the ethnic Albanian party Forca, which are all part of the ruling DPS-led coalition. “We are not against European integration but we can’t support same-sex marriages and are brave enough to say it clearly,” Forca MP Genci Nimanbegu said.

The main opposition bloc, the Democratic Front, DF, which is socially conservative and close to Russia, said most citizens in Montenegro were against same-sex unions and accused the government of undermining traditional values. “The main goal of this law is to impose a new value system. After everything they took from us now they want our families,” one of the Democratic Front leaders, Nebojsa Medojevic, said.

The new law recognizes same-sex couples as legal unions but does not give them the same rights as married couples. They are still not allowed to adopt or foster children, for example, which human rights organizations say restrict LGBT rights; same-sex couples are also not recognized as families

Homosexuality remains a sensitive issue in the still socially conservative country, as it does elsewhere in the Balkans. Earlier surveys suggested that 71 per cent of citizens in Montenegro consider homosexuality an illness and that every second citizen agreed that homosexuality is a danger to society and that the state should suppress it.

Of other former Yugoslav republics in the region, EU-members Croatia and Slovenia have legalized same-sex unions.

Church Accuses Montenegro of Abusing Talks on Disputed Law

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/22/church-accuses-montenegro-of-abusing-talks-on-disputed-law/>

July 22, 2020 - Samir Kajosevic, Podgorica, BIRN

Church says it suspects the Montenegrin government only engaged in talks on the contested Freedom of Religion Law dialogue to improve its image before parliamentary elections set for August 30.



Serbian Orthodox Church and government expert teams during negotiations. Photo: Government of Montenegro

The Serbian Orthodox Church has accused the Montenegrin government of trying to abuse the dialogue over the contested Freedom of religion Law for election purposes; parliamentary elections are due on August 30.

On July 21, Government and Church teams failed to agree on changes to the law, which the Serbian Church deems discriminatory. After negotiations folded on Tuesday, the Episcopal Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro said it still couldn't accept the government proposal for it to re-register.

"We see the government request to the [Church] to register in Montenegro as an ultimatum. This request was inappropriate because, as a Church institution, we have existed in Montenegro for a full eight centuries," the Episcopal Council stated in a press release.

"We can't register as some new religious community. The government call for dialogue obviously served for political marketing, and we don't want to be part of it," it added.

On March 1, government and Church teams started negotiations about the law, but the dialogue was postponed due to the coronavirus epidemic.

Negotiations resumed on July 20, but the two sides still couldn't agree on law changes. On Wednesday, Deputy Prime Minister Zoran Pazin said the government wanted to reach a compromise with the Church, despite the political pressure it was putting on the authorities.

"We are still open for dialogue, but at this moment, we don't see the meaning of continuing talks. The government's offer was explicitly rejected by the Church authorities," Pazin told a press conference.

According to him, the government offered some changes to the law, which would be adopted in parliament by the end of July. The government had, for example, offered faith groups the chance to prove property ownership before the courts, not with the Real Estate Directorate, as the law now says. It also offered the Church full use of all its sacral objects, which could be registered as state property. The government still wanted the Church to register, however.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Dusko Markovic said the government wanted to end the disagreements and rebuild trust between the state and the Church.

"Despite the Church protests against the law, talks were conducted patiently within the delegations of the state and the Church," he said.

Since parliament passed the law on December 27, tens of thousands of Serbian Orthodox priests, believers, and supporters have been protesting twice-weekly across the country, demanding its withdrawal. The Church – whose relations with the government are poor – claims the law would allow the state to rob it of its property.

Opposition pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political movements that generally support the Serbian Church are also regular participants in the rallies and marches.

The disputed law calls for the creation of a register of all religious buildings and sites that authorities say were owned by the independent kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed Yugoslavia.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia Editor Faces Charges of Revealing Official Secrets

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/31/north-macedonia-editor-faces-charges-of-revealing-official-secrets/>

July 31, 2020 - Sinisa Jakov Marusic, Skopje, BIRN

North Macedonia's main media union has voiced concern after the prosecution filed charges against the owner and editor of a news portal, Ljupcho Zlatev, for revealing classified secret police documents.



North Macedonia's Public Prosecution HQ in central Skopje. Archive photo: BIRN

Media unions and watchdogs in North Macedonia have said they want to look into why a news portal editor has been charged with revealing official secrets.

The owner and editor-in-chief of *Ekonomski Lider* news portal, Ljupcho Zlatev, is accused of publishing two articles in July in which he has revealed classified documents from the former Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence, UBK, which was recently been transformed into Agency for National Security, ANB, and which he obtained illegally. He faces up to five years in prison if found guilty.

The two texts, published on July 9 and July 12, refer to a former employee of the now-defunct UBK who did not pass the security checks needed to transfer into the newly formed ANB. Allegedly, this was because his father had participated in street protests against the change of the country's name, which parliament had approved in early 2019, as part of a historic agreement with Greece.

“In both texts, the accused made available to the public copies of UBK documents – acts from operational checks on a person – which are listed as classified info,” the prosecution in Skopje said on Thursday.

The ANB was formed in 2019 under a law supported by both the government and opposition to replace the notorious secret police, the UBK, which was at the centre of an illegal wiretapping scandal in 2015. To strengthen oversight over its work, the ANB no longer operates as part of the Interior Ministry but as an independent government body. It also no longer has police powers or is in charge of the technical process of surveillance, which was given to a separate agency.

But, as most of its employees come from the old UBK, a selection or vetting process was introduced to ensure that old corrupt para-intelligence structures did not get through. Zlatev, who was seen as part of the PR machinery of former PM Nikola Gruevski and often perceived as a propagandist rather than a journalist, defended his action on social networks, saying that he had acted in the public interest.

Over the past two years, seven complaints of unethical and unprofessional conduct have been filed against Zlatev to the Journalistic Council of Ethics, a self-regulation body. “I published [the texts] because after one father attended the protests against the change of name [to the country], his son lost his security certificate and the chance to work in the ANB,” he wrote.

“This UBK construct is a classic blow to citizens’ political freedoms and big public interests, so that is why I published the documents that a whistle-blower gave me. “If I got similar documents now, I would also publish them without thinking twice!!! I could repeat the act because freedom and democracy are more important to me than any legal provision,” Zlatev added.

The country’s oldest and biggest media union, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, ZNM, said it would look into the case and demand answers from the prosecution.

“We don’t know all the details of the case and analysis needs to be done. But every time a case is opened by the prosecution in the domain of freedom of expression and the right to inform, it can be problematic,” ZNM head Mladen Cadikovski told 360 Degrees news portal on Thursday.

“The public interest can be stronger than the law if publication reveals the misuse of certain institutions. We are demanding a meeting with [chief] prosecutor [Ljubomir] Joveski on several topics, and this will be one of the issues that we wish to discuss,” Cadikovski added.

Romania

DIICOT ordinance to close August 10 case: Moral complicity of peaceful protesters, collateral victims were not also innocent

<https://www.nineoclock.ro/2020/07/16/diicot-ordinance-to-close-august-10-case-moral-complicity-of-peaceful-protesters-collateral-victims-were-not-also-innocent/>

July 16, 2020 by NINE O'CLOCK



The Directorate for Investigating Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT) says, in the ordinance to close the “August 10” case, that there was a moral complicity of the peaceful protesters in Victoriei Square, who did not distance themselves from those who exerted violence on the law enforcement officers, but were actually amused.

Moreover, DIICOT says that not all “collateral victims” of the violence in Victoriei Square were also “innocent victims”.

In the document drawn up by the DIICOT, by which the Gendarmerie heads were not charged for the intervention in force against the protesters present in Victoriei Square, prosecutors say that, after 16:00, some protesters were violent towards the gendarmes, throwing stones and bottles at them.

The prosecutors show that the attempts of the gendarmes to extract from the crowd the violent protesters failed, especially due to the attitude of peaceful protesters.

“Starting at this time, the Romanian Gendarmerie forces used materials and means in their service, including irritants and tear gas, punctually, in the direction where the persons manifesting violently were, for the purpose of preventing the breaching of the objective, ensuring the protection of the personnel, as well as manoeuvring forces in view of isolating and extracting from the crowd violent persons, operations most often ending in failure, given that protesters assumed to be peaceful disapproved by booing, gestures and violent manifestations the demarches of law enforcement officers,” the DIICOT mentions.

Prosecutors say that the way violence was exerted on law enforcement “had a character of novelty, reflecting a mutation in the action plan”. Thus, the aggressions came from the entire length of the cordon, with increased mobility, both in the contact area, as well as from the mass of participants (second and third rows and deeper).

The DIICOT says that, despite repeated appeals addressed to peaceful protesters to distance themselves from persons manifesting violently, the former “were amused” by the violence exerted on law enforcement officers.

Prosecutors state that, throughout the entirety of the events on August 10 and on the night between August 10/11, gendarmes initiated and operated, “where and when such an intervention presented guarantees of safety for their own personnel and the perspective of minimum effect on other participants in the protest,” the extraction from the crowd of persons identified as having a violent behaviour, but “the said type of intervention did not enjoy support even from the protesters assumed as being peaceful, their reactions (cursing, booing, threatening gestures, etc.) accompanying the actions of those who by violent manifestations were endangering not only the bodily integrity of law enforcement officers, but, in equal measure, were endangering the other participants in the protest.”

First Transgender Woman to Run for Office in Romanian Elections

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/21/first-transgender-woman-to-run-for-office-in-romanian-elections/>

July 21, 2020 - Marcel Gascón Barberá, Bucharest, BIRN

Thirty-year-old Roma sex worker Antonella Lerca will be the first-ever transgender person to run for public office in Romania when she competes in September's local elections.



Illustration. Photo: Unsplash/Cecilie Johnsen

Antonella Lerca, a transgender woman of Roma origin who is a sex worker, launched her campaign on Monday to run as an independent candidate for Bucharest's District 2 in the local elections on September 27, she told British LGBT news website Pink News. "I'd had enough of rich white privileged men making decisions for vulnerable communities in Romania," 30-year-old Lerca said. She was referring to "the Roma community, transgender community and sex worker community", to which she belongs.

Lerca, who is the first-ever transgender person to run for public office in Romania, regretted the absence of LGBT faces in Romanian politics, and said she will rely on her eight-year experience as a human rights activist supporting "vulnerable communities" to mobilise voters and effect change in Bucharest's Sector 2.

According to her website, Lerca will run on the platform with three priorities: social protection and public services, women's rights and fighting discrimination, and making the city more environmentally-friendly. She promises "funding and investments for social housing and capping rents".

Lerca's debut into politics comes after the Romanian parliament in June adopted a ban on "propagating theories and opinions on gender identity according to which gender is a separate concept from biological sex". The law was met with a backlash in civil society and academic circles, with many denouncing it as an attack on freedom of expression and political interference in education.

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has refused to promulgate the law, which he has said amounts to "censorship", and has sought to get it annulled by the Constitutional Court.

Romania Recognises Cyber Harassment as Form of Domestic Violence

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/07/romania-recognises-cyber-harassment-as-form-of-domestic-violence/>

July 7, 2020 - Marcel Gascón Barberá, Bucharest, BIRN

Lawyers have hailed new legislation in Romania as an “important step” in protecting victims of online aggression.

As of July 9, Romania will recognise cyber harassment as a form of domestic violence under recently-adopted amendments to the country’s 2003 Law on Domestic Violence published in the Official Gazette on Monday, Romanian media reported.

The move follows a ruling against Romania in February by the European Court of Human Rights over the state’s failure to protect the Internet privacy of an abused woman whose Facebook profile and emails were accessed by her former husband. There are frequent reports in the Romanian media of sexual violence against women and minors in which the perpetrators make first contact via social media.

Under the amendments, ‘cybernetic violence’ includes “online harassment, online messages that instigate hatred for reason of gender, online stalking, online threats, publication of information and intimate graphic content without consent, [and] ... illegal interception of communications” of a digital or online nature.

The use of social networks or emailing services “with the aim of shaming, humiliating, provoking fear, threatening, [and] silencing the victim” of domestic abuse also constitutes cybernetic violence, under the new text of the law.

The changes task the National Agency for Equality of Opportunity between Women and Men with promoting research in the field of artificial intelligence that would help “prevent potential risks of technologies that perpetuate sexism, gender stereotypes and cybernetic violence”.

In an op-ed published on the news portal hotnews.ro, lawyers Monica Statescu and Simona Ungureanu hailed the amendments as “an important step in protecting a significant segment of the victims of aggressive behaviour online.”

The lawyers called for “the adoption of an explicit set of rules that incriminate any violent online activity regardless of the relation between the victim and the aggressor”.

Serbia

Amnesty Urges Serbia to Drop Probe Into Critical NGOs

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/29/amnesty-urges-serbia-to-drop-probe-into-critical-ngos/>

July 29, 2020 - Milica Stojanovic, Belgrade, BIRN

Amnesty International and the European Commission have expressed deep concern about what Amnesty called Serbia's 'intimidating' investigation into the finances of 57 NGO and individuals in Serbia – including BIRN.

An official investigation in various NGOs and individuals in Serbia suspected of money laundering and financing terrorism is designed to intimidate them, international rights organisations, including Amnesty International, have said.

Serbia's Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering, which is part of the Finance Ministry, has asked all banks in the country for financial data about 20 individuals and 37 NGOs, "to determine whether the listed organisations and individuals have anything to do with terrorist financing or money laundering".

Amnesty International's Europe Director, Nils Muiznieks, called the investigation an act of intimidation. "The targeting of journalists and NGOs on absurd allegations of money laundering and financing terror is a blatant act of intimidation and the latest in an ongoing campaign by Serbian authorities to silence critics," Muiznieks said.

"This kind of arbitrary investigation that specifically targets those critical of the government undermines the right to freedom of expression and threatens freedom of the press. These investigations must be dropped," he added.

The European Commission's Enlargement spokesperson, Ana Pisonero, said the Commission expected "further information from the authorities, including on the selection criteria" for investigation. "Fighting money laundering is an important pillar of Serbia's EU integration. At the same time an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and should be recognised and treated as such by state institutions", Pisonero wrote on her Twitter account.

The 57 NGOs or people whose data are sought by the Serbian authorities include the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, the Centre for Investigative Journalism of Serbia, CINS, Crime and Corruption Reporting Network KRIK, the Novi Sad Journalism School, both of Serbia's major journalism associations and a host of rights groups, including Civic Initiatives, YUCOM, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and the Humanitarian Law Centre.

The targeted individuals include a number of BIRN employees, CINS director Branko Cecen, TV Newsmax Adria Serbia head and former BIRN editor Slobodan Georgiev and

the journalists Biljana Stepanovic and Vukasin Obradovic. An opposition politician, Vuk Jeremic, is also named.

Some 130 civil society organizations have called on the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering to present its grounds for suspicion and justify why it ordered the extraordinary collection of information from the banks.

“Since the list includes numerous organisations and individuals dealing with investigative journalism, protection of human rights, transparency, film production, development of democracy, rule of law and charity, the conclusion is that this is a political abuse of institutions and a dangerous attempt to further undermine the rule of law in Serbia”, a joint statement said.

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