



YOUTH INITIATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
INICIJATIVA MLADIH ZA LJUDSKA PRAVA
NISMA E TË RINJVE PËR TË DREJTAT E NJERIUT

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Sender:

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Republic of Serbia

Recipient:

H.E. Mr. Denis Francis
President of the United Nations General Assembly
International territory,
760 United Nations Plaza
Manhattan, New York,
United States of America (host country)

Subject: Letter from the Youth in Serbia to the President of the United Nations General Assembly

26th April 2024

His Excellency Mr. Dennis Francis, President of the United Nations General Assembly

We are writing to you as youth activists from the organization Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) from Serbia, but first and foremost as young people concerned with the future of Serbia and the Western Balkans, to express our support for the draft UN General Assembly Resolution regarding the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica and provide an explanation as to why this Resolution is important for the future of our country.

Democracy in our country is backsliding in the past few years while many respectable organizations have been describing it as a hybrid regime. Young people who dare to speak out critically about the government's policy are exposed to smear hate campaigns and SLAPPs and are targeted by public officials. However, we have made the choice not to stay silent while our peaceful future, which we surely deserve, is being jeopardized. Behalf of many young people in Serbia and citizens who are deeply afraid to speak due to the climate that has been created in our society which was incited by an irresponsible campaign towards the Srebrenica resolution led by the highest Serbian state official, we feel that it is our human duty to say: Not in our name.

Despite the widespread disinformation and misuse of the resolution on the Srebrenica genocide in Serbia's public sphere, we view it as a crucial step in the process of dealing with the past. Acknowledgment of mass atrocities plays a vital role in establishing prevention mechanisms and should be seen as a foundation for building a better future in post-conflict societies. We are witnessing the exact opposite; there have been numerous occasions when state officials persistently deny legally-established facts about the genocide in Srebrenica, inciting hate and opening the wounds that need to be healed.

Over the last five years, a large and organized campaign has been underway in Serbia, involving the painting of walls, public institutions, and buildings in nearly every city with the name and face of Ratko Mladić. Mladić led the Army of Republika Srpska during the Bosnian war and was convicted for crimes against humanity in several municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including genocide in and around Srebrenica. Although we have informed local authorities, no action has been undertaken to remove these depictions. The authorities have remained silent, while some of the most prominent public officials have openly stated that they see nothing wrong with this.

Furthermore, we want to highlight a significant case brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concerning the Srebrenica genocide. The ICJ's verdict in 2007 held Serbia responsible for violating the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide by failing to prevent genocide.



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In 2010, the National Assembly of Serbia adopted a declaration condemning the crimes committed in Srebrenica as defined in the ICJ's verdict but without mentioning the term genocide. However, Serbian officials continue to violate this declaration.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and local courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina have sentenced more than 50 individuals for their roles in the Srebrenica genocide. The UN *ad hoc* courts, namely the ICTY and its legal successor, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), have established and proven in 15 cases that genocide was indeed committed in Srebrenica.

Unlike the UN international tribunals and the local courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, no trials for the genocide in Srebrenica have been held before the Special Department for War Crimes of the High Court in Belgrade. Serbia is still violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the crimes of genocide because the Public Prosecutor's Office for War Crimes is failing to prosecute war criminals and bring charges of crimes against humanity and genocide in the case of Srebrenica. This has led us to believe that there is a culture of impunity in Serbia, a concern further corroborated by numerous reports from international and local institutions, particularly highlighted in the 2023 report of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović.

Moreover, the highest state officials of Serbia are continuously glorifying convicted war criminals who have been sentenced for mass human rights violations. These acts are jeopardizing the peace process in the region leaving no space for a sincere and responsible political dialogue about the past. Almost three decades after the genocide in Srebrenica, those who have been found responsible for this crime are publicly portrayed as heroes by the highest state representatives.

Additionally, there are no attempts by the Serbian government to commemorate the victims of genocide in Serbia with dignity. The Serbian legal framework does not allow for the erecting of monuments for the victims of genocide in Srebrenica and official commemorations or other acts of memorialization that would pay respect to the victims. Also, the commemorations organized by local NGOs in Serbia every year, which are dedicated to the victims and the families of genocide survivors, are often the target of attacks by extremist groups and under the threat of police bans. Since 2005, YIHR has been actively urging authorities in Serbia to designate July 11th as Srebrenica Memorial Day. That is why we, as youth from Serbia, demand change in this regard, and the UN General Assembly Resolution is one positive means towards achieving that.

Every day over the past month, we have witnessed persistent attempts to deny that what happened in Srebrenica was an act of genocide and block the adoption of the Resolution in the UN General Assembly, portraying the Resolution as something horrible for the Serbian people. The highest Serbian state officials and institutions spearhead these attempts.

On the other side, a group of the most prominent non-governmental organizations from Serbia, including YIHR, issued a statement in which they supported the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. Still, those organizations face numerous insults and even threats from the public. This clearly shows that narratives of genocide denial, which state officials perpetuate, shape public opinion; it is high time to put an end to the culture of denial that is keeping the region trapped in the past.

We believe that the UN Resolution of the General Assembly regarding the genocide in Srebrenica is important because it will not only lead to recognition for victims and pay respect to them, it will also be beneficial for Serbian society as it will serve as a good starting point for a societal dialogue about the responsibility of the Republic of Serbia for genocide, as well as providing a dignified place for victims in the public sphere.



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Mr. President,

We urge Your Excellency not to allow the denial of legally established facts about the Srebrenica genocide and the misuse of victims for political gains at the respective UN General Assembly session where the topic will be the Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. We hope that the adopted text of the Resolution will initiate a much-needed dialogue in our society and create an environment where victims of genocide can find a place of respect and dignity in the public discourse of Serbia. YIHR stands firmly in support of the Resolution as a guarantee for peace.

Please accept, Mr. President, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Program Director of YIHR Serbia

Belgrade, Serbia,

Sofija Todorović

27th April 2024



Background information

YIHR is a regional network of non-governmental organizations with programs in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo whose peace efforts have been awarded the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in partnership with the Václav Havel Library and the Charta 77 Foundation. For the past two decades, YIHR has been dedicated to promoting peace in the former Yugoslavia region – a peace as a sustained process involving dealing with the past and ongoing cooperation among states and peoples in this region. YIHR actively opposes bellicose politics, the denial of war crimes, and the glorification of convicted war criminals in public discourse. We advocate for the recognition of facts and the legal conviction and moral condemnation of those responsible for crimes during the Yugoslav wars. Through our activities, YIHR stands for truth, justice, accountability, equality, freedom, and democracy.