

ABOUT TOLERANCE AND "HATE" SPEECH

*"Let the neighbour's cow be safe and sound" **

by Helena Rill

The changes that have happened after the October 5th of 2000 when the new government was established, after Slobodan Milošević and the old regime had been overthrown, haven't had much effect on hate speech. It remains present in everyday life, and often is a part of public communication.

Chauvinistic graffiti, attacks on religious and ethnic communities, insults based on national, religious, and sexual orientation, doesn't make the hate speech any weaker, but quite the opposite, even stronger and more harsh, as a result of rage, feelings of danger and impotence, as a reaction to the appeal made to the citizens of Serbia/Yugoslavia to deal with their own responsibility for the crimes committed in their own name.

As an example of this practice, in just one week, following panel discussions were either cancelled or delayed, because threats and anonymous tips were made:

a) The threat was made that the Technical Faculty building in Èaèak, Serbia, would be "stoned" if the panel discussion "*Truth and Responsibility*" was held there.

b) A bomb scare took place at the building of Dom omladine (Youth Home) in Belgrade, where the discussion of the Postpesimists "*Threathening Phenomenons Tolerance*" was supposed to be held.

The first time I heard of "*Threathening Phenomenons Tolerance*", I wondered why anyone would consider tolerance to be something threatening. This is especially because I come from Vojvodina where this word is often used, particularly in political speeches, for strengthening one's political positions etc. I'm under the impression, especially when I'm feeling apathetic, that this word is such a cliché, therefore it cannot be perceived as threatening and that its real meaning is forgotten. However, I was wrong. Tolerance becomes dangerous for some people, and has been proved with this anonymous tip about the bomb. In my opinion, it means that resistance is being set up against hate speech, and those who use this kind of speech are frightened and feel in danger.

Why is tolerance becoming dangerous? I presume that is because finally it is becoming important in its own right. It goes back to its basics, it makes us reconsider and deal with our own responsibility and ourselves. Unfortunately, I often hear that "tolerance means leniency towards opinions, convictions and behaviour we disagree with"; that it is some kind of sufferance so we can all live in happiness and harmony. Furthermore, I hear it most often in the context of national and religious tolerance, but what about tolerance when it comes to ones with different opinions, different origin or sexual orientation?

What is the essence of tolerance, for me? I perceive it as something much more demanding than sufferance, which is, in my opinion, very dangerous, because it reminds

* As opposed to an old saying "Let the neighbour's cow drop dead"

me of sweeping the whole thing under the carpet, which is the cause of many problems in this region, and in general, too. To be more exact, tolerance is not sufferance. Tolerance is an active attitude towards differences, respect for them and it requires an individual engagement: reconsideration, cognition of one's own responsibilities, needs, values, ideas, getting to know the others and learning about them and their differences. It is easy "to be tolerant" when we think the same and share the same values, but what happens when this is not the case?

However strange it may sound, I'm under the impression that's where the circle of cause and effect begins. As a response to hate speech, there's a "Tolerance" campaign by the Federal Ministry for National and Ethnic Communities. A reaction to this campaign is more hate, which starts another circle. However, this time it seems to me that the circle is getting smaller because for the first time in 12 years, the government has made a strong statement: we don't want hate, we want tolerance.

The Federal Ministry for National and Ethnic Communities launched the campaign called "Tolerance" on the panel discussion "Threatening Phenomenons Tolerance". It gives hope that things change in Yugoslavia, because the official stand is against hate, and in favour of a culture of differences. This long-term campaign has started with TV ads in the form of cartoons, easily acceptable, and with the message that one picks up very quickly. The leading character in one of these ads is a little cow, and the message of the ad is to "let the neighbour's cow be safe and sound" as opposed to the very popular saying that goes "let the neighbour's cow drop dead". The other message is: "Tolerance. It costs nothing, but it's worth a lot ". These messages are placed on billboards in Belgrade. According to Jelena Markoviæ, a federal assistant minister for national and ethnic communities, the plan is to develop this campaign over the next 2 years, and to make it a part of some school programmes.

What are the effects of this campaign? Here's a story to illustrate it: A man asks a saleswoman for a certain kind of tea, at the market. Since she doesn't have it, she sends him over to another counter. The man is surprised and he asks her if she is sending him off to the competition. The woman replies: "It costs nothing, but it's worth a lot ".

This panel discussion "Threatening Phenomenons Tolerance" has showed me how strong the hate still is, how much strength it requires to fight against it, how important this step is toward tolerance that the state has taken, and that there are young people in the ministry/Ministry who believe in the things they do and fight for it.

Let's be honest. Nothing's will happen quickly. It takes years, even decades for the final results to come. But, the problem should be addressed with an active approach.