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## **An open attack on the autonomy of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad**

### **An appeal for solidarity of the academic community with the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad**

Bearing in mind the value of university autonomy, freedom of critical thought and solidarity, we express our concern over the threats received by our colleagues at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. An organised attack on the integrity of this institution began with the circulation of a tampered video featuring its professor Dinko Gruhonjić, which resulted in death threats aimed at Professor Gruhonjić; a blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad; and ultimatums, insults and continuous threats to the faculty staff who have decided to defend university autonomy. Given the complex political situation in Serbia, the conduct of the university management and of the Student Parliament is particularly disturbing. Both prove to be among the many seized and instrumentalized institutions that actively contribute to the devastation of academic values and human rights instead of their protection.

#### **Background and key information**

The Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad was founded 70 years ago. The oldest faculty of the University of Novi Sad, it carries a long history of critical thinking. During the 1990s, the faculty mounted strong resistance to the antidemocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević. Dr. Zoran Đinđić, the late philosopher and the first President of the Government of Serbia after Milošević's downfall, assassinated in 2003, was once employed at our faculty. Today the faculty address bears his name: Boulevard Dr. Zorana Đinđića 2.

Since mid-March 2024, the faculty has been exposed to unprecedented political pressures triggered by attacks on Associate Professor Dinko Gruhonjić, also a journalist, who was falsely accused of hate speech and the glorification of Second World War criminals. The accusations were based on a tampered video of his talk at the Rebedu festival in Dubrovnik, where Gruhonjić participated as a political analyst. After the publication of the doctored propaganda video in the pro-regime tabloid media, the highest representatives of the current government, members of the leading SNS (Serbian Progressive Party), joined the political persecution of Gruhonjić. On Wednesday, 20 March, Milenko Jovanov, leader of the SNS parliamentary group, hurled grave insults at Gruhonjić. A few hours later, the entrance of the building where Professor Gruhonjić lives with his family was vandalised with graffiti explicitly calling for his murder.

Professor Gruhonjić has the full support of his colleagues from the Department of Media Studies where he teaches, and has likewise received widespread support from other departments of the Faculty of Philosophy. An initiative board was formed to organise a rally on Wednesday, 27 March, in support of Professor Gruhonjić, the autonomy of the University of Novi Sad, and freedom of speech and thought, and against political persecution.



Meanwhile, the Student Parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy filed a complaint against Gruhonjić to the faculty's Ethics Committee, alleging that the professor had been spreading hate speech. A meeting of the Ethics Committee was scheduled for 2 April.

Despite that, the Student Parliament of the University of Novi Sad delivered an ultimatum to the Dean's Office at the Faculty of Philosophy, demanding Professor Gruhonjić's immediate dismissal and threatening to organise a blockade of the faculty if it refused to comply.

On Thursday, 28 March, a group of around 30 young people marched into faculty premises while another group of around 70 people gathered in front of the building. Among the members of the two groups were very few students of the Faculty of Philosophy. One of the young men who entered the building was wearing a T-shirt with an image of Milorad Ulemek Legija, sentenced to 95 years in prison: 40 years for organising the assassination of the Prime Minister of Serbia, Zoran Đinđić; 40 years for organising the murder of former President of Serbia Ivan Stambolić; and 15 years for an attempted assassination of former opposition leader Vuk Drašković.

The faculty management reached a decision to protect the safety of its students and all of its staff, and therefore to evacuate the building and suspend all activities until further notice, or until it could guarantee the safe conduct of regular activity at our institution of higher education. The faculty's usurpers chained and padlocked the entrances, and an ambulance soon arrived to provide emergency medical help to the Dean and one of the Vice Deans, affected by the incursion and the aggressive behaviour of its perpetrators. The Dean called the police, whose officers arrived at the premises after consultations with the attendant prosecutor, claiming that "there is no cause for misdemeanour or criminal charges" and therefore no reason for the presence of police officers inside or outside the building. The Dean, Vice Deans and other employees who were present were offered a safe evacuation with no guarantee that they would be allowed to return to the faculty.

In the meantime, Professor Gruhonjić's students joined his colleagues' support, signing a written statement of support. This was followed by persecution against students and faculty staff, including highly chauvinistic insults and death threats. The Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Professor Ivana Živančević Sekeruš, is continuously subject to such insults and threats.

On Sunday afternoon, 31 March, the faculty premises were visited by the Rector of the University of Novi Sad, Professor Dejan Madić from the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education; he was joined by the Dean of the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Professor Boris Dumnić, and the Dean of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, Professor Patrik Drid. The Rector had not previously announced his visit to the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, nor had he answered her phone calls and emails in which she asked for help from the Rectorate and the University Senate to prevent the blockade of our faculty, situated in the immediate vicinity of the Rectorate building.

On Sunday, the Rector held a press conference in front of the Faculty of Philosophy, during which he read excerpts from Professor Gruhonjić's newspaper columns, accusing him of hate speech and publicly supporting the Student Parliament's ultimatum for Gruhonjić's dismissal. In his speech, Rector Dejan Madić ignored the fact that the University of Novi Sad has clear faculty and university procedures for the dismissal of university staff. The two deans also in attendance uttered similar accusations at Professor Gruhonjić's expense.



After the Rector's departure, the faculty blockade was temporarily lifted. Its organisers from the Student Parliament announced its continuation after the April examinations, which ends on 12 April, unless the faculty dismisses Professor Gruhonjić.

In protest over the Rector's conduct, the Vice Rector for International Relations, Professor Sabina Halupka Rešetar, who teaches at the Faculty of Philosophy, resigned from her position. Resignations were also submitted by three members of the Gender Equality Committee of the University of Novi Sad.

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Philosophy convened on 2 April, initiating the procedure to investigate the complaint of the Student Parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy alleging that Professor Gruhonjić had spread hate speech. The Ethics Committee concluded that the complaint was incomplete, asking the complainant to file a complete complaint within 30 days. The Ethics Committee does not have legal power to dismiss faculty staff and other faculty employees. It can issue different types of official public warning in cases where the Code of Academic Integrity has been violated.

The President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić stated at a press conference that no one is to threaten or jeopardize Gruhonjić's well-being, while also commenting that Gruhonjić "should be ashamed" for what he had allegedly stated. In other words, President Vučić also relied on the misleading video footage, which was taken out of context. In this way, he further contributed to the attacks on Gruhonjić, as well as the professors and students of the Faculty of Philosophy.

After twenty days, the attacks still persist in the form of statements made by senior government and party officials, through the regime-affiliated media and on social networks, and everyone that has supported Professor Gruhonjić, freedom of speech, and the autonomy of the University is being targeted by them. The convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj publicly read the names of those who voiced their support of Gruhonjić on a national TV network. During the early 1990s, Šešelj was sentenced at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia to a ten-year prison sentence for the expulsion of ethnic Croats from Vojvodina. This expulsion began on 6 May 1992, when Šešelj publicly read a list of names of those who had to be deported in Hrtkovci, a town in the multi-ethnic province of Vojvodina.

The state of democracy in Serbia in general, and of science and education in particular, are increasingly at peril every day. Moreover, the few independent media outlets that remain face constant attacks from the regime. The current attempt to silence the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad and the critical voices among its faculty members is yet another grave attempt to erode democracy in Serbia.

### **Appeal**

In light of the current events at the University of Novi Sad, and with great concern over the threats aimed at our colleagues, as well as the fact that 30 years ago similar campaigns targeting critically inclined professors led to the expulsion of our higher education institutions from the European education system, we, the signees, demand urgent protection of the Faculty of Philosophy's autonomy. We demand that the University of Novi Sad and the government of

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the Republic of Serbia take all legal measures to stop the attacks and political persecution aimed at Professor Gruhonjić, his colleagues, students, and faculty staff, as well as everyone who, due to their support of the Faculty of Philosophy, currently faces grave verbal repression, which threatens to transform into a physical one.

**Signees:**