

Call for international solidarity with Saša Ilić against nationalist campaign

Open letter to Austrian MEPs

To the Foreign Minister of Austria

To the Austrian Minister for EU Affairs

To the Austrian Minister of Arts, Culture, Civil Service and Sport

To the Austrian Secretary of State for Arts and Culture

To the cultural spokespersons of the Austrian parliamentary parties

Support for Saša Ilić and for his colleagues and ours

Saša Ilić, who enjoys good will and high esteem in Austria as a former writer-in-residence of the Vienna Museum Quarter (Museumsquartier Wien), a fellow at the International Writers' House Graz (IHAG – Internationale Haus der Autorinnen und Autoren), and a regular commentator for the Literaturhaus Europa in Krems, has become the target of ongoing public attacks in Serbia due to his critical stance on past and present political developments. Ilić is no longer willing to tolerate those attacks and is now attempting to take legal action – not least in order to be able to permanently counter such attacks on artists and cultural workers, which are becoming more and more frequent in Serbia.

However, he and his colleagues, who are also our colleagues, will not be able to persevere through this conflict without international public attention and support.

We urge you to provide him with that attention and support.

Gerhard Ruiss / Evelyn Schalk

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An unprecedented harassment campaign is currently being carried out against Serbian writer Saša Ilić. In February, his novel *Pas i kontrabas* (*The Dog and the Double Bass*) won the NIN Award, the most important prize for literature in that region of Europe. In his multi-layered work, Saša Ilić writes about Yugoslavia and the traumas of the war – one of the main settings is the psychiatric hospital in Kovin, a former Austrian imperial barracks – but also about the failure of institutions up to the present day.

His writing has drawn the ire of the country's ruling nationalist political and cultural elites. This is not the first time. As a declared anti-nationalist author, he has taken a stand against reactionary cultural politics again and again. He was co-editor of the literary supplement *Beton*, has spent ten years writing for *Peščanik.net* – one of the few Serbian news portals that is not loyal to the government –

and co-founded the international literary festival Polip in Prishtina, Kosovo. His published works in German include *The Berlin Window (Das Berliner Fenster)*, along with numerous articles, essays and short stories. All these publications are united by a critical engagement with the past and present, as well as a clear, cosmopolitan perspective. Those qualities have repeatedly made Ilić a target of attacks by authoritarian, far-right forces. But the current harassment campaign is more focused on intimidation than ever, and aims at personal and financial exposure of this defiant writer.

The public attacks began with a boycott of the NIN prize for literature and media diatribes against the jury and their decision. The controversy peaked when the daily newspaper Kurir featured a prominent comparison of Ilić, an anti-fascist writer, to Bosnian mass murderer and war criminal Ratko Mladić. Ilić has initiated a lawsuit against this piece and its author, which triggered further ongoing attacks by public broadcasters and other media that are loyal to the regime. He is standing more or less alone against that entire apparatus.

In the past, the (now former) Minister of Culture had already tried to have the unwelcome critic fired from his job at the Serbian National Library. Now he renewed his attacks on the author, as well as the NIN jury, in an open letter.

Delfi, the country's largest bookstore chain, which maintains close connections to the ruling party SNS, has de facto stopped the sale of Ilić's books. By way of comparison, on average, their bookstores sell more than 3000 copies of the winning book by each NIN honouree, but they have not sold one by Ilić.

"Control of the media and of art has achieved its most radical forms this year," says the author. The dangers inherent in the attacks are evident from a long history of assaults on artists and cultural institutions that criticize the regime. Recently a theatrical performance of a piece about Srebrenica became the target of violent attacks. A group of masked hooligans destroyed an exhibition of alternative comics, and the annual cultural festival "Mirëdita, dobar dan!", which promotes peaceful exchange between Serbian and Kosovar artists, can only take place with a massive police presence.

For years, the silence and ignorance in Europe about the resurgence of nationalism have been deafening. This silence must be broken.

We call on colleagues in our countries and on politicians to support our colleague Saša Ilić. In a Europe that is united and striving for unity, the attacks on Saša Ilić and his colleagues by official political authorities are something no one should have to go through.

Please send further declarations of support by e-mail (including your surname, first name, profession, and place of residence) to: ausreisser@mur.at