



CHILD RIGHTS CENTRE

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Measuring child rights awareness in general elections in Serbia, May 2012

Introduction

Serbia is lagging significantly in the realization of children's rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Major issues, such as the following, still remain to be addressed (among others):

- Adoption of a comprehensive law on child rights
- Establishment of a State body specifically addressing rights of the child (or family)
- Establishment of an independent institution specifically tasked with the protection of the rights of the child.

Although very important, the above listed is not sufficient. The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is not possible without political will. Political will does not exist where there is no awareness of the rights of the child, including awareness of the state child rights are in. Such awareness is not sufficient: a “child rights aware politician” has to have a vision and ability to make child rights a reality.

An excellent way to check on this was to “listen” to politicians’ speeches during elections.

The research

General elections were held in Serbia on May 6, 2012. Students of the Master on the Rights of the Child at the Law Faculty of the UNION University, under the supervision of Prof. Nevena Vuckovic Sahovic, and considerable support of the Child Rights Centre in Serbia, came up with the idea to conduct a survey on awareness of child rights in the political in the 2012 elections campaigns. As no example of similar research conducted on a national or international level could be found, the researchers faced a big challenge. Therefore it was necessary to identify at least one indicator to be measured, and that was: *awareness of child rights*. After that, the measuring tools were developed.

The students monitored statements of political actors and representatives of the electoral lists (eighteen lists). The surveying lasted 6 weeks, from 21 March to May 1, 2012. Each researcher was in charge of two electronic media, one weekly magazine, a daily news TV program and a Sunday news TV program (prominent talk shows).

Results and observations

Main observations of researchers are that children were (in the campaign) mostly referred to in the general context, with typically empty and pompous statements like: "the future for children and families." In the political campaign the child was often removed from the present time, as if it existed in the future only. This attitude is closely related to the observation of the child as an investment, as a "branch" in which to invest, and still, politicians are much more aware of the need to invest in agriculture or industry than in education and health of adolescents.

Two issues relevant to children's rights were raised in the election political speeches, but not as the result of awareness: *education and population policy*. In their speeches, many politicians were appealing for investments in education so that students can find appropriate jobs after graduation. That in itself is not bad, however there is a simultaneous lack of awareness of the rights of the child in the period between enrolment into education and employment; for example, none of the campaigners were aware of data which suggests that over 1000 schools in Serbia do not have running water and toilets, and that 30% of students who graduate from school are functionally illiterate.

Many campaigning politicians have mentioned the issue of negative birth rate, an issue that they call "the struggle against the white plague." Politicians emphasize the number of children, not the quality of life of every child. Thus, there is an impression of a mere primal desire to survive as an ethnicity, rather than to open space for extended family, where each member would have the opportunity to get quality education and good healthy development.

Other areas, such as the position of marginalized children, are mostly presented within a broader context of the entire group and of adults, that is, without recognizing the specific needs of each child and with no awareness that the child has the rights as well. This was especially evident when it comes to Roma children, children with disabilities, children in conflict with the law, children who are victims of violence or exploitation.

The conclusions of this limited study are that the politicians in Serbia are still not aware of child rights and that they did not even demonstrate intentions to direct their activities towards children. The research results also indicate that none of the politicians are aware of the fact that the child has to be acknowledged as a right holder, not as a member of a vulnerable group or a future factor.