

“WITHDRAW THIS GROTESQUE AND SHAMEFUL PRIZE!”

Protest of a Bulgarian citizen coalition against the award of a prize for journalistic mastery to an outright racist

At an official ceremony in Sofia, Bulgaria on the 25th of May 2008 in the presence of leading politicians, members of Parliament and journalists, the annual “Chernorizetz Hrabur” prizes for contributions to Bulgarian journalism were awarded. The awards for press journalists were instituted by the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria in 2002, covering 11 categories.

We, the undersigned, are outraged at the fact that this year's "Young Journalist" prize was awarded to a journalist employed by the "Novinar" national newspaper named Kalin Rumenov. Readers of this newspaper and its online version are familiar with this journalist, who has acquired notoriety with its flagrantly racist attitude to the Roma community (the community as a whole with all its hundreds of thousands of members). Rumenov consistently portrays this group in violently offensive terms as backward and second-rate, as a community whose members are unable to take decisions for themselves and their own development. He calls on the state to deal with them by all possible means like a pest which threatens the security of the “better” Bulgarian ethnic group.

Here is an example of the level of Rumenov’s journalism, which won him the Young Journalist Prize for his contribution to Bulgarian journalism:

“If you sow Gypsy seed, you reap social benefits. The Gypsies are multiplying while you Bulgarian dudes and broads pay your taxes. The Gypsies are cumming and the least you’ll have to worry about is the spelling mistakes. After a few Gypsy five-year plans, grammar will be so worthless that they won’t even buy it for scrap metal. The Gypsies are cumming like wolves, they’re multiplying like sheep. And there isn’t any poetry in that. The Gypsies in 30 years’ time will be the same as they are today. They’ll carry on coming inside their women just as often. They still won’t be standing on their own two feet or bringing money into the big Bulgarian family. And that family still isn’t going to have family planning for the Gypsies in 30 years’ time. It’s too much to wait half your life just to note that it’s the Gypsies who have robbed you. Because during all that time they’ve been in cahoots with the politicians. You’d better come up with a plan, because there’s a lot of hard physical labour in store for you” – The Gypsies are Cumming, Novinar, 20.12.2007

“The first to leave will be international companies. There won’t be anyone to sell their new shit to, and they’ll move away to somewhere with less Gypsies and more money. Who’s going to buy soap for soft and tender white skin? Dirty Gyppos?” – The Gypsies are Cumming, Novinar, 20.12.2007

“Gypsies can’t make decisions for themselves. But they can decide instead of you. That’s why the political system uses them.” – The Gypsies are Cumming, Novinar, 20.12.2007

“The difference between Gypsies and cattle is that cattle are subject to veterinary control. Livestock can’t behave like Gypsies, but the reverse is allowed. Bovine

rights and freedoms have been under serious pressure to years, and during that time the Gypsy woman has given birth to twins again and she's as bloody-minded as a cow yet again." Gypsies and Cattle, Novinar, 20.02.2008

Have you seen such flagrant hate speech recently in the Bulgarian press? And not even published in a marginal publication of some extreme nationalist organisation, but in a national daily newspaper? Would you have believed that it is possible for such an author to be given a distinction and even a prize when he makes the practice of desecrating the rights and dignity of hundreds of thousands of people in such an indiscriminate manner?

Articles written in such flagrant racist language would raise furious scandals in the media and public environments of any country with established standards to protect the rights and dignity of individuals and communities (including minority communities). Such material would be seen as shameful and would be rejected as a journalistic misunderstanding in all professional media communities which adequately and legally fulfil their role as responsible intermediaries in their multicultural societies. Such articles would be scandalous and impossible for any media environment with effectively operational self-regulation bodies such as ethics committees, etc.

Accordingly, this protest is not against the author, however objectionable his views may be. This protest is against the type of media policies which permit the consistent, irresponsible and unprofessional publication of extreme racist hate speech. It is against media practices which allow labelling and discrimination against thousands of citizens by means of the written word in violation of international and domestic legal human rights and media standards and instruments, and indeed in violation of the Bulgarian Media Code of Ethics. The "Novinar" newspaper has also signed this code, which it is now flagrantly violating by making its pages frequently available to Kalin Rumenov's hate articles without making any effort whatsoever to distance itself from the journalist's views on the Roma community or to provide any counter-comments to them.

The inadequate, extremely insensitive and damaging act of awarding a prize to Rumenov reflects a serious crisis in the value system pervading the Bulgarian media environment on issues related to minorities and coexistence between ethnic communities in this multicultural society. This case even more alarmingly illustrates a problem, which is far bigger than racist attitudes of individual authors, a problem, concerning the professionalism and values on the highest decision-making levels in the media.

This case also exposes the Bulgarian Press Ethics Commission in a dismal light. This Commission was established in 2006 to monitor media compliance with the Code of Ethics. Its regulations oblige it to take action and issue its standpoints on articles which violate the code. And yet, even in the face of articles which flagrantly violate the code (along with dozens of others published in recent months which abound in negative labelling and insinuations against members of minorities, especially Roma), at the time of writing this text (2-10 June 2008) the Press Ethics Commission had not once taken action on its own initiative on such occasions. Clearly it is unable to make the distinction between freedom of speech itself and the *responsibility* of free speech

and has failed to interpret its obligations under Articles 2.5.1 and 2.5.2 of the Code of Ethics. Strikingly, the Press Ethics Commission failed to take action even after citizen organisations filed an official complaint at the beginning of 2008 in response to Kalin Rumenov's racist articles and the policies of the newspaper which publishes them.

Faced with such an inert self regulatory body, which was supposed to uphold press ethics, we can hardly be surprised at the growth rate of this journalist's "creative" work and his sustained offensive against the dignity of an entire human community.

The behaviour of this commission is also no surprise in view of the fact that the National Council for Ethics in Journalism Foundation, which manages both this and Broadcast Media Ethics Commission, is made up of the chief editors and publishers of newspapers including those which regularly publish material in contravention of the respective articles of the Code of Ethics. (Documentary evidence for this was submitted by civil sector organisations to the Press Ethics Commission).

This absurd situation has become the normal state of affairs. A 19-member awards panel (comprising 12 chief newspaper editors selected by a throw of the dice among 28 publishers taking part in the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria (UPB), along with seven members of the UPB Board, selected from among 10) decided to award a prize to Kalin Rumenov under one of the journalism competition categories. Since no particular articles were quoted as the basis for his award, it follows that the panel's assessment was based on his overall work, including the articles from his notorious "Roma series".

The whole situation begs the question of why the Bulgarian media wanted a Code of Ethics at all when it is so easy for them to violate it so flagrantly, so consistently and with such impunity. Why do we need bodies like the Press Ethics Commission, which turn out to be not only useless, but damaging to society with its perfunctory existence and its silence on the welter of drastic violations of journalistic ethics?

In the end, who needs prizes which fail to encourage the best articles for their professional and ethical standards? Who needs prizes which achieve the exact opposite: dragging the media back to the retrograde practices of the darkest periods in history? The attempts by a number of Bulgarian media figures on the occasion of the award to equate fascist hate speech with provocative and creative reporting and with the "boldness" and "originality" of youth can only be described as sickeningly disingenuous.

We believe wholeheartedly in freedom of speech as a guarantee of human rights and basic freedoms in a democratic society, but at the same time we are firmly against the abuse of free speech, especially when it is used discriminatively in the media at the expense of the dignity of individuals for social and ethnic groups. This is the meaning of the relevant international human rights and media standards, domestic law and the Bulgarian Media Code of Ethics.

In protesting against the shameful practices surrounding the award to Kalin Rumenov, we call on the founders and organisers of the "Chernorizetz Hrabur" journalism competition to withdraw the prize from this author and to publicise this act in a manner which ensures the same level of publicity as the prizegiving itself.

Our message is also to the politicians who for some reason are becoming a fixture in what should be a purely professional event of the media guild (do prime ministers and heads of state attend the Cannes Film Festival prizegiving events?). The fact that representatives of the state authorities were present at the ceremony puts them in a position where, intentionally or not, they are seen to share the values of the prize and the grounds on which it was awarded to Rumenov. Even if they did not intend to do this, their participation creates a very strong negative impression.

We still congratulate the award winning journalists in the other categories of the *Chernorizetz Hrabur* competition, but at the same time we maintain that the prize awarded to Kalin Rumenov is a blot on its image and casts doubt on the whole point of the competition. Withdrawing the prize would send a positive signal, and we owe it to the communities affected, to the public as a whole and, not least, to the journalistic profession".

Update: 15 days into the campaign

Following the award to Kalin Rumenov, a coalition of 109 lawyers, journalists, academics, civil sector activists and members of other professional groups set up the above petition for the prize to be publicly withdrawn. This coalition of citizens also sent a message to leading politicians, who for some reason regularly attend what should be a purely professional media guild event. Those who signed the petition to withdraw his prize are calling on the politicians who were present at the ceremony to make a public declaration that they do not share these values.

On the 30th of June, the petition was submitted to the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria, the founder and organiser of the *Chernorizetz Hrabur* prizes. The first reaction of its Chairman Tosho Toshev, who is also the editor-in-chief of one of the most widely-circulated national newspapers in Bulgaria called *Trud*, was to attempt to present Rumenov's prize is the result of an unfortunate combination of circumstances and that the journalist's prize was not awarded for his racist articles which caused such a public scandal, but for some other material. Toshev's claim, however, is at odds with the publicly visible facts. At the prize-giving ceremony, the award-winning articles of the journalists in all the other 10 categories were specifically mentioned. This was not the case with Kalin Rumenov. This is conventionally and logically understood to mean that his prize was awarded for his overall work during the last year as a young author, including his notorious Roma articles.

According to its Chairman, the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria "does not have a *network of agents*" to investigate the work of the nominated journalists in full. He hardly conceals his insinuation of spying. This assertion is being bizarre, clearly attempting to depict the routine requirements for members of a panel of judges to be informed and familiar with the general background of the press during the last year as something unusual. Mr. Toshev's assertion is also unacceptable because the work of a journalist is public by definition. It is ludicrous to maintain that published articles can be subject to "spying". Furthermore, Rumenov's breathtakingly racist articles could hardly be described as unnoticed by the public during the last year. On the contrary, this author acquired his public notoriety precisely because of them. It was these articles which raised a storm among the citizen organisations which referred them to

the Press Ethics Commission, and it was precisely the essence of the complaints about these articles which the commission decided to ignore. If the panel of judges was really so ignorant, it raises serious questions about their adequacy.

The Chairman of the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria Tosho Toshev committed the Union to issue a standpoint on the demands set out in the petition. The first indications, however, are that this standpoint will be based on the assertion that there has not been any no mistake in connection with Kalin Rumenov's award. Public attitudes, however, indicate that a serious gaffe has been made and that there is no other publicly acceptable solution than to withdraw this outrageous prize, which would satisfy not only members of the Roma communities affected, but also members of the broader public who expressed their outrage.

The coalition of citizens who backed the petition is monitoring the development of the case and will provide information on any decisions taken and on its future intentions. At the same time, the coalition is launching an appeal to the relevant international and European organisations and institutions and to individuals to support the demand set out in the petition as appropriate.

THE PETITION WAS SIGNED BY (in alphabetical order):

1. Adela Peeva, film producer and director
2. Albena Taneva, higher education lecturer
3. Anna Denkova, philologist
4. Antoaneta Koleva, translator and publisher
5. Antonina Zhelyazkova, Ottoman historian, chair of the International Centre for Minorities and Cultural Interaction
6. Assoc. Prof. Antonii Todorov, political scientist
7. Assoc. Prof. Plamen Makariev, Sofia University
8. Assoc. Prof. Romyana Petkova, film director, South Western University
9. Assoc. Prof. Vesela Tabakova, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University
10. Axinia Gencheva, Gemini Bulgarian gay organisation
11. Bedrie Bayram, company manager, Razgrad
12. Biser Alekov, *GORD* Association, Razgrad
13. Bozhidara Novakova, graphic designer
14. Daniela Furtunova, solicitor
15. Demir Yanev, Roma Solidarity Association, Petrich
16. Denitza Lozanova, ecologist
17. Desislava Beleva, lawyer
18. Desislava Gavrilova, expert on theatre and cultural studies
19. Deyan Kolev, Amalipe Centre for Into Ethnic Dialogue and Tolerance
20. Diana Karagyozova, Integro Foundation, Gurmen
21. Dimiter Petrov, CEKI Association, Razgrad
22. Ekaterina Georgieva, engineer, Plovdiv
23. Elena Vasileva, head of bank press department
24. Elitza Grancharova, journalist
25. Elitza Hristova, teacher
26. Emi Baruh, journalist
27. Emil Stefanov, Roma Zavet 2003 Association

28. Emilia Mateina, journalist, Sofia
29. Emilia Savkova, student, Varna University
30. Eng. Asen Asenov, municipal company manager, Kubrat
31. Eng. Bagryan Maximov, Razgrad
32. Galina Asenova, municipal councillor, Pernik
33. Gemma Yakov Baruh, Programme Director, Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe
34. Ivailo Ninov, cartoonist
35. Ivan K. Ivanov, psychologist
36. Ivan Tzanev, poet
37. Julia Dacheva, teacher, Sofia
38. Julka Hristova, laboratory assistant, Senovo
39. Kadrin Hasanov, GORD Association
40. Kalina Bozeva, Chair of the Inter Ethnic Initiative for Human Rights Foundation
41. Kamen Atanasov, company manager, Plovdiv
42. Kamen Stratiev, social educationalist, Plovdiv
43. Kircho Dimev, company manager, Strumyani
44. Krasimir Loykov, educationalist, Education for Democracy Centre, Plovdiv
45. Krasimira Kubarelova, ecologist
46. Krustio Krustev, writer and journalist
47. Lily Makaveeva, Integro Association, Razgrad
48. Lyubomir Nokov, company director, ecologist
49. Lyudmila Atanasova, manager, NGO Training and Consultation FRBB
50. Lyudmila Verih-Shomova, translator
51. Malina Tomova, writer
52. Margarita Ilieva, lawyer
53. Maria Stanisheva, ecologist
54. Maria Stoimenova, journalist
55. Mariana Aretova, publisher
56. Mariana Peryanova, performance art director
57. Mariana Raynova, artist
58. Mariana Stankova, engineer, Plovdiv
59. Mark Bossanyi, translator
60. Mehmed Mehmedov, company manager, Sevar
61. Metin Ruffi Shevket, "Roma" Cultural Centre
62. Mihail Ekimdzhiev, lawyer, Plovdiv
63. Mihail Georgiev, Rromani Baht foundation
64. Mihail Veshim, writer
65. Mina Konstantinova, solicitor
66. Natalia Ilieva journalist, formerly BBC
67. Nikolai Aretov, literary critic
68. Nikolai Yankov, Neve Droma Association, Shumen
69. Ognyan Kovachev, ecologist
70. Ognyana Ivanova, translator
71. Olga Apostolova, manager, ecologist
72. Petya Apostolova, dietician
73. Prof. Ivailo Dichev, lecturer in cultural anthropology, Sofia University
74. Prof. Ivailo Turnev, medical doctor
75. Rada Tzaneva, International Secretariat of Amnesty International
76. Rayna Gavrilova, Executive Director of the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe
77. Remzie Hasanova, health intermediary, Razgrad
78. Renginar Efraimova, teacher, Seslav
79. Rumen Shomov, dramatist

80. Rumyan Sechkov, Executive Director of the CEGA foundation
81. Savcho Savchev, writer
82. Seher Ahmedova, nurse, Razgrad
83. Senior Research Assistant Dr Natasha Vaklieva-Bancheva
84. Senior Research Assistant Ilona Tomova, sociologist, Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
85. Senior Research Associate Vencislav Dimov, musicologist
86. Sheker Tyumbelekchi, teacher, Gotze Delchev
87. Siana Romanova, Nadezhda Association, Provadia
88. Slavcho Savkov, company manager, Senovo
89. Svetla Nikolova, agronomist, ecologist
90. Svilen Marinov, journalist, Razgrad
91. Teodor Vasilev, ethnology student, ecologist
92. Todor Todorov, historian, ecologist
93. Tzvetanka Dimitrova, Carmen Association, Razgrad
94. Valentina Daneva, European programme consultant
95. Valeria Kalcheva, journalist
96. Vanya Serafimova, sociology lecturer
97. Vasil Velev, journalist, BBC
98. Vencislav Radev, journalist, UK
99. Vencislav Slavchev, Integro Association, Senovo
100. Veselin Alekov, Amare Plaha Association, Sesla
101. Veselin Trandov, journalist
102. Victor Lilov, music producer
103. Victoria Knish, graphic designer
104. Viza Nedyalkova, journalist
105. Vyara Angelova, sociologist
106. Vyara Lazarova, Executive Director, Parent Activity Association
107. Yakim Kolev, Drom Association, Kubrat
108. Yordan Bogomilov Yordanov, music producer, Sofia
109. Yordan Popov, writer