

## PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

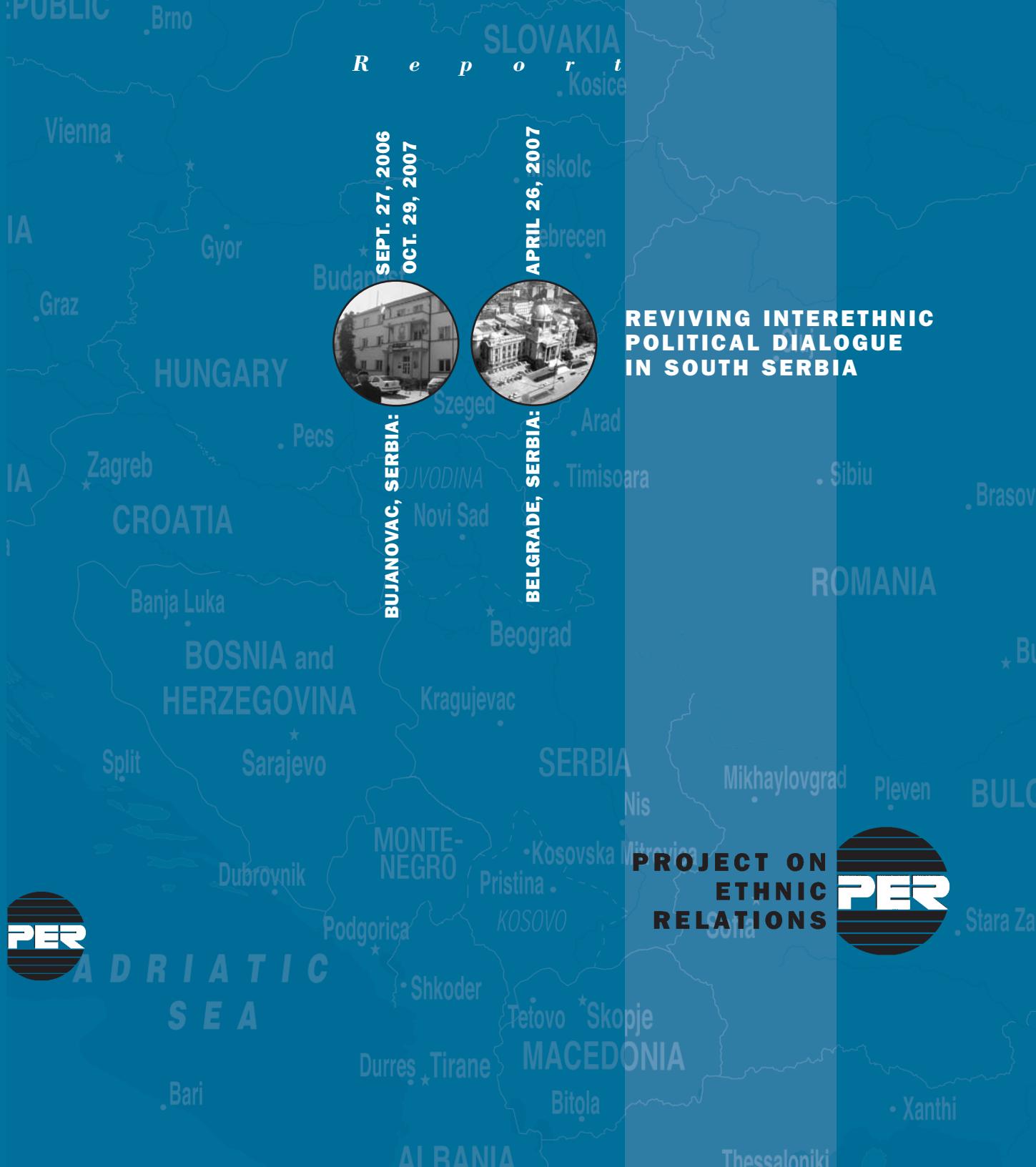
The **Project on Ethnic Relations (PER)** was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts that were to erupt following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. PER conducts programs of high-level intervention and dialogue and serves as a neutral mediator in several major disputes in the region. PER also conducts programs of training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels.

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**REVIVING INTERETHNIC  
POLITICAL DIALOGUE  
IN SOUTH SERBIA**

**SERBIA**

**2006-2008**

## PREFACE

The Project on Ethnic Relations’ “Reviving Interethnic Political Dialogue in South Serbia” project was conceived as a means of fostering greater participation of ethnic Albanian leaders in Serbia’s political life, and improving the level of dialogue between these leaders and senior government and political officials in Belgrade. It was implemented against the backdrop of negotiations on Kosovo’s status, a particularly sensitive and unstable time for Serbia and the Balkans.

South Serbia, or also referred to as the Presevo Valley, is the area in Serbia most critically affected by interethnic problems. With a large Albanian population, a recent history of violent conflict, and the redefinition of Kosovo’s status, the region continues to face the greatest risk from increased tensions, whether home-grown or as a result of developments in Kosovo.

With these factors in mind, PER devised a program that included a series of productive discussions devoted to the participation of South Serbia Albanians in Serbia’s national political life, improvement of infrastructure at the local level, educational opportunities for Albanian language students, and various other issues related to majority-minority rights in Serbia.

The dialogue brought some practical results: it helped persuade the majority of ethnic Albanian political parties to participate in the Serbian parliamentary elections of January 2007, in which they won a parliamentary seat. The participation was significant in that it represented the willingness of ethnic Albanians to move beyond their fixation on difficult status and legalistic issues, and instead address the practical questions of the Albanian community in Serbia. Similarly, the attendance of discussions by senior Serbian officials indicated the willingness

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From left to right: Nagip Arifi, Alex Grigor'ev, Cathy Cottrell, Dragan Lazic, Slobodan Draskovic, Martin Brooks, Dino Pasalic, Danijela Nenadic, and Nenad Djurdjevic.

of some in the Serbian institutions to respond to minority demands and accommodate them accordingly. Most important of all, the dialogue provided a rare opportunity for Albanian leaders to discuss their grievances directly with Serbian government and parliament officials.

It is worth noting that after Kosovo's proclamation of independence and the protests and violence which resulted in Serbia, South Serbia is the only area which has so far remained quiet and calm. By not organizing protests or celebrations, both local Albanian and Serb leaders exercised the caution needed to keep their communities from imploding or exacerbating the already high tensions of this momentous occasion. In fact, this caution shows that the local leaders have begun to realize the importance of peaceful coexistence, restraint, and a moderate approach to politics.

That said, an insufficient political will in Belgrade for resolving many of these outstanding issues continues to frustrate local leaders. As you will read in the following text, promises are often made but follow through is less common. To be fair, results from these commitments are slowly coming to fruition, but their speed and efficacy remains deficient. Frustration is felt not only by the Albanians, Serbs, and Roma in South Serbia but by the international community as well. Since much of the progress in South Serbia has been a direct result of interest and pressure by the international community, this weariness is a troubling development.

For the foreseeable future, the dynamics between Belgrade and Pristina will dominate headlines and international policy, which is why it is more important than ever for civil society and non-government agencies to remain engaged on other interethnic and intra-ethnic issues affecting Serbia. As is often the case in the Balkans, interethnic relations are far more complex than they seem, and tensions in one locality often have a way of spilling over into another. Without addressing many of these problems, majority-minority relations will remain faulty, and interethnic tension will persist. By engaging instead of ignoring these issues, PER will continue to work for a better and peaceful future for South-eastern Europe.

The following text is a compilation of reports from PER-organized discussions for Serbian officials and South Serbia political leaders. These reports were written by Alan Moseley, Nenad Djurdjevic, Slavisa Orlovic, and Danijela Nenadic. This report has been edited by Adrienne Landry. The text has not been reviewed by participants, and PER takes full and complete responsibility for its contents. To encourage frank and open discussion, all of PER's roundtables are closed to the press. However, many of these meetings were followed by brief press conferences, and members of the press were allowed to take pictures and

TV footage during the opening remarks. For the most part, the events were widely reported in Belgrade, South Serbia, and in the international media.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office as well as the British Embassy in Belgrade for their financial and professional support. We would especially like to thank Paul Edwards, Cathy Cottrell, and Dino Pasalic. As always, PER's work in the Balkans depends on our network of friends and associates who often have to rearrange their already hectic schedules to participate in our discussions. Special thanks go to the busy political leaders in Serbia and representatives of the international community who nevertheless found time to attend our meetings.

Lastly, we would like to acknowledge our hardworking colleagues at PER for their dedication in making this report possible. We are especially grateful to Nenad Djurdjevic who has been representing PER in Serbia and Montenegro for more than half a decade. He was recently appointed to direct the Government of Serbia's Coordination Center for South Serbia. We wish him success and look forward to continuing working with him in his new capacity.

**Livia B. Plaks, President**

**Alex N. Grigor'ev, Executive Director**

Princeton, New Jersey

March 2008

## LOCAL POLITICS AND NATIONAL AFFILIATION

On September 27, 2006 the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized a roundtable discussion in Bujanovac on the current situation in South Serbia (the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja) and the participation of ethnic Albanians in Serbia's national political life. The meeting was attended by local, South Serbia political leaders (Albanian, Serb, and Roma), the head of the Serbian government's Coordination Body for South Serbia, several representatives of relevant government ministries and services, and members of international organizations and foreign embassies accredited in Serbia. The Albanian participants represented the complete spectrum of ethnic Albanian political parties from the area; major Serb political parties from the area also took part, with the notable exception of the Serbian Radical Party, whose central authorities did not allow their local head to participate.

### Opening Remarks

In her opening remarks, PER President, Livia Plaks, cited the problem of mistrust between South Serbia's ethnic communities, and said that during the sensitive time of negotiations on Kosovo's status it is especially important that both sides communicate and take steps to increase mutual confidence. She raised the question of Belgrade's role, and whether the national government is doing enough to address the problems of South Serbia. She also asked the Albanian participants about their participation in national institutions, through the formation of a National Council of the Albanian Ethnic Minority and through participation in upcoming parliamentary elections on a unified Albanian list. She emphasized PER's history of neutral involvement in the region as a facilitator of dialogue between majority and minority political leaders, and asserted that one goal of the roundtable would be to

### NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this report, the spelling of the name "Kosovo" is used (rather than "Kosova," the spelling preferred by Albanians, or "Kosovo and Metohija" or "Kosmet" preferred by Serbs) because that is the spelling most commonly used in the English-speaking world. For the same reason, Serbian names of the places are used, for example, Pristina and not Prishtina. However, the spelling "Kosova" is used in the names of Kosovo Albanian political parties and organizations. The term "Kosovo" is used as an adjective for Kosovo's inhabitants, whether Albanians, Serbs, Roma, Turks, or others.

"Serb" is used as an ethnic term, whereas "Serbian" is employed when referring to Serbia.

see if PER could also assist South Serbia's ethnic minorities in developing more satisfactory political relations with the country's governing institutions.

The British Ambassador's opening remarks cited the great need for investment in South Serbia. The region, he said, has great economic potential, but many investors are wary of a still troubled region. "If you want others to invest in your communities," he said, "you must first invest in the process of dialogue and peace."

The Head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia devoted a large portion of his opening statement to a description of the recent investment that has been made in South Serbia, both by the Serbian government and by international organizations. He cited increasing investment in recent years, and said that "this region of Serbia is starting a period of greater stability."

However, he acknowledged that much still remains to be done to better integrate ethnic Albanian communities. He admitted "mistakes made by the state," in this area, but also stated that "integration is a two-way process," and called on ethnic Albanians to take advantage of all mechanisms for their representation in national decision making bodies. He also cited the expected settlement on Kosovo, and said that the short-term goal is to "preserve stability in view of the status decision." He observed that during recent local elections "nobody questioned the future of Albanians in the state of Serbia," and said "we are depending on the sobriety and realistic attitudes of all political actors" in the upcoming period.

The mayor of Bujanovac made brief opening remarks, expressing enthusiasm for the new PER project but also expressed disappointment that there were so few representatives of the Serbian government attending the meeting.

### Grievances of Albanian Leaders

Many Albanian leaders at the roundtable expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack of progress on a number of issues in South Serbia. They made statements such as "in practice, Albanians are second class citizens," and "every day we make the same requests, but seem to only repeat ourselves with no results." They described several concrete issues of concern, including:

*Inclusion of ethnic Albanians in state institutions:* Several ethnic Albanian participants asserted that not enough has been done to include Albanians in state institutions such as the judiciary, the prosecutor's office, the state health care

**If you want others to invest in your communities, you must first invest in the process of dialogue and peace.**

administration, the police and border guards, and educational institutions. They rejected the argument that, in the case of the judiciary, an insufficient number of Albanians had passed the bar exam. On the contrary, they and an international participant presented numbers of those who have passed the bar but have not been employed in the judiciary. One participant also mentioned the public utilities, of which the government of Serbia is the main owner, and complained that “Albanians are not in the management,” in the local boards of these companies.

A representative of the Romani community also addressed this theme, reporting that “not a single police person is Roma.” He cited discrimination against Roma as contributing to their difficult living conditions and high unemployment rate. He asked for better representation of Roma in public institutions, but said “we are very modest – we would be happy to have 3% Roma in institutions.”

A government official acknowledged these shortcomings. “We have not achieved very much in the process of integrating the Albanian communities,” he admitted, and “we need to do more.” He agreed that “the state must ensure prerequisites for greater participation of Albanians” in public institutions, and said, “without this, our efforts will not be successful.”

*Construction of a new maternity ward hospital:* Several Albanian participants brought up the question of building a new maternity ward hospital in Presevo. “We have the green light, but no progress,” said one.

*Textbooks and school curricula:* An Albanian leader identified the issue of the school curriculum as another unresolved problem. “The Ministry of Education has approved the use of textbooks from Kosovo,” he said, “but not the curriculum.”

*Freedom of movement:* An Albanian participant asserted that the Serbian government had promised to open additional border crossings at the Macedonian border, but that this did not happen. “We need these border crossings to ensure freedom of people and goods across the border,” he stated. And, he added, “to avoid the killing of people – I don’t know of an example anywhere else of people being killed for crossing borders. Maybe stopped and questioned, but not killed.” He also noted that the concentration of gendarmerie in the area prevents freedom of movement.

*Language issues:* One participant asserted that Albanians should have the possibility of having official documents in both Serbian and Albanian. The differences in the Serbian and Albanian alphabets often cause mistakes in important documents such as passports, he said. “So we need documents in two languages. This was a right that was enjoyed during communism, but it was taken from us under Milosevic, and we still don’t have it back.”

Another participant compared Serbia with Montenegro, where “all minorities have the right to write their names in their own language. We don’t have this

right in Serbia, and that is discrimination,” he said. A third leader pointed out that “If an Albanian wants to obtain a document from the local administration, he can’t find anyone there who speaks Albanian.”

*National symbols:* A local Albanian leader mentioned the use of Albanian national symbols, and said that “the national flag of Albanians should not bother anyone – we will put it up during our holidays.”

*The gendarmerie:* One participant claimed that the South Serbia region “has been militarized again. We have red berets, people wearing scarves on their heads, as in the past...Who is reforming them? Who can we trust?” He concluded that “international police should be here to support both sides.”

### **Belgrade’s Position**

A senior official from Belgrade responded to the grievances of the Albanian participants by stating that, in the case of the maternity ward hospital, the “standards and requirements for opening a maternity ward have not been met.” However, he added that “I personally believe that a maternity ward should be opened as soon as possible, and we at the Coordination Body will look for the money to do that in the next year.”

On the issue of border crossings with Macedonia, he stated that financial constraints have made this impossible at present. He denied that there was a “political game” about this issue.

This participant also claimed that the number of gendarmerie is being decreased. Of the police, he said “we have inherited this system from the old regime, and it will take some time to change.”

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### **Questionable Investment from Belgrade**

One prominent issue during the discussion was the question of the use of central government funds in South Serbia. Several participants asserted that money had been allocated by central authorities in Belgrade for projects not requested by local leaders. In particular, they reported that funds had been sent from Belgrade for the reconstruction of an Orthodox church and monastery, as well as other projects that South Serbian leaders had not applied for. An ethnic Albanian mayor said that, at a recent meeting of the Coordination Body for South Serbia, Serbian Minister of Finance Mladjan Dinkic “rejected all our proposals, but accepted the reconstruction of a church.” This issue was a source of great frustration and resentment among ethnic Albanian leaders.

A government official reacted with surprise to these reports. “The news that money has been approved for projects that the local government did not compete for is something I have never heard of,” he said. “It is a scandal if it is true.” He pledged to follow up immediately on these reports with the Ministry of Finance in Belgrade.

### **The Attitude in Belgrade**

All the Albanian leaders at the roundtable spoke in favor of peaceful, political solutions to interethnic problems in South Serbia. “We have given up arms and turned to political activity, and we have resolved to solve problems in a political manner,” said one.

However, many expressed deep disappointment and a lack of faith in Belgrade. “Trust,” said one leader, “is not fully restored.” “The government is not willing to involve us,” said another, “I don’t know what else we can do.” A third observed that “there is a prevalent feeling not only among Albanians but among all minorities in Serbia that their rights depend on the party in power. We see this country as our country, but the Prime Minister does not see us as its citizens.”

Several local Albanian leaders pointed to the insufficient level of government participation in the roundtable as evidence that Belgrade is not interested in the problems of the South Serbia Albanians. They also argued that the progress that has been made is largely a result of pressure from the international community.

Representatives of Serbian political parties cited a number of external factors to explain the government’s shortcomings in the region. They mentioned the overall poor state of the Serbian economy, and the ongoing stalemate over Kosovo as reasons why more progress has not been made. “I think all of us, the whole region of South Serbia, are hostage to the resolution of Kosovo’s status,” said one party leader. “We cannot expect positive results until the status of Kosovo is resolved.” This speaker also assigned some blame to the South Serbia Albanians. “I think there is a degree of dishonesty on both sides...The state has made some efforts, but is not prepared to do more. What about Albanians? In my view, most Albanians are not ready to accept the state of Serbia as their own.”

Addressing the issue of Albanian inclusion in state institutions and enterprises, another Serbian party representative cited practical limitations: “You cannot simply fire the Serbs to make room for the Albanians,” he said. “We need to have the best people in the right places; you need skills for every job.”

All sides in this debate, however, affirmed that interethnic relations among the

communities living in South Serbia are stable. “Interethnic dialogue has always existed,” said one Albanian mayor. “We did not have interethnic problems, but problems between the government of Serbia and the minorities.”

### **Albanian Political Participation**

A major topic of discussion was the question of Albanian participation in Serbia’s national political life. Two possibilities for this participation were considered: the formation of the National Council of the Albanian Ethnic Minority (a provision in the minority law that Albanians in Serbia have not yet made use of), and participation in upcoming parliamentary elections through a unified Albanian list.

International participants strongly encouraged the Albanian leaders to take advantage of the opportunity to form the National Council. The Albanian participants were cautiously supportive of this suggestion, though they asserted that such a council should not be necessary for them to achieve their demands, and several expressed skepticism that the councils will be able “to change institutions.”

One Albanian political leader, however, stated openly that “I think it was a big mistake for Albanians not to form their own council.” He asked for further information from central authorities on how to go about creating the council.

A representative of the Serbian government’s Service for Human and Minority Rights explained some features of the National Councils. She also discussed the Republican Council for National Minorities, which includes representatives of all Serbia’s minority councils as well as government ministers who are involved in addressing problems of minorities.

The Council’s chair is the Prime Minister of Serbia. She said that the Republican Council must meet at least twice a year, if two-thirds of the minority council members want to meet, or if the Secretary calls for a meeting. “So it is not true that the Republican Council never meets...and at this meeting minority representatives can ask ministers whatever they want.”

This participant also discussed the anti-discrimination law, which is currently being drafted by the Service for Human and Minority Rights. She invited Albanian leaders to take part in the public discussion of this legislation. “It would be very interesting to have your input,” she said.

Participants were noncommittal on the question of creating a unified list of ethnic Albanian political parties for the upcoming elections. Several international participants pressed them on this issue, pointing out that a united Albanian list could win at least two parliamentary seats, which could be very

valuable in Serbia's highly divided parliament. "If you aren't trying, you won't go anywhere," said one.

Ethnic Albanian participants were skeptical, however. An Albanian leader reported that when the Party of Democratic Action offered to form a coalition with DOS, "it was told that winning 40,000 votes in Presevo would mean a loss of 400,000 votes elsewhere in Serbia."

Despite this hesitancy, none of the Albanian leaders at the Bujanovac roundtable excluded the possibility of taking part in upcoming elections through a unified Albanian list, and several said they would consider this suggestion.

## **Conclusions**

South Serbia's ethnic Albanian leaders are clearly dissatisfied with the implementation of the 2001 Covic plan – particularly its provisions for integration of Albanians in state institutions. They expressed an immense lack of confidence in the goodwill of Belgrade regarding South Serbia.

While the possibility of ethnic Albanian participation in Serbian national politics was an important part of the discussion, local leaders seemed most preoccupied with local problems and their frustration over what they viewed as Belgrade's inattention to the sometimes small, concrete measures that would improve life in South Serbia.

Though the Head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia was an active participant in the discussion, and vowed to follow up on some of the Albanians' grievances, the local leaders were disappointed with the level of participation from Belgrade in the roundtable, which they interpreted as a sign that South Serbia is a low priority in the capital.

On a more positive note, the tone of remarks from Albanian leaders was notably moderate. The statement of one participant, that "we have resolved to solve problems in a political manner," was reflected in the approach of the others. The high level of participation in the roundtable by Albanian leaders, who represented the complete spectrum of Albanian political parties from the area, testified to their willingness to seek solutions through dialogue. They welcomed the PER initiative, and one leader stated that "such a roundtable is a good start for resolving problems in the Presevo Valley."

It was also encouraging that the Albanian leaders demonstrated some readiness to join national institutions though the National Council of the Albanian Ethnic Minority or, possibly, by running in the January 2007 parliamentary elections.

## **BENEFITS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: LESSONS FROM MACEDONIA AND MONTENEGRO**

On April 26, 2007 PER organized in Belgrade a second roundtable which gathered party representatives and officials from South Serbia, the Serbian Minister of Education and other officials from the Serbian Government, officials from the Coordination Body for South Serbia, the Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro, a former Minister in the Government of Macedonia and a member of the Macedonian Parliament, various members of international organizations, and several foreign diplomats stationed in Serbia.

## **Opening Remarks**

In her opening statement, PER President, Livia Plaks, emphasized the necessity for finding mutually acceptable solutions for both the majority and minority populations in South Serbia. She underlined the importance of putting confidence building measures in place and encouraging dialogue between the Albanian minority and the Serbian leadership in Belgrade in order to prevent the building up of resentments in the coming period.

Serbian Minister of Education, Slobodan Vuksanovic, stated that the ministry is open to hearing different representatives of the Albanian community in Serbia. He informed the participants that the ministry employed an ethnic Albanian advisor at the School Department in the Vranje Regional Office. This person provides support to schools with instruction in Albanian. The ministry annually approves Albanian language textbooks for primary and secondary education that are brought in from Kosovo. These textbooks do not include those in sociology, history and geography because of the "possibilities for misinterpretation." The minister emphasized that sizeable investments have been made in building and reconstructing schools in the area – the amount of money allotted for this purpose is half of the entire sum dedicated in the annual budget for school renovations throughout the entire country.

However, the minister warned that while listening to the demands of ethnic Albanian political leaders from South Serbia and following democratic principles is important, it is highly questionable to heed the requests for some sort of separation and independence – such requests make it difficult to pursue the government's policy. He stated that one should not expect the government to invest in schools or in anything else in areas where the representative politicians do not want to be part of the same country that is expending its budgetary monies for these purposes.

## **Experiences From the Neighborhood – Macedonia and Montenegro**

A leading official from a neighboring country summarized his own and his party's experience in creating multiethnic accord in Macedonia, after his country's short but bloody conflict in 2001. He said that the "Ohrid Framework Agreement [that stopped the war and regulated constitutional changes and rights of the Albanian community] is considered to be a key political asset in Macedonia as it helps the country move closer towards EU and NATO."

The main consequence of the Ohrid Agreement was the acknowledgment by the ethnic Macedonian majority that the resident Albanians were and are equal citizens. As a result of the post-Ohrid political process, Albanians acquired new rights and Macedonians did not lose any of their previously held rights, even though it was initially perceived by the latter as inevitable.

The Democratic Union of Integration (DUI), a party that was formed by the former leaders of the National Liberation Army (NLA, an ethnic Albanian guerilla force during the 2001 conflict), won 67% of the Albanian vote at the first election held after the Ohrid Agreement was signed. He explained that the tipping point occurred when Ali Ahmeti (the leader of DUI and the former NLA political leader) publicly stated that he considered Macedonia his own state, his fatherland, and stressed that his political goal was to fight for Albanians to be equal in this fatherland. The participant quoted opinion polls stating that less than 10% of Albanians considered Macedonia as their own country before 2001 while 72% considered it as their own country just four years later after similar statements like Ahmeti's.

As a consequence of the new political climate, a number of new laws have been past in Macedonia. These laws include: law on the use of national symbols, law on use of state documents, the new citizenship law, the law on higher education (which legalized the Albanian-dominated Tetovo University), as well as many others. As far as the reform of the security sector is concerned, more Albanians started to be employed in the Ministries of Interior and Defense (17% of the police force and 13% of the armed forces are currently ethnic Albanian). The Macedonian participant stressed that all these achievements were possible only after the decision by ethnic Albanian political leaders to engage in national politics and to work within Macedonia's political system.

One of the main obstacles for the more accelerated reforms was the lack of trust between the main political parties in the government, between the main ethnic Macedonian party and the main ethnic Albanian party. He pointed out that it was important to rebuild that trust in order to implement the Ohrid Agreement and arrive at Macedonia's present achievements. This was his main advice for the South Serbia Albanian politicians present at the roundtable.

Other international participants seconded him by pointing out that such a course of action would be far more beneficial for ethnic Albanians in South Serbia than the pointless rhetoric of some leaders about the role that South Serbia could play in Kosovo's status process. According to these participants, nobody in the international community would support such efforts.

The Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro shared his experiences regarding interethnic relations in Montenegro, and the institutional instruments for minority protection in his country. He said that even though the present version of Montenegro's Minority Law and the present draft of the country's new Constitution can be improved, most of these documents represent achievements for Montenegro. Such achievements are due, according to him, to a culture of dialogue created between the majority politicians and the leaders of the ethnic Albanian community.

A participant from the international community highlighted another important part of the Montenegrin interethnic experience that could also prove to be useful in Serbia: following the Montenegrin example, instead of asking for low level appointments in different Serbian ministries, minority representatives and those from South Serbia in particular should concentrate on creating a strong and active informal support group composed of parliamentary members who are in constant contact with representatives of minorities. Such a group could lobby the government more effectively for minority interests, and could launch and support parliament and government initiatives that are deemed necessary for advancing the position of Serbia's minorities. Such an informal parliamentary group proved to be essential in the successful implementation of minority projects in Montenegro, more so than the presence of mid- or low-level ethnic minority officials in the government.

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## **Local Experiences – South Serbia**

A member of the Serbian Parliament recognized that experiences from Macedonia and Montenegro could help in overcoming many of the problems facing the region of South Serbia. He did, however, stress that responsibility also lies in the hands of local Albanians. According to him, the main reason for the lack of adequate textbooks in Albanian language lies in the insufficient educational level of the local Albanian elite incapable of producing texts that meet generally accepted criteria. The Serbian Ministry of Education is not well informed, he said, about the problems facing the Albanian community especially with regards

to the fact that Serbian institutions do not recognize student credits accrued from educational institutions in Kosovo, economic inviability of publishing Albanian-language textbooks in Serbia due to their low circulation, and the differences between school programs adopted in Serbia and school programs adopted in Kosovo.

A mayor from a Serbian municipality stated that Serbian institutions are aware of the issues in South Serbia. The real problems, however, arise when the Albanians ask for something like higher education in their mother tongue. In order to enable better education in Albanian language, it is not sufficient to build school buildings, he said, but also to invest in the education of teachers and the creation of better textbooks. He wondered why it was acceptable for the government to permit some textbooks from Kosovo but not the educational curricula from there. After the adoption of the new Constitution there is the tendency to impose the usage of the Cyrillic script as the only alphabet acceptable in official correspondence. This participant did not agree with such practice. He also added that allowing the usage of Albanian symbols does not cost anything to the state and called for opening more

border crossings and boundary passages with Macedonia and Kosovo as well as for the opening of a maternity ward in the area, something reminiscent of Montenegro's interethnic agreement reached in Ulcinj in 2001 with PER's help.

An initiative to open an Albanian language faculty in Bujanovac was supported by the government, a Bujanovac Municipality official said, with the condition that the local municipality provides the building for it. The municipality did provide the building

but the government has yet to open the faculty. The same is true with the maternity ward, the border crossings, etc. The government accepted these initiatives and made promises to implement them but nothing concretely has been achieved so far.

Following the conflict in South Serbia, the Albanians leaders signed a joint statement with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and decided to take part in the work of the Serbian Government's Coordination Body for South Serbia. However, they stated, reorganization of that institution and thorough analysis of the so-called Covic plan are needed. According to them, a reformed Coordination Body should continue its work since the consequences of armed conflict are still present. Such consequences can be resolved only through

extraordinary efforts and attention of an assembly that does not depend on the political will of those in power but fulfills its mandate professionally.

The president of a political party in Presevo argued that maintaining the national identity of a certain group is possible only if the group learns its mother tongue while still having a sufficient knowledge of their country's official language too. In this respect, he suggested that the competences in the sphere of education be transferred from the central to local authorities. The rights of national minorities to maintain their collective identity should be balanced with the responsibility to integrate into the wider community. According to this participant, participation in state institutions is a very important tool in exercising such pressure.

### ***The rights of national minorities to maintain their collective identity should be balanced with the responsibility to integrate into the wider community.***

### ***The Majority's Perspective***

A member of the Serbian Parliament said that he regrets the fact that there is currently only one Albanian member in the Serbian Parliament. He spoke about the 'perception gap' – the one in which every community sees their problems as the biggest and most important: "If you ask a Serb in Bujanovac about the accomplishments of the government in the three municipalities, the answer would be that many things were solved. But if one asks an Albanian, he or she would say that too little has been done. The future status of Kosovo can deteriorate the situation especially in Bujanovac and Presevo, so everyone should monitor the situation and not allow any radicalization to take place," he advised.

According to this same participant, the Coordination Body should be disbanded in the long run; however it is obvious that the Body is still needed since there are two levels of problems in the region: 1) the problem of Serb-Albanian relations and an inability to decrease tensions between the two communities; 2) lack of infrastructure at the local level. The Albanian community could help in creating trust with the majority and the government by forming its Minority National Council, and by taking part in the executive bodies in Belgrade, especially in those that deal with development strategies. It is important for Albanians to be present in institutions that make decisions – this has nothing to do with the percentage of the population they constitute in Serbia.

Another member of the Serbian Parliament agreed that the one of the biggest problems for the integration of Albanians is the ethnic distance between Serbs and Albanians. At the same time, in Kosovo, 40% of youth do not wish to have

any relations with the Serbs. The media are contributing to this negative situation – and a change in the way media reports on these issues is needed. On the other hand, the lack of resolution on the Kosovo status issue is holding both the Albanian community in South Serbia and Serbia, as a whole, hostage.

### **Conclusions**

In his remarks, a representative of the British Embassy concluded that the Albanian communities in Montenegro and in Macedonia helped the states they are living in – in Montenegro they helped the very creation of the new state, while in Macedonia they contributed to the confirmation of identity and to the building of state institutions. As for Albanians in Serbia, the moment is ripe for supporting the state in which they live. In return they should expect to have an open dialogue with the government about their problems. Officials in Belgrade need such positive steps, and it is up to Albanian representatives to take the initiative and open dialogue with different ministries in Belgrade.



From left to right: Alex Grigor'ev, Nagip Arifi, Livia Plaks, Paul Edwards, and Ragmi Mustafa.



From left to right: Ragmi Mustafa, Dusan Spasojevic, Nagip Arifi, Alex Grigor'ev, Cathy Cottrell, and Slobodan Draskovic.

## **IN SEARCH OF POLITICAL WILL: RESOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF SOUTH SERBIA**

On October 29, 2007, PER organized in Bujanovac its third roundtable as part of a series titled “Reviving Interethnic Political Dialogue in South Serbia.” The roundtable was broken into two parts – the morning session was attended by participants from South Serbia who were then joined by Serbian government representatives from Belgrade in the latter half of the day. The two meetings gathered party representatives and officials from the South Serbia municipalities of Presevo and Bujanovac, local political parties, ministerial officials from the Serbian Government, officials from the Serbian Government’s Coordination Body for South Serbia, and several foreign diplomats.

### **Session I: Problems of South Serbia**

#### **Opening Remarks**

PER Executive Director, Alex Grigor'ev, opened the meeting by giving an overview of PER's activities in previous years and pointed out that PER is not only concerned about minority rights, but especially about promoting harmonious majority-minority relations.

“We advocate dialogue and a strong commitment from both sides of the process to listening carefully to the other side, to understand the limitations and possibilities and the aspirations of the other side, and then to reach some serious and practical conclusions about how future relations can be shaped.”

The issue of South Serbia, he reminded participants, deserves attention for the purpose of preserving peace and stability in Europe. He especially stressed the fact that this is of concern not only to the Albanians living there but also to the Serbs, Roma, and everyone else.

He explained that the very idea of this meeting was to enable local and national authorities to focus on practical and concrete issues that are of immediate concern to citizens who live in the area of South Serbia, problems which the Serbian Government can solve quickly and without a great deal of money. “One needs, however,

**We advocate dialogue and a strong commitment from both sides of the process to listening carefully to the other side, to understand the limitations and possibilities and the aspirations of the other side, and then to reach some serious and practical conclusions about how future relations can be shaped.**

political will,” he said. Communities in South Serbia, and especially the Albanians, have a long list of old expectations that have not been fulfilled by Serbia’s various democratic governments since 2000.

He asked the politicians present at the meeting to act as analysts tasked with identifying the most important problems. “Let us try to be realistic and think what Belgrade can do within as short a time as possible and with no big funds,” he suggested.

The First Secretary of the British Embassy in Belgrade, Cathy Cottrell, supported the chair’s appeal that such discussions be aimed at producing practical results. Cottrell reiterated the importance of South Serbia for the stability of the Balkans – a priority of her government.

## ***Education***

Participants from all communities agreed that the most significant problems in South Serbia are found in the field of education. Local participants reiterated that these issues have been brought up numerous times to the attention of the government in Belgrade but little has been done to resolve them.

A local mayor observed even though there have been some new educational facilities built, the problems relating to the availability of Albanian language textbooks and deficit of Albanian speaking teachers and curricula remain. The district office of the Ministry of Education in Vranje, staffed by officials from the old regime, has very little interest in the problems of the three municipalities and prevents the education system there from functioning normally, he opined. He suggested that the management of education be decentralized and that this would not help only ethnic minorities but also all who live in South Serbia. Both local Albanian and Serb politicians supported this participant and called for greater participation of local government bodies in appointing officials who deal directly with issues in South Serbia.

“The school for economic studies should finally be opened in Medvedja,” a different participant contributed. There was a decision of the government to open such a college but everything stopped after its construction license was revoked. “This stranded 400 enrolled students who then had to look for other enrollment throughout Serbia,” he recalled. “The state should show its understanding of the problem and should be flexible,” he concluded.

A politician from Bujanovac disagreed saying that faculties cannot be established “in every village.” According to him, Medvedja does not have the capacity to host such a school.

Another participant added that the situation with education in South Serbia is reminiscent of the lack of attention to minority education in the rest of the

country. Education is a crucial factor in preserving a minority’s identity. “All that the Albanians are requesting is that our ethnic identity be preserved. We need more and better Albanian language textbooks. It is unacceptable that Albanians learn from 80% Serbian authors and only 20% are Albanian – that out of 150 songs in a children’s music textbook only three are in Albanian. I think that this cannot be bad for Serbia either,” said another participant.

All of the Albanian participants spoke about the need for a teacher’s college in Bujanovac. There is a great deficit of Albanian speaking teachers in Serbian Albanian-language schools. The government does not recognize college diplomas issued in Pristina – another issue that needs to be resolved – and with no opportunities for Albanians from South Serbia to receive higher education in their own language in Serbia, many of these students opt to go abroad and then do not return. Opening a teachers college subsidiary of the University of Nis in Bujanovac would solve this problem.

An international participant recalled the experience of Montenegro where the government, with the help of the Project on Ethnic Relations, opened an Albanian-language teachers faculty for a much smaller ethnic Albanian community. The new faculty was an important step in strengthening majority-minority relations in Montenegro and resolving the deficit issue of Albanian speaking instructors in Montenegro. That said, however, the faculty very soon completed its original task and demand for its graduates has declined. This development caused the government to start looking into transforming the teachers faculty into a multi-disciplinary educational institution. This experience can and probably should be applied in South Serbia, he concluded.

## ***Health***

The discussion then turned to the issue of health and the need for a maternity ward in South Serbia. One participant observed that the location for a maternity ward in Presevo has been selected, design and technical documents have been provided, but there is still no license for the construction of the promised maternity ward. In the meantime, the nearest maternity ward is almost an hour away from Presevo.

### ***Education is a crucial factor in preserving a minority’s identity.***

“The area needs a greater number of medical and technical staff,” this participant continued, “but there is no good will on the part of the Ministry of Health for recruiting Albanians to work in local hospitals.” Another participant then claimed that the Ministry of Health, in its open call for vacancies, approved the recruitment of five medical doctors – the director of the outpatient medical center in Bujanovac requested that four of the empty vacancies be filled

by Albanians and one by a Serb. However, the Ministry of Health, the participant accused, turned down that request and instead requested that four of the doctors be Serbs and only one be Albanian. In the outpatient medical centre in Bujanovac, Albanians account for 55 staff members, one or two Roma and 200 Serbs – and this is in an Albanian dominated area, he reiterated.

A Serb participant disagreed with these two speakers: “Knowledge and ability should be the criteria for appointment not ethnicity.” One of the previous speakers replied: “We have eight medical doctors in Presevo who have passed specialist training and we see no reason for the Ministry to recruit people who do not live in South Serbia.”

### **Border Crossings**

The opening of additional, smaller border crossings with Macedonia was brought up by several ethnic Albanian speakers. Many Albanian families live on both sides of the border, and the only existing Presevo border crossing significantly limits contacts with family members. The Government of Serbia, they claimed, has promised to resolve this issue over the years but to no avail.

### **Roma**

One participant pointed out that the problem of the Roma is another complex and specific issue in South Serbia. The biggest problem of the Roma community in Bujanovac is education. According to his estimates, only 15 Roma children finished elementary school last year. Teachers in Bujanovac are not familiar with the main principles of the educational reform in Serbia, and especially the parts regarding the education of Roma children.

“Only 0.3 - 0.5% of Roma have jobs in Bujanovac. Not a single Rom works in the state administration offices in Bujanovac. The exception is that four Roma work in the municipal administration offices,” he concluded.

The same participant requested that a financial analysis be made to clearly determine how much has actually been invested into the Roma community. According to him, the Romani community in South Serbia has been seriously neglected.

### **Interethnic Realities**

One participant argued that interethnic relations in this region have never been all that disturbed. “Our destinies are connected and we will continue to live together on this small piece of land,” he said. “If we have support of the government, we - Albanians, Serbs, and Roma – can do everything here,” said a counterpart from the other side of the ethnic divide who supported him.

The previous speaker pointed out that most of the problems come up in the relations between the representatives of local self-government and certain ministries of the Serbian government. Very little happens in Presevo and Bujanovac because government officials refer them to the Coordination Body. Thus, Presevo municipality has not been able to receive funds for some very attractive projects, not even from the Ministry of Agriculture to which they applied in an open call for projects aimed at reducing unemployment. The Ministry for Infrastructure is another example, he argued. This ministry has budgeted €760,000 for improving Serbia’s infrastructure, none of which has gone towards asphalting a single square meter of road in Presevo.

Another participant pointed out that in relation to economic development and improvement of interethnic relations, passage of the Law on Restitution of Municipal Property is very important.

With regards the integration process, one participant observed that it has evolved slower than expected, but that concrete results should not be even expected for 15 years. “The process of integrating Albanians and Roma into Serbian political life has been quite slow,” said the participant, “but such is the case with all long-term processes. We cannot fire all our Serbian staff from state administration offices and only recruit Albanians.” This participant complained that the ethnic Albanian administrations of Presevo and Bujanovac pay very little attention to the needs of the Serbs in those municipalities, and very little from the local budgets goes to supporting non-Albanian communities. For example, one Serb participant asked, “why does not the local TV of Presevo broadcast programs in Serbian language for the local population?”

A different participant pointed out that politics has permeated every nook and cranny of society as well as anything to do with the economy. Unemployment does not just affect the Albanian community but impacts Serbs as well.

### **Governmental Coordination Body for South Serbia**

In the opinion of a local mayor, South Serbia is a specific region and an extremely poor one at that, which is why it needs a specific governmental institution such as the Coordination Body. Other local participants agreed with him that there is a great need for this Body in the three municipalities.

It is true, one participant argued, the Coordination Body needs to be more efficient, but at the same time the 2008 budget set aside for it has been reduced to a half of what it was just two years ago. The budget, one participant said, should be increased not decreased as very little from the so-called “Covic Plan” has been implemented.

The participants stated that knowing the budget for a particular municipality and for the Coordination Body at least a year in advance would be highly beneficial. “A more long-term plan for development is necessary,” a participant argued. Another participant called for a comprehensive analysis of where and how much money has been spent by the Coordination Body since 2002.

The Albanian participants disagreed with the ongoing reform of the Coordination Body and refused to take up the positions of Vice Presidents of that Body allotted to the mayors of the three municipalities. Their chief concern is that the opinion of the local officials was not taken into account during the reform of the Coordination Body by the government of Serbia.

### **Political Will**

One participant pointed out that political will on the part of the Serbian government is crucial if any of the above mentioned problems are to be resolved. First, the government needs to enable Albanians to enter state institutions sooner rather than later, and especially into the local offices located in the territories of Bujanovac, Presevo and Medvedja. He requested there be enforcement

of the law that explicitly stipulates that ethnically mixed communities should be reflected in the recruitment of positions in national administrations.

Another participant pointed out that only greater decentralization would

solve local problems as the communities in the south understand each other and understand how important it is to preserve their peaceful cohabitation. “We live here, we pay taxes – that money should return here where it is collected. People leave this area not because of a lack of security but because of a lack of jobs.”

**People leave this area  
not because of a lack of  
security but because of  
a lack of jobs.**

- Necessity of an increased budget for the Coordination Body with long-term strategies outlined in action plans;
- Need for analysis of the activities and finances of the Coordination Body starting from 2002 until present;
- Dissatisfactory communication between government ministries and local authorities;
- Infrastructure rehabilitation and development;
- Greater role of local authorities in the privatization process;
- Opening of local border crossings between Serbia and Macedonia;
- Decentralization and the granting of greater decision making to municipal authorities;
- Possibilities for using funds from government ministries and not only from the Coordination Body's budget;
- Opening of an Albanian language faculty;
- Recognition of UNMIK-issued university diplomas;
- Textbooks in Albanian language;
- Hiring of more Albanian language teachers and other teaching staff;
- Improving education of Roma pupils;
- Opening of a maternity ward in Presevo;
- Recruitment of more Albanian medical doctors from Presevo and Bujanovac, and revising the Ministry of Health's employment criteria.

### **Integration and Cohesion**

A representative of the Albanian community pointed out that preserving multi-ethnic societies are not the obligation and objective of the local community only, but also of central authorities. “In the central government, there are not any serious projects addressing the country's multiethnic cohesion,” he said. “We still have state authorities that represent only one ethnicity – it is not just border crossings where there are no Albanians or where they are present only symbolically. Regarding the country's judiciary development, the reform process has evolved rather tardily. Albanians still do not receive proper treatment. I would like to make a parallel with Montenegro and the fact that many different questions were addressed there at the same time (Teacher's college, maternity ward, border crossings). They have all been resolved and finished a long time ago. And the only thing that was needed for the speedy resolution of those issues

## **Session II: What can be done?**

### **Opening Remarks**

The chair opened the afternoon session by pointing out that while a lot of things have been done, there is yet a lot to do. He informed the newly arrived participants from Belgrade that, during the morning session, many of the local participants from South Serbia agreed that multiethnic relations are good in the region but that government support could and should be better at addressing their needs.

He reflected upon the major themes discussed in the morning session:

was political will - very little money was spent in Montenegro. Such political will is lacking in Belgrade," he concluded.

## **Education**

A government representative identified problems pertaining to education in the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja. With regards the issuing of licenses to Albanian teachers, he pointed out that in June 2006 the Ministry of Education paid money for re-licensing exams. In Presevo, the Ministry of Education has been able to issue licenses for 40 teachers. Apparently the new method for licensing which was recently launched has caused a delay due to the large number of applicants.

He pointed out that a number of textbooks published outside of Serbia have been approved by the government through dialogue with minority councils in Serbia. The Albanians in Serbia need to form such a council in order to benefit from this procedure.

A representative of the government reiterated that since 2002 the reform process in education has been under way and that he sees no reason why the reforms in South Serbia should be different than elsewhere. If there are specific needs for specific issues – for example, a seminar for Albanian language teachers – it is necessary to register for it and to request its approval (accreditation) from the Ministry of Education. Regarding a college for teachers, he said, the law is clear, the procedure is clear, and he called for an initiative to be launched as prescribed by the law. He said that a discussion about opening an Albanian language faculty is a legitimate one. When it comes to the problems related to Roma, he pointed out that if there is any place in Serbia where there has been a lot done for Roma, it is in South Serbia. He reminded the other participants that the Ministry has a Roma assistant and a Roma coordinator.

An international participant noted that government authorities have already promised a few times to open a college for Albanian language teachers but that as of today, nothing has yet to be done. Unfulfilled promises, then, are a recurring issue. The participant concluded that there is no other hindrance to resolving these issues than a lack of political will on the part of the Serbian government, especially when considering that the international community has even offered to help in providing funds for many of these initiatives. "If there is political will to resolve these issues, we will find the money," he concluded.

## **Governmental Coordination Body for South Serbia**

One member of the government reminded the others present that the Coordination Body's purpose is to coordinate the work of local communities and

government Ministries. In his opinion, the greatest success of the new Serbian government is that it prioritizes resolving crises in South Serbia through diplomatic means in cooperation with international organizations such as UNHCR and OSCE, and that it cooperates with KFOR and NATO forces as well.

He admitted that the Coordination Body has had both benefits and faults – the biggest fault being when it did not operate for an entire year due to a crisis in the Government. "Today, it is a reformed body," he said, "that recognizes that many of the problems in South Serbia are not specific to the region but typical of the country as a whole. These three municipalities have been given more attention than any of the other municipalities in Serbia, except for Belgrade. For all participants present, it is important that we keep in touch, that we talk in rational ways, and consolidate our forces to address problems."

The same participant also called on the local officials to publicly recognize the good work done by the Coordination Body, especially when it is done privately. "How can you expect us to do good work if the only thing heard in public from you about the work of the Body is constant criticism and disagreement? You never publicly thank us for our work. This is rather demoralizing," he concluded. The chair picked up on this theme and advised participants about the importance of encouraging each other.

Another representative of the Serbian government talked about good examples of assistance that the Coordination Body has provided to local populations in regards to water supply, construction of roads, etc. He also mentioned the problem of de-mining the territory. He quoted the example of improving the local police force and the prioritization of including Albanians by quoting examples – some of them being promoted to the posts of deputy or assistant heads of police. He noted that none of the local politicians publicly condemned the assassination of a BIA staff (intelligence service), which leaves a bad impression, does little to encourage people to work in state agencies, and does not contribute to an atmosphere of integration. Regarding border crossings, Serbia has done a large share of work and is currently waiting for an official reply from the Macedonian government.

## **Conclusions**

One participant informed the others about the adopted Action Plan of the Coordination Body which identifies how the Body's teams will liaison between municipalities and Ministries. Each vice president will have his/her specific mandate and portfolio, and s/he will liaison between certain Ministries to tackle concrete problems. "The Coordination Body will be a bridge between local community authorities and Ministries," he said.

Another participant proposed reconvening this roundtable on an annual basis in order to sum up the work of the Coordination Body in a given year and plan ahead.

A member of the Coordination Body informed participants about the funds invested in South Serbia to date. According to the information from the Coordination Board, 3.936 billion dinars or 56 million euros has been invested. He also stated that the Coordination Body is working to create a team of experts who will make an analysis of everything that has been done so far. This working group will be, more or less, a reflection of the composition of participants attending the PER roundtable, along with representatives of the civil and business sector.



**From left to right: Nagip Arifi and Rasim Ljajic.**

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS\*

(English alphabetical order)

### PARTICIPANTS FROM SERBIA

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\*The number in parentheses indicates the number of PER roundtables the participant attended. Where no number appears, the person took part in one roundtable only. Some participants have changed their titles between 2006 – 2008.

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Only the titles at the time of their latest attendance are listed.

## OTHER PER PUBLICATIONS

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