

## 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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BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

## THE BALKANS AND THE EU: CHALLENGES ON THE ROAD TO ACCESSION

**PROJECT ON  
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RELATIONS**



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**Bucharest, Romania**

**November 19, 2005**

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## PREFACE

On November 19, 2005, the Project on Ethnic Relations, in cooperation with the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, organized an international roundtable discussion under the title "The Balkans and the EU: Challenges on the Road to Accession." The purpose of the roundtable was to provide a venue for frank dialogue among countries of the region and European institutions on the next wave of EU enlargement, how to make EU accession a reality, and the regional implications of future European integration. The discussion also focused on the issue of Kosovo, and how the province's future status will impact the EU integration process for the region as a whole and for Serbia and Montenegro in particular.

The roundtable, which was held in Bucharest, brought together senior political leaders and government officials from Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro including Kosovo, and Slovakia, as well as representatives of the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the United Nations.

While all participants in the roundtable were in agreement that European integration should be their states' eventual goal, sharp differences in opinion were expressed over the question of Kosovo. Kosovo Albanian leaders continued to insist that independence is the optimal solution both for Kosovo and for the region. Serbs rejected the possibility of an independent Kosovo, and argued that such a step



**From left to right: Michael Einik, Livia Plaks, Anca Boagiu, Jonathan Scheele, Slobodan Casule, and Andrej Zernovski.**

would set a dangerous precedent. Representatives of EU institutions avoided involvement in this debate, but stressed that the countries of the Western Balkans still have much work to do, and many outstanding problems to resolve, before EU membership will be a reality for them.

The Bucharest roundtable was unusual as a neutral, off-the-record setting for open discussions of often sensitive issues. This report documents those discussions.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its assistance in organizing the Bucharest roundtable, as well as for its ongoing support of PER's Regional Center. We also gratefully acknowledge the PER team in Bucharest, whose hard work made the roundtable possible.

In order to encourage more open discussion, and following PER's usual practice, participants have not been identified by name in the text of this report. Alan Moseley, PER Program Officer, prepared the report, which has not been reviewed by the participants, and for which PER assumes full responsibility.

**Livia Plaks**, *President*

Princeton, New Jersey  
January 2006

## 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 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.



From left to right: Ardian Gjini, Skender Hyseni, and Hashim Thaci.

## INTRODUCTION

2005 was a year of both achievements and setbacks for the European Union and its aspiring new members. For optimists, the year's events would seem to confirm that the EU is well on track to make dramatic steps eastward. In April, Bulgaria and Romania signed accession treaties calling for full EU membership beginning January 1, 2007. In November, both Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina reached the important milestone of beginning Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) negotiations with the Union, and, in December, after the Bucharest roundtable, Macedonia officially joined Turkey and Croatia as an EU candidate—the first state in the Western Balkans to do so.

At the same time, Euro-pessimists could also find much to worry them in 2005. In spring, the proposed new European constitution, which requires ratification by all 25 member states, was resoundingly rejected by voters in France and the Netherlands. The deadline for ratification, originally set for 2006, was postponed indefinitely. Analysts attributed this major setback to anxiety over the EU's rapid pace of growth, and particularly prospects for the further inclusion of Turkey and the troubled countries of the Western Balkans. While Macedonia was ultimately granted candidate status (though without a precise date for the start of membership negotiations), the decision was put into



From left to right: Zoran Loncar, Arenca Trashani, Adrian Severin, and Pal Csaky.

doubt in the course of deeply fraught talks over the Union's 2007-2013 budget. During the December Council of Ministers meeting that opened the budget talks, the French Foreign Minister questioned whether the time is right to make Macedonia a candidate. "Is this the right moment, when everyone knows that the EU doesn't have the solutions to the challenges posed by the current enlargement, neither institutionally nor financially?" he asked.

Against this rather conflicted background, 2005 also marked a turning point for what is perhaps the most highly charged issue facing the Western Balkans: the question of Kosovo. After receiving an assessment of Kosovo's progress implementing democratic standards, on November 15, the UN Secretary General appointed former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari as a special envoy to lead talks on Kosovo's future status. As U.S. Undersecretary of State R. Nicholas Burns noted in remarks to the U.S. Congress, also in November, "2006 will be a crucial year of decision for Kosovo and the Balkans." With Kosovo back in the international spotlight, and a referendum over Montenegro's independence from a joint state with Serbia also looming in the coming year, it is clear that the Western Balkans are poised to undergo dramatic, and potentially wrenching, changes.

Taking stock of such developments, PER organized the Bucharest roundtable in an effort to explore both the broad question of the European perspective for the Western Balkans, and the particular issue of Kosovo in this context. The discussions, behind closed doors, gave participants from the region a chance to communicate directly with European officials on their prospects for European integration, and provided a forum where acceding and candidate states could share lessons of their experience with neighbors. They also brought senior Kosovo Albanian leaders to the table with government officials from Belgrade and other Serb leaders for talks on the province's future. Additionally, the roundtable was a further attempt to build a more coherent regional perspective on the problems of the Western Balkans, allowing the countries of the region to voice their concerns and, hopefully, develop better cooperation in solving the problems that face them all. This final objective is a long-term goal of the Project on Ethnic Relations, and the Bucharest roundtable represented just one in an ongoing series of such regional discussions.

The roundtable revealed two significant points of tension. First, many participants, including both EU officials and representatives of candidate or acceding countries, strongly emphasized the hard work that lies ahead for aspiring EU members, and the need for self-reliance and self-discipline. As one official from a current EU candidate country put it, "Don't expect too much [from Brussels]....You will be given a little push, and then you will be expected to walk." While not denying that EU accession will involve much hard work, other participants pointed to a "lack of leadership" within the EU, particularly when it comes to articulating the benefits of EU enlargement to citizens of current member states. Further, these participants argued that Europe's own interests in realizing the European perspective in the Western Balkans dictate a much higher degree of involvement in the region. "The EU should not be indifferent to what is going on in this area," said one, "We should not simply wait and see if the countries of the Western Balkans are doing their homework."

The second point of contention was Kosovo. Kosovo Albanians insisted that independence is the only solution for the province, and that granting Kosovo's independence would remove a major obstacle



From left to right: Alex Grigor'ev, Zoran Loncar, Arenca Trashani, Adrian Severin (obscured from view), Pas Csaky, Michael Einik, and Livia Plaks.

to the region's European integration. Serbs ruled out the possibility of an independent Kosovo, pointing both to the continuing problems of daily existence for Serbs in the province, and to the precedent that would be set by granting independence based on what they called the "ethnic principle." While no significant new ground was broken in this debate, an official from Serbia did strike an unusually conciliatory tone, saying, "My government is ready to reach a compromise." Kosovo Albanian participants noted this change in attitude, and said that they appreciated his statement.

As more than one participant in the meeting pointed out, in the matter of European integration transparency and clarity are of the utmost importance. One EU official cited the remarks of European Commissioner for Enlargement Ollie Rehn following the French and Dutch referenda, in which he identified a "Plan C" for enlargement: consolidation, conditionality, and communication. The last, better communication with citizens of EU and candidate countries about enlargement, is essential. PER's Bucharest roundtable was an effort to foster such communication also among the aspiring new EU members of the Western Balkans, and to bring a greater measure of clarity to some of the issues that will shape their region in the coming years and beyond.

## THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

To launch the discussion, a senior representative of the European Union addressed the question of the so-called "European perspective" for the countries of the Western Balkans, especially in light of recent developments such as the rejection of the new EU constitution in France and the Netherlands. Despite this setback, and the apparent uncertainty within Europe over the future of the Union, he said that the countries of the Western Balkans do have an EU perspective, and that "it is a real perspective."

While emphasizing that the European Commission remains in favor of further enlargement, this official offered several words of caution. First, there will not be another "big bang" of EU enlargement as in 2004, when Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia were granted membership together on May 1. The reason for this has to do with the absorption capacity of the EU, he said, and also with the accession

process itself. On the latter point, he asserted that it is essential that the process be transparent, fair, and objective, and that the conditionality connected to EU membership is clear to all. "Every process

***Turning enlargement into reality will be a lengthy and occasionally frustrating experience.***

needs a timescale, and needs targets," he said, "but there is a risk that the process can acquire a reality that is separate from actual events." Thus, "we need to avoid creating expectations that may not be justified."

Aspiring EU members should understand that "turning enlargement into reality will be a lengthy and occasionally frustrating experience," he said, but he emphasized that the EU perspective for the Western Balkans is one that the Commission wants to see.

Another EU representative expressed the position of the Union on enlargement and the Western Balkans. The EU will move ahead with its previous commitments, he asserted, which concern first of all Croatia, Turkey, and Macedonia, as well as eventual Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs) with Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania. "We have been moving ahead and we will not stop moving ahead with these commitments," he stated. However, this official also cautioned that EU accession is "not an automatic process," and that the states of the Western Balkans have serious problems that they must solve before EU membership can be extended to them. "We can all imagine nightmare situations without the EU in the Balkans," he argued, "but it is even worse to imagine importing such problems into the EU." However, he noted that it is not the case that "any resolution of problems will lead the way to the EU." "There are resolutions that would complicate accession," he said.

Discussing the regional aspect of EU enlargement, he asserted that "we do not hold any country hostage to any other." However, he went on, "even if there is no formal link, we are all aware that there is a strong connection between countries" of the Western Balkans.

Finally, he advised participants that the EU perspective cannot be a substitute for necessary reforms. EU accession is the umbrella for the reform process, he said, but it is not the whole story.

An official from the Council of Europe discussed the issue of the democratic and human rights "standards" that must be secured before European integration can move forward. "European integration is not only about Strasbourg, Brussels, and The Hague," he said, "it is also about standards." Such standards, he went on, are not "abstract promises," but "true guarantees to the people living in the region." He mentioned Kosovo specifically in this context, advising the participants that discussions over the final status of the province "should not interrupt Pristina from implementing standards."

The issue of the Roma was brought up by one participant from Poland, who pointed out that improving the situation of the Roma is part of the Copenhagen Criteria for aspiring EU members. He asserted that "frustration within the Romani community is growing," and suggested that the social unrest that recently struck France could also become a problem for countries of the region with large Romani populations.

There was strong agreement among all participants from states of the Western Balkans that their future is with the EU. No speakers expressed any doubts that European integration should be their ultimate national goal. Further, many asserted that the very existence of the "European perspective" is key to maintaining regional stability. In the words of one participant from Kosovo, "If we were to remove the EU perspective, everything would collapse." "What we have achieved so far and what we hope for cannot be separated," he stated. A participant from Hungary echoed this view: "The most important thing is the perspective of EU integration. There is no other way to stabilize the region." In support of this claim, he asserted that the EU integration process was indispensable to achieving normalized bilateral relations between Hungary and Romania, and Hungary and Slovakia. "Without the EU," he said, "we could never have achieved this."

***If we were to remove the EU perspective, everything would collapse.***

A senior government official from Serbia also affirmed his country's eagerness to move forward in the EU accession process. He stated that he expects Serbia to be ready to sign an SAA in November 2006. He also highlighted Serbia's improved cooperation with the Inter-



national Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. The Serbian government is ready to fulfill its obligations in this area, he asserted, and he noted that "we have already solved the problem of fifty of those charged" with war crimes. We should emphasize the positive developments in this area, he urged the other participants, rather than focus on the negative aspects.

## LESSONS OF ACCESSION AND CANDIDACY

Representatives of new EU member states at the roundtable, which included Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, as well as EU candidates Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, shared lessons and insights they gained from their experience with the accession process. The topic of interethnic relations received considerable attention. A participant from Slovakia highlighted the importance of interethnic relations for aspiring EU members. Stable and harmonious relations among ethnic groups are a priority for the EU, he said, and states seeking to join the Union must address these issues.

A political leader from Macedonia supported this view. "The most important reforms for Macedonia," in its bid for EU candidacy, he said, "were those related to interethnic relations." Implementing reforms such as bringing Albanians into government, establishing comprehensive Albanian-language university education in Macedonia,



From left to right: Csaba Tabajdi and Jacek Paliszewski.

passing legislation on the use of national symbols, and making the capital and some other cities officially bilingual were not "easy or pleasant," he said, but they were necessary.

A participant from Romania offered several lessons for aspiring EU members. First, he said, the countries of the Western Balkans should understand that European integration requires reforming the very concept of the state. Though "our states were born as ethnic states, based on the majority population," he said, "we must move beyond that to be bricks in the European building.... We must be civic states." In Romania, he argued, it was necessary to bring about a change in the "mentality about the nature of the state." "We have admitted that we have a plurality of ethnic groups, all of them being constitutive, co-founding parts of the state." He added that this kind of nation building was a "political project" in Romania, and that, as any political project, "it involved something artificial." Thus, if the states of the Western Balkans wish to join modern history, he asserted, "they need to forget mythology."

*If the states of the Western Balkans wish to join modern history, they need to forget mythology.*

As a second lesson Romania has learned from the EU accession process, he argued that states must "redefine the national interest" to accommodate a "win-win" approach to relations with neighbors and historical rivals, rather than continue to see such relations as "a zero-sum game." In Romania's case, he said that in past centuries the state had pursued a zero-sum game with Hungary. Today these relations have been transformed, and this lesson is relevant to the Western Balkans.

Finally, this participant also offered words of caution regarding the expectations of the public. "Do not give too many unrealistic expectations to your populations," he advised political leaders. "You must build the mood of the population on the ground."

A participant from Croatia counseled other participants that, in contrast to the 2004 wave of EU accession, "We cannot count on the same level of financial or political support from Brussels." Do not

expect much from European leadership, he said. "You will be given a little push, and then you will be expected to walk." "The political elite of the Balkans must rely on themselves," he declared, "the rest of Europe has all the time in the world to wait for us to wake up and do the right thing."

***You will be given a little push, and then you will be expected to walk.***

Croatia has reached the level of development where it can no longer blame "enemies" for its problems, he said. Now his country's task is to strengthen the rule of law. "The rule of law is going to bring us into the EU," he stated. Other countries of the Western Balkans must understand that they will have to work very hard to bring Europe to the region, he warned, "it is not for Europe to come here, it is up to us."

A senior political leader from Macedonia took up this theme. "The EU is not a hospital for sick states," he asserted. "No one will find the solution to our problems if we ourselves don't know it." He continued the earlier speaker's emphasis on self-reliance and hard work as the key to realizing the European perspective. He added that the states of the Western Balkans must strive toward "a higher level of integration" so that the region will be more attractive to the EU as a market, pointing out that "the second concept of the Union is that it is a common market."

A participant from Albania made the point that European integration must be embraced as a collective national goal if it is to be realized. It cannot be a matter just for the government or for the opposition, she argued.

## **IS THE EU READY FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?**

While representatives of the EU stressed that the issue of enlargement is separate from other internal EU debates, and that the EU perspective for the Western Balkans is alive and well, other participants raised questions over the Union's leadership in this area. In a departure from previous speakers, who focused on the primary responsibility of aspiring EU members to overcome their own problems, one U.S. participant argued that greater leadership and support is needed on the part of current EU members for the states of the Western

Balkans. It is clear that the countries of the region hope to ultimately gain EU membership, he said. But what is the attitude of current members? Leaders of EU countries should consider the unpleasant alternatives to EU integration for the region, which include possible further armed conflict, criminality, and so on, and recognize that bringing the region closer to the EU is in their own interests. Further, current EU leaders must do a better job of explaining to their populations why integrating the Western Balkans is important to them. "I see a lack of political leadership," he concluded.

***The EU should not be indifferent to what is going on in this area.***

A participant from Romania supported this view. "The EU should not be indifferent to what is going on in this area," he asserted. He charged that both the United States and the European Union have apparently lost interest in southeastern Europe. "There is no vision, not to mention a common foreign policy" toward the region, he said.

A political leader from Hungary referred to the skepticism recently expressed by French and Dutch voters in their rejection of the proposed EU constitution. The fifteen old member states "had not been prepared well for accession," he argued, "it was not explained to the public why enlargement was favorable or not." "When I am in France," he added, "I see that people have baseless fears" related to the new EU members.

An EU official acknowledged that the EU is currently experiencing a degree of uncertainty over its future. After the referendum, he said, the Union must embark on "a period of reflection," and the question is "What is the EU for?" We have the task of explaining to West Europeans exactly why the EU exists, he said. There are serious questions about how the EU will function, not only at twenty-seven or twenty-eight members, but at well over thirty. The question of the EU's absorption capacity is something that is still being debated, he pointed out, and, to be clear, much of this debate is focused more on the impact of the eventual accession of Turkey than it is on that of any individual country of the Western Balkans.

## THE EU AND KOSOVO

The question of Kosovo received considerable attention at the roundtable. Participants from Pristina argued that granting the province independence would bring a resolution to an issue that has impeded progress in the region and prevented countries of the Western Balkans from moving closer to EU membership. As one Kosovo Albanian leader put it, "Kosovo's independence, which is imminent, will prove to be key both to the region's faster European integration, and also to lasting stability in the region."

While many at the table agreed that it is important to resolve the outstanding question of Kosovo's status, several Serb participants rejected the possibility of granting Kosovo independence. These speakers were concerned with the fate of the Serbian minority in Kosovo, arguing that even under UN administration their basic human rights are not protected, and they also brought up the precedent that would be set by meeting the demands of the Albanian "separatist movement" in Kosovo. One Serb participant pointed to the apparent contradiction in the argument in favor of Kosovo's independence: "If Kosovo Albanians get independence on the ethnic principle, then Serbs in the north of Kosovo also have the right to independence according to the same logic." "Will two million ethnic Hungarians in Romania be given independence?" he went on, "Of course not, and we cannot treat democratic Serbia differently from other states." "Will the international community accept the principle of blood and soil in the Balkans?" he concluded, "I hope not."



From left to right: Axel Wallden and Helene Holm Pedersen.

A participant from Belgrade applauded the earlier discussion of human rights standards in relation to Kosovo. She argued that the fulfillment of such standards is very low in Kosovo, and noted that "I am not talking in general terms, but about some basic rights like freedom of movement, and the safety of all people." Another Serb participant pointed out that "it is not enough to have laws if they are not implemented."

In one significant departure from a previous position, a participant from Belgrade stated that the Serbian government is prepared for compromise, and will work with whatever parties will be involved in implementing the agreed settlement for Kosovo.

***Will the international community accept the principle of blood and soil in the Balkans?***

For their part, Kosovo Albanians welcomed this change in tone from Belgrade, but continued to insist on independence as the only solution for Kosovo and for the region as a whole. A participant from Pristina rejected the notion that granting Kosovo independence will have a "domino effect" for other states, and asserted that the government in Pristina is committed to integrating all minorities in a future state of Kosovo, and that decentralization and subsidiarity will be essential tools for securing minority rights. Another Kosovo Albanian participant argued that, in fact, granting independence for Kosovo is already a compromise solution, since it lies between two other extremes: unification of Kosovo with Albania, or preserving its status as "a republic within Yugoslavia."

While others at the roundtable refrained from entering the debate between Belgrade and Pristina over Kosovo's future status, several cautioned that Serbia's future must also be taken into consideration. "Would a small, defeated, humiliated Serbia be good for the region?" asked one participant. Serbia's fate, and the potentially negative outcomes within Serbia as a result of developments in Kosovo and Montenegro, must not be neglected, he stated. The best approach for Kosovo and the region, he argued, is one that looks "not to solve individual problems, but to address all the peoples' legitimate aspirations in one package."

## TOWARD REGIONAL COOPERATION

There was broad agreement in the discussion that greater regional cooperation is needed in order to speed European integration and improve stability. One Kosovo Albanian participant argued that Kosovo's unresolved status has "held the whole region hostage," and that once Kosovo's independence has been recognized, "regional cooperation on freedom of movement—of people and goods—up to a Schengen-type regime, should be the first topic discussed." A political leader from Macedonia said that many problems facing individual countries can be better overcome through regional cooperation and integration; for example, Albania has problems with electricity, and Kosovo has power plants built during the time of Yugoslavia that are not being used, he noted.

A participant from Romania, however, pointed out that "it is strange to speak about regional cooperation in an environment where everyone is so concerned with building up segregation and separation," referring to the discussions of independence for Kosovo and Montenegro. A Croatian participant rejected this line of argument. "I have experience that separation is not contraindicated to cooperation," he stated, and "a clear definition of states will only contribute

to regional cooperation." He also took issue with the earlier remarks that the countries of the region should be concerned over settlements that would result in a "weak, nationalistic, and horrifying Serbia." "This is an argument that should not be raised in these discussions," he said. Such an outcome would cause problems for only one state in the world: Serbia itself.



Josip Paro.



From left to right: Ksenija Milivojevic and Bojan Pajtic.



From left to right: Arta Dade and Leon Malazogu.

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

*(English alphabetical order)*

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### Republic of Bulgaria

**Hristo Georgiev**, Director, European Directorate, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

### Republic of Croatia

**Josip Paro**, Ambassador to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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### Republic of Hungary

**Csaba Tabajdi**, Member, European Parliament

### Republic of Macedonia

**Slobodan Casule**, Member, Parliament of Macedonia; former Minister of Foreign Affairs

**Tihomir Ilievski**, Ambassador to Romania

**Andrej Zernovski**, Member, Parliament of Macedonia; Chair, EU-Macedonia Parliamentary Committee

### Republic of Poland

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### Romania

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**Alexandru Farcas**, Western Balkans and Regional Cooperation Directorate, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania

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**Irina Zidaru**, Western Balkans and Regional Cooperation Directorate, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania

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## Council of Europe

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**Alex Grigor'ev**, Director, Western Balkans (USA)

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