

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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Individuals and institutions wishing to receive PER publications should write to:

**PROJECT ON
ETHNIC
RELATIONS**



15 Chambers Street
Princeton, New Jersey 08542-3707, USA
Telephone: (609) 683-5666
Fax: (609) 683-5888
E-mail: per@per-usa.org
Web Site: www.per-usa.org

KOSOVO



FALL 2008-SUMMER 2009

**INTERETHNIC DIALOGUE
AND RECONCILIATION
IN KOSOVO**

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PREFACE

From September 2008 to August 2009, PER organized a series of activities in Kosovo aimed at improving relations between ethnic communities, especially between Albanians and Serbs. These interethnic political dialogues took place at a time when Kosovo's institutions were consolidating their administrative authority across Kosovo, including the Serb-majority areas. These measures included collection of utility bills and the issuing of personal documents, especially driver's licenses and license plates.

At this time, a growing number of Serbs are beginning to recognize the need to organize politically, start cooperating with Kosovo's institutions, and participate in Kosovo elections. It seems that more Serb politicians are emboldened to call on others to take part in the November 2009 elections and in the work of Kosovo's institutions. The position of Belgrade remains the major obstacle to this participation. However, Kosovo Serbs are increasingly eager to communicate to the government in Belgrade, and to the central bodies of their political parties, the opinion that the survival of Serbs in Kosovo depends on their cooperation with the Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo institutions.

The Kosovo Serbs remain generally uninformed of the political processes in Kosovo, including, most importantly, decentralization and the upcoming local elections. Crucially, they seem to be uninformed on how the institutions of Kosovo could resolve many of their problems including basic information about obtaining personal documents and their validity. Neither Serb leaders nor Kosovo government officials make sufficient efforts to inform the Kosovo Serb community. There seems to be a lack of clarity on technical issues connected with the upcoming elections, especially about Serb inclusion in the voter lists.



Participants at the April 2009 interethnic roundtable.

In the course of the first year of this PER program we have provided venues for dialogue between Serbs and Albanians, and for intra-Serb dialogue. By providing a format for debates on these difficult issues, PER has also been given the opportunity to inform the leadership of various communities about the political processes currently underway in Kosovo. PER worked on the central level in Pristina and in different municipalities with substantial Serbian population. PER tried to assist leaders of Kosovo's communities in indentifying issues on which interethnic cooperation is possible and implementation of which would improve the lives of Kosovo Serbs. Lastly, PER sought to strengthen interethnic trust needed for the future of Kosovo.

This report briefly outlines dialogues that were organized by PER within the scope of this project. The meetings were chaired either by PER's President or by PER's Executive Director. We would like to thank our PER staff in Princeton, Shpetim Gashi and Angelique Olmo, and in Pristina, Leon Malazogu and Malisa Venhari, for their contribution in planning and implementing the initiative. We would also like to thank Adriana Catherine Toma, our intern from Columbia University, for editing chapters of this report. Leon Malazogu, the Head of PER's office in Kosovo, is the main author of this report and the person responsible for organizing the meetings. Other PER staff contributed to the text as well. 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.

The initiative was generously funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). We would like to express our sincere appreciation to USAID and especially to the mission in Kosovo, to Patricia Rader, Urim Ahmeti, and Lejla Kolenovic. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Government of Kosovo for the support of the work of the Project on Ethnic Relations.

Livia B. Plaks, *President*
Alex N. Grigor'ev, *Executive Director*

Princeton, New Jersey
August 2009

CONSOLIDATION OF LEADERSHIP

Eight years after the end of the war, Kosovo's ethnic communities remain suspicious of each other and largely uncertain about the future. This uncertainty has been the leading cause of tensions between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. The legacy of the war has strengthened the widely held belief that domination of one community over another is the tradition in the region. But beyond the animosity between the Albanians and Serbs, a number of political factions within each ethnic group are still hindering the two sides from reaching any sort of consensus on their future.

Given the continued animosity between the two groups as well as the volatility of inner factions, PER organized intra-ethnic dialogues in order to solidify the unity of a particular side's positions as well as establish priorities for future dialogue. Two gathered leaders from the Kosovo Serb community, the others included Kosovo Albanian political leaders.

The four intra-ethnic sessions addressed the following questions: What has been done since Kosovo's proclamation of independence to improve interethnic relations? Are the current efforts to integrate the Serb community sufficient, and have there been any results? Do the Kosovo institutions need to modify their strategy for minority integration? Does EULEX deployment provide for new opportunities to implement the Ahtisaari plan, particularly the part pertaining to the implementation of minority legislation? What can be done to empower those Kosovo Serb politicians who favor dialogue and cooperation with the Albanians?

Meeting of Serb Political Leaders I

The objective of the first intra-Serb meeting, held on December 10, 2008, was to discuss the current situation of the Kosovo Serb community and its politics. The meeting was the first in PER's current project Interethnic Dialogue and Reconciliation in Kosovo, but it was also a continuation of past PER efforts to bring together Serbs who are part of Kosovo institutions and Serb politicians from outside of these institutions.

PER began the discussion by asking the participants where the situation was headed and if current strategies are producing desirable and sustainable outcomes. One senior participant stressed the need to build a stronger economic basis for greater political subjectivity of the Kosovo Serbs. He argued that strengthening Kosovo Serb leadership should work in line with Belgrade's strategy. "We have to persuade Belgrade that we are

the ones who serve as a strong pillar of Serbia's presence here," he said.

Some participants maintained negative views of decentralization while others saw it as essential to the preservation of Serb presence. In was decided that more conversations need to be held for Kosovo Serbs to reach any kind of consensus regarding decentralization.

Kosovo's status continues to make it difficult for the Serbs to consolidate their position with regards to political participation. Several participants expressed the need to participate in order to defend Serb interests.

2009 will have to be the year when we start to talk to the Albanians. If we don't talk to them, there won't be any Serbs left south of the Ibar River.

Participants from a party taking part in Kosovo institutions argued that because they have ended their boycott and agreed to participate in Kosovo institutions, they are instrumental in explaining to the newly deployed EU's Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) the needs of the Serbs and how best to implement new

policies effecting Serb communities. They see EULEX as important in bringing the rule of law to Kosovo.

The SLS leaders complained that they face limitations due to other Serb parties continuing the boycott, and that they are ignored by the Serbian media. Others pointed out that it is SLS's own responsibility to reach out to other Kosovo Serbs and that SLS leaders do little to repair the current tensions among Serb factions.

Participants stated that 2009 will be a turning point for the Kosovo Serb leadership. As one of the leaders outside of the Kosovo institutions pointed out, "2009 will have to be the year when we start to talk to the Albanians. If we don't talk to them, there won't be any Serbs left south of the Ibar River," he concluded.

At the meeting it was clear that the prospect for political coalitions among the Serbs remains elusive, but that a greater understanding of the practical issues affecting the Serb community may build cooperation on particular issues.

Meeting of Albanian Political Leaders I

Later on December 10, 2008, PER convened an intra-Albanian discussion. The President of Kosovo, who argued that there was no longer a need to

hold intra-Albanian discussions, opened the meeting. It was time for Kosovo to move forward with joint Serb and Albanian sessions, he suggested.

He emphasized that EULEX should have one face for all Kosovo citizens and not different ones for Serbs and Albanians. He also asked that the international community clarify its relationship with Serbia. According to the President of Kosovo, Serbia must prove that it is contributing to the internal stability of Kosovo.

It is important to note that while they were very candid and self-critical in the intra-ethnic roundtable, the Serb participants held more of a firm stance vis-à-vis the Albanian counterparts.

Based on several conversations held with Kosovo Serbs, a government minister stated that the Serbs have a dilemma when it comes to integration. They understand that integration is necessary for them to move forward with Kosovo, but it comes at the price of being labeled a traitor. In order to avoid this unfair label and maintain power in local communities, most Serbs refuse to acknowledge Kosovo's government and take part in elections, insist on maintaining their own government institutions which are financed by the Serbian government, and continue to provide daily municipal services outside of the Kosovo government's authority (a.k.a., parallel structures).

Many argue that since financial support from Belgrade makes up the large part of their livelihood, the interruption of parallel structures would do more to disrupt Serb communities than it would to benefit them. The minister wished that Belgrade would change its behavior both in Kosovo and internationally. He also asked that EULEX do more to help resolve the issue of parallel structures.

The chair asked one of the leading opposition representatives if a common strategy could be developed between the government and the opposition regarding the integration of the Serb community. The opposition leader replied that he agreed with the general political consensus that it was necessary to win over the Serbs in Kosovo. This would finally close the chapter on Kosovo's independence and open a new agenda focused on building a prosperous European Kosovo. He added that the issue of integrating Serbs is the most vital element of Kosovo's foreign policy.

Another representative of the opposition suggested that Kosovo authorities compile a list of accomplishments so that it is clearer what actually has been done. The representative said, "Things need to be measured

and quantified. So far as I can tell nothing is happening besides rhetoric that they [Serbs] should look towards us. If we say that this is the number one issue in Kosovo, we should not just rely on rhetoric.”

Meeting of Serb Political Leaders II

On May 28, 2009, PER convened a second intra-Serb meeting in Kosovo. One of the greatest benefits of the meeting was that it allowed Serb politicians who have ended their boycotts and are actively taking part in Kosovo’s institutions to clarify rumors or misconceptions about their political participation. It also gave them an opportunity to explain the logic behind this new tactic. Upon hearing this reasoning, a member of the Serbian Socialist Party stated that he continued to believe that dialogue does nothing to improve the situation, but admits causes no harm.

The practical issue of electricity remains contentious for Serbs in Kosovo, and the aspects of payment and supply dominated the roundtable. KEK, Kosovo’s electricity provider, awaits privatization under the purview of the Kosovo government’s decentralization plan. For several years now, often since the war, the vast majority of Serbs in Kosovo have either refused or have been unable to pay their bills, and thus have accrued heavy debts. KEK has begun cutting off electricity to those Serbs who are not able to pay their balance, and thus whole communities of Serbs are without power.

One Serbian Radical Party (SRS) official criticized KEK for not having invested enough in the electricity grid that has been maintained by Serb workers these many years. He and his constituents were surprised to receive notice of payments without having signed any contracts. He pledged to do his best to encourage his constituents to repay debts in installments, but that the terms of these repayments needs to be renegotiated according to mutually agreed upon contracts. Several Serbs argued that for them to be able to pay their debts, they need to be in a better socio-economic situation and were grateful to the Government of Serbia for continuing to pay their salaries.

A Serb representative of the government explained to participants the agreement that was reached with KEK. The government agreed with KEK that only current bills would require payment, and that the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare of Kosovo would give 20 Euros to those who cannot afford to pay, and the Serbian Government would help with the remainder. The debts were to be frozen and once a household

pays for a year, the debt was to be fully forgiven and cease to appear on the bill. Moreover, after two months of regular payment, the household would pass into a designated “zone A,” which means they would receive regular electricity supply.

Those Serbs working with Kosovo’s institutions blamed Belgrade and their radical Serb counterparts for not respecting a previous agreement with KEK, and cautioned against doing so a second time since this destroys the credibility of community leaders who negotiate on their behalf.

Other participants voiced criticism against Belgrade for not giving better support during this situation. Several reportedly asked for advice from Belgrade, as high as the president of the Serbian parliament, but were told to address the problem at the local level. Most criticized Belgrade, first for destroying every possibility for the Kosovo Serbs to function alone, and then leaving them without any support. Belgrade was not accused of intentionally conducting this policy but rather failing to ascertain the significance of the Albanian factor. “It is dangerous to underestimate the fact that Albanians are a factor here,” one participant said, while another added that the electricity problem is emblematic of the consequences all must suffer when Pristina/Prishtina and Belgrade refuse to work together.

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This also broached the topic of what powers and competences the Serb parallel leadership, elected in Serbia-sponsored elections in May 2008, actually has. While some parallel municipalities have more power than others, most agreed that the only exit strategy from their current untenable situation is to take part in Kosovo’s upcoming local elections in November 2009. They agreed that the political message of the parallel institutions is important, but from a practical standpoint, they have not been very successful.

The participants from Gjilan/Gnjilane focused on the issue of quarries. Participants reported that on the highway between Pristina and Gjilan, a number of companies started developing stone quarries in close proximity to the villages. They reported environmental and health concern – there have been no harvests due to dust which has landed on their fields. The elected mayor of Gjilan and the parallel “Serbian mayor” (in his

political party capacity), in a rare show of unity, traveled together to petition the Prime Minister of Kosovo to stop the quarries. The Prime Minister agreed to form a multiethnic commission to establish the environmental impact of the quarries. More than half a year later, the commission has not drawn any conclusions and is increasingly falling under criticism for being comprised of only Albanians. While Serbs praised the mayor of Gjilan as supportive, they were disappointed that the issue has yet to be resolved.

Most agreed that having legitimate leaders elected was necessary. Credible Serb leaders were needed at the local level even if their only authority is in the raising of specific Serb-related initiatives. Many participants perceived decentralization as an economic opportunity that would be missed if they were to continue with the boycott and refuse to take part in its implementation.

SLS representatives were accused by some as being Albanian sympathizers because of their entry into Kosovo institutions while others maintained the boycott. Others respected their courage to participate when it was politically disadvantageous for them to do so. One called them a 'necessary evil,' because of the need to engage with Kosovo government officials. Another came to their defense saying that it was easy to be a 'patriot' who withdraws, and more difficult to be labeled a 'traitor' in order to get the best out of a system at the right time. For him, the key challenge for the Kosovo Serb leadership was how to create and implement solutions without being labeled as 'traitors.'

The chair stressed to the participants that the Kosovo Serbs are in race with time – they have been talking about the same set of issues for ten years, and in the mean time their situation is not improving but getting worse. He urged the participants to stop the cycle of missed opportunities and invited them to engage with Kosovo Albanians on practical issues so that their communities may benefit from tangible results.

Meeting of Albanian Political Leaders II

On May 29, 2009, a member of the PER staff opened the second intra-Albanian roundtable by briefing the participants on the issues raised during the second intra-Serb roundtable the previous day. The participants remarked that the Serbs' increasing disillusionment with Belgrade and

their parallel structures was encouraging, and provided further incentive for them to present Pristina in a more positive light.

A mayor from one of the municipalities reported on his discussions with local Serbs. He recognized that Serbs in his district remain hostage to Belgrade's interests and evaluated their position as unenviable. He felt that he had made headway in presenting KEK as a non-ethnic specific service provider, but cited the stone quarries as an issue that requires a higher level of problem solving – it cannot be resolved at the local level.

All participants at the meeting declared it was in everyone's best interest not to attack fellow Albanian politicians for their conciliatory measures towards the Serbs. When it came to the subject of Serb integration, both the opposition and members of the party in power agreed that it was not useful to malign these actions for political gain. "Kosovo's overall interests are too important to compromise," voiced one participant.

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A deputy mayor reported that many Serbs in his municipality have lost faith in the parallel structures and are asking for various services from the Kosovo municipality. The parallel mayor is threatened by this trend and, in order to reappear as his community's leader, he is becoming more violent and is presenting himself as a defender of Serb nationalist interest.

A senior official in charge of local government described the activities that the authorities are conducting with regard to the implementation of decentralization. He reported over 300 applications by the Serbs for municipal preparatory teams. The calendar of the transfer of powers depends exclusively on the absorption capacity of these groups.

Several participants stressed the importance of funding. Without greater economic assistance, they do not have the ability to invest in neither Albanian nor Serb areas. While they agreed to talk to Serbs of all backgrounds, since parallel structures are a part of the reality, they highlighted how difficult it is to integrate the Serbs by kind words only. Only investments, in the old as well as new municipalities, can push the process along, they agreed.

INTERETHNIC MUNICIPALITIES: COMMON PROBLEMS AND PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Recognizing that community needs will only be met once Albanian and Serb leaders work together on practical issues, PER organized a series of interethnic roundtables comprised of Albanian and Serb political representatives from specific municipalities. PER selected Novo Brdo/Novoerde, Strpce/Shterpce, Gjilan/Gnjilane, and Gracanica/Gracanice as the multiethnic areas in most need of interethnic consensus building.

The objective of the meetings was to establish a rapport between influential Kosovo Albanian and Serb leaders so that they might collude on solving shared problems, and make recommendations for realistic and pragmatic opportunities for future interethnic integration.

These roundtables were the first Albanian-Serb dialogues of this type in Kosovo since the declaration of independence in February 2007. The discussions were off-the-record and not covered by the media, which allowed for sincere critique of actual problems.

Novo Brdo/Novoerde

On April 23, 2009, PER organized a roundtable in Novo Brdo that focused on identifying certain areas of mutual interest that could, in the process of working together, improve interethnic relations as well as the lives of citizens living in the municipality.

The chair opened the roundtable by stressing the need to revitalize dialogue at the local level. The chair then asked both sides to examine the factors influencing the engagement of Serbs in political institutions. Albanian and Serb representatives from Novo Brdo prioritized agriculture, education, healthcare, and rural tourism as the most important issues for the municipality.

Albanian participants addressed the unhelpful position of the parallel structures – those Serb-only institutions created to undermine the authority of legally elected Albanians. A senior official argued that Serbs in Novo Brdo have no reason to fear discrimination.

That said, all agreed that very little would be accomplished by forcing parallel offices out. Instead, they expressed the belief that a stronger Serb turnout during the next election would bring these parallel institutions to their natural end. However, the longer the parallel structures are in

operation, the more damage they will do to the authority of the Kosovo government, both at the local and national level. With this in mind, all Albanian participants expressed willingness to integrate the Serbs into formalized, legal institutions.

A Serb participant said that most Serbs want to participate in the coming elections. He stated that the role of the President of Serbia was extremely important and expected that he would support their participation. A Serb from Pristina said that Belgrade is reluctant to openly tell people to take part in elections. He argued that there must be a way for a Serb politician to claim that he recognizes the new institutions and that he intends to participate in legal elections without the axiom that he supports and accepts independence as well.

A member of the PER staff expressed concern for those Serb politicians who face persecution by their radical Serb counterparts for participating in Kosovo's political process, but explained that it is vital for moderate Serbs to face down these threats and demonstrate what can be achieved through engaged involvement and participation – only then will the municipality be rid of radicalism and its harmful effects.

Strpce/Shterpce

On April 23, 2009, in the town of Strpce, PER arranged for a multiethnic roundtable discussion on the municipality's financial state, as well as the effect of interethnic relations on economic development, especially in the area of tourism. Even though it was not unexpected, PER was disappointed that Serb leaders chose to boycott the joint meeting and instead agreed only to two privately held sessions. The agenda for both meetings included the following questions: what is the current level of tourism investment in Strpce and how can it be increased? How will the future privatization of Brezovica's tourist center affect the people living in the municipality? Do new investments in the municipality benefit the Serb and Albanian communities equally? Is the existence of parallel institutions hampering economic development?

In Strpce, a local Serb entrepreneur with political experience brought up the lack of economic and political opportunities as well as “unresolved”

The longer the parallel structures are in operation, the more damage they will do to the authority of the Kosovo government.

property disputes. He argued that despite international pressure, little will improve until political headway is made between Serbia and Kosovo. Even so, the same participant admitted that there were some examples of cooperation between Serb business owners and the Kosovo government – for example, he was able to obtain a certificate from a Kosovo Ministry to run his hotel's ski lifts. But in the end, he insisted that future cooperation would depend on signals sent by the Serbian president.

During the Albanian meeting, one participant stated that Strpce was the only municipality in Kosovo in which not all Albanians returned after the war, but at the same time it is the calmest municipality of all without a single interethnic incident. This statement seemed to contradict the fact that out of all the PER organized interethnic meetings, the Serbs in Strpce were the only ones who did not show up for a dialogue with the Albanians.

Albanian officials suggested meeting with the town's Serb leaders outside of Strpce and preferably outside of Kosovo. It is clear that much more must be accomplished during individual meetings and that intra-Serb discussions should be held to introduce Serbs from Strpce to Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo.

Gjilan/Gnjilane I

The chair opened the Gjilan municipality meeting on April 24, 2009, by revisiting the issues previously discussed during earlier roundtables, and by putting pressure on municipality officials to present what inroads they had made over the past few months.

A top official explained that while the previous discussions were illuminating, impediments to integration were primarily of a political nature rather than practical – and politics over the past two months were the same as usual. The official asked the participants to acknowledge the existence of common problems that result from the proximity of the communities and to focus on the issues that pertain to all. In terms of the practical issues to be addressed, he suggested integration, the right to work, public services, administration, and other issues that permeate municipal boundaries.

One Serb participant agreed with the official that most practical issues are dependent upon politics. She accused the central authorities for conveniently identifying “friendly Serbs.” In order to address decentralization and other political issues, the municipality must work with Serbs

who have the support of the entire community, not just those who are quick to reconcile.

Another Serb participant argued that Pristina is trying to get the Serbs to participate without Belgrade, but that this is impossible. The official replied that while he was aware that decentralization was dependent on Belgrade's position, and that there should exist a desire among the Kosovo Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians for the political and territorial accommodation of everyone. ***The municipality must work with Serbs who have the support of the entire community, not just those who are quick to reconcile.*** “To be frank with you, the Ahtisaari proposal, with regard to the five municipalities here, is an extraordinary proposal for the Serbs, and I am sure that the Serb side knows this,” the official said.

The chair asked the Serbs to state three practical issues that they believe would be useful for their Albanian colleagues to address. The primary issue that all agreed on regarded the stone quarry situated between three Serb villages and one Albanian village.

The President of PER informed the participants that PER had discussed the issue of the stone quarry with the Prime Minister who said that a commission had been established to assess the level of damage and determine actions to be taken. One of the most influential Serb officials representing the region of Gjilan for the government of Serbia expected an immediate solution to the problem of the quarry. He praised PER as the only organization that had already spoken twice to the Serbs about the issue.

The second issue raised was the right to reassert property. Serb participants mentioned several examples of Serbs not being able to reclaim their own property. The mayor asked that in the future a copy be sent to him for each case so that he can properly address property concerns.

The municipal administration was the third most contentious issue. Personal documentation, and in particular marriage certificates from Serbia are not being recognized by Kosovo administrators. Serb participants complained that officials in the Gjilan municipality would ask couples to divorce in Serbia and to get remarried in Kosovo in order to obtain legal marriage certificates. A leading municipal official thanked the Serbs for bringing this issue to his attention and determined to solve the problem in a timely manner.

The participants concluded that they were pleased with the discussion of the issues of property and personal documents, but felt that the problems concerning the stone quarry and electricity are likely to reoccur.

Gjilan/Gnjilane II

Given the success of the first meeting, on June 23, 2009, PER held a second roundtable on local issues in Gjilan. The discussion centered on practical issues, especially in regards to the issuance of personal documents.

A number of Serbs in the Gjilan area announced they are ready to take Kosovo government issued personal documents, but they are concerned that the Kosovo authorities are pressuring them too hard to accept the Kosovo documents and penalizing them for not accepting them immediately. The Serbs asked for a period of three to five months in order to let them sort out the problem and get better informed. They favor establishment of more local offices in Serb-majority areas for issuing such documents. Establishment of an office in Partes was mentioned in particular.

A PER staff member cautioned that putting out ultimatums to the Serbs before the November elections may be counterproductive. Instead, efforts should be made to reach out to the Serbs and constructively encourage them to take up Kosovo documents, especially those needed for voting.

Local Albanian participants reiterated several times that these are technical problems and solutions to them can and should be found. It seems that these issues are unnecessarily politicized and there is a danger that this might continue for as long as the political disagreement between Kosovo and Serbia goes on.

A PER staff member advised the Serbs within the institutions to discuss with the Ministry of Interior and other sectors of the government the ways of handling these seemingly technical issues. It is important to highlight that the decision not to accept some documents such as driver's licenses issued by the parallel institutions was perceived by the Serbs as intentional pressure. Improper handling could create an unwelcome backlash from the Serbs. This is one of the issues that the Serbs in the institutions can and should resolve to boost their own legitimacy among fellow Serbs.

Gracanica/Gracanice

On June 22, 2009, PER organized a roundtable in Caglavica for Albanian and Serb leaders from the municipality of Gracanica. Because of the central role of Gracanica for the Kosovo Serbs living south of the Ibar River, and the fact that the participants from Gracanica are politicians whose influence surpasses Gracanica itself, it was a challenge to confine the discussion to purely local issues.

The majority of the Serb participants voiced their readiness to discuss the modalities of decentralization for Gracanica with Kosovo authorities. They understood that such a discussion would encourage a growing number of Gracanica Serbs to take part in the local elections in November. The government representatives assured the Serbs that if they were to participate, the authorities would stay committed to decentralization.

Gracanica Serbs continued to point out the inequalities of infrastructural development in Kosovo between Serb and Albanian inhabited areas, particularly between Gracanica and Pristina. Whereas during previous roundtables there has been vigorous opposition to Pristina's investments in any Serb areas, at this meeting they were criticized for not making investments.

As in the other municipalities, a good part of the roundtable discussion was focused on problems pertaining to electricity. Serbs agreed to immediately begin paying for electricity but disagreed on the details of the payments. They continue to worry that KEK will reactivate old debts at a later date.



Left to Right: Pieter Feith, Tom Yazdgerdi, Livia Plaks, Sadri Ferati, and Mahir Yagcilar.

POLITICAL WILL AND DECENTRALIZATION

Although the implementation of decentralization is a priority for Kosovo's institutions, all agree that it is difficult to implement it successfully without Serb participation. Many Serbs reject the Ahtisaari plan for decentralization not because it is inadequate, but because it is part of the plan that allowed Kosovo to become independent.

While it is the official policy of the vast majority of Serb politicians in Kosovo to reject the Ahtisaari plan, many admit that decentralization would benefit their communities. They have yet to figure out, however, how to cooperate with the Kosovo government with regards decentralization without recognizing Kosovo's independence.

Despite this dilemma, a number of Serb leaders are increasingly willing to engage in informal discussions with Kosovo government officials on some aspects of decentralization, such as preparing infrastructure and training

The resolution of even simple problems are too often dismissed as impossible due to the high level of distrust between Serb and Albanian communities in Kosovo, as well as throughout the region.

staff for new municipalities. To solidify the momentum of these new avenues for dialogue, PER convened a series of interethnic roundtables specifically organized to address current day-to-day issues affecting the lives of Kosovo's citizens, and how to ameliorate them.

The resolution of even simple problems are too often dismissed as impossible due to the high level of

distrust between Serb and Albanian communities in Kosovo, as well as throughout the region. It is widely understood that an improvement in the relations between the two ethnic groups will assist in the future of Kosovo's political and economic growth.

Political Will: Cooperation and Compromise

On February 11, 2008, PER's president opened the meeting by addressing the lack of a positive message from Belgrade in terms of Serb participation in Kosovo's political life. While the focus of Albanian and Serb politicians has been to influence Belgrade to be more constructive, the chair asked the participants if they could think of constructive ways to deal with problems in the absence of such a message. Due to the lack of

trust, she asked if anything could be done to improve the general atmosphere ahead in view of the upcoming elections. All participants agreed that the current status quo could only worsen the situation.

One senior Serb leader did not believe that the lack of a positive message from Belgrade was the primary reason for the worsening of the situation. He defended the parallel institutions, since without these institutions many Serbs would have been left without vital services. He replied in detail to a request for full knowledge of how the parallel institutions are financed, arguing that everything is transparent and all money transported to Kosovo from the Serbian government is reported to the Kosovo customs office.

All participants agreed that the current status quo could only worsen the situation.

A senior Serb leader expressed his dissatisfaction with the Ahtisaari Proposal as it does not address their "institutional problem," – meaning that, "Albanians could always overrule it. In the absence of an institutional solution, we always have to go through the international community," he said.

A government minister said that when it comes to decentralization, everything is up for negotiation except the authority that implements it. The very question of who should implement decentralization in Kosovo undermines the authority of Kosovo's institutions, he argued. He continued that there is no other country where municipalities have so much power and such a high percentage of the state budget. He agreed that "institutional protection" is necessary but that it is already provided in Kosovo's new constitution and laws.

The leader of one of the main caucus groups assured Serb participants that these new laws had been previously agreed upon and would not change with a new government. This government can implement the package but has no right to change it. The Kosovo Serbs are the only ones who can either facilitate the



Left to Right: Halil Matoshi and Randjel Nojkic.

implementation of the Ahtisaari package or destroy it. The credibility of Kosovo Serbs can only be measured by the results of the elections.

A senior Albanian leader questioned the Serbs' strategy of boycotting the elections and asked them not to interfere with those Serbs who have chosen to participate. While one Serb participant drew a parallel between the Albanians' successful boycott during the nineties, he made a distinction. The Albanian participant argued that during the Albanian boycott, Yugoslavia was falling apart and Albanians were part of a larger process which is not the case with Kosovo today. As a result, he concluded, boycotts will be less successful as Kosovo gets stronger.

One Kosovo Albanian politician attempted to redefine the Serb interest for ordinary issues. Apart from pleas regarding specific rights, he asked the Albanians to understand that the Serb community lives in a very difficult situation and they continue to find it difficult to adapt to the new Kosovo. They are under pressure to live in Kosovo, and are placated by pecuniary assistance from Belgrade. However, he warned that Belgrade should not use local Serbs as a tool to undermine independence.

An Albanian mayor from a northern municipality recognized that historically Belgrade has been the traditional political center for all Serbs in former Yugoslavia. However, he observed, this has changed in Croatia

Politicians should focus on the practical needs of the Serb community instead of rhetoric.

and, to some degree, in Bosnia too. He assured the Serbs that Belgrade would continue to play an integral part in the lives of the Kosovo Serbs, but that it needed to take a step back. A former Prime Minister of

Kosovo said, "Serbs in Croatia would never have accepted Zagreb as their new political center had Serbia not told them to."

"Everyone wants to do politics, but no one wants to deal with the real problems of the communities," a Serb participant observed. There was general agreement that politicians should focus on the practical needs of the Serb community instead of rhetoric.

Improving Interethnic Cooperation in Kosovo

On April 22, 2009, PER organized a gathering in Pristina for Albanian and Serb leaders as well as international representatives to address the following questions: what is the current state of interethnic relations in

Kosovo, and what can be done to further improve them? How can cooperation between Albanians and Serbs be increased at both a central and local level with the goal of resolving daily issues – for example, electricity usage and needs? How can the international community contribute to fostering greater levels of cooperation between the Albanian and Serb communities in Kosovo?

The Prime Minister of Kosovo and PER's president opened the meeting, and PER's president chaired the proceedings. The Prime Minister indicated readiness on the part of the government to do everything possible to facilitate the return of Kosovo Serbs to areas where they are comfortable returning. He cited examples of reconstruction projects under way in Laplje Selo, Novo Brdo and Kamenica and asked Serb leaders to encourage their communities to take part in decentralization as an essential step in creating a multiethnic community.

A consensus was reached that Serbs should not pay previously accumulated debts to Kosovo's electricity provider (KEK). One Serb said that KEK officers should determine new balances only after old debts have been forgiven. In order to begin payments, some Serb participants thought that a second provider should be introduced. Another participant suggested introducing pre-paid electricity cards without any national labels. The mayor of a northern town suggested that KEK reach out to Serb areas through sub-contractors.

An international participant reminded the others that the energy situation in Kosovo is in crisis, and that it is mostly the Serbs who are no longer paying. KEK is ready to forgive most debts, and would schedule the payment to include only what has been accrued during the last 12



Left to Right: Momcilo Trajkovic, Bajram Rexhepi, Sadri Ferati, Livia Plaks, and Slobodan Petrovic.

months. In response to requests that Serbs return to work at KEK, she replied that since KEK is undergoing privatization it is more likely they will be firing people than they will be hiring. Already they are aware they will have to shed 3,000-4,000 employees from KEK's payroll.

Vehicle license plates, while seemingly innocuous, continues to cause problems, especially up in the north. The problem is that in order to have a legal vehicle in Kosovo, a car must be registered with proper Kosovo authorities and obtain Kosovo government issued license plates. Most Serbs prefer to keep their cars registered in Serbia and use old Serbian license plates for Kosovo.

For many years, this was not a problem in so much as there was little the authorities could do about vehicle registration, much less had an interest to. But since the widespread push to establish a Kosovo government rule of law, old Serbian license plates are increasingly considered illegal in Kosovo. Vehicles with old Serbian Kosovo license plates are sometimes ticketed and/or confiscated.

A simple answer would be to insist the Serbs acquiesce to Kosovo vehicle registration laws and obtain Kosovo license plates. But were they to do this, they would lose the ability to cross the border into Serbia, where Kosovo plates are not recognized – a vital transit for many businesses and families who live in the north.

One participant proposed that the license plates of Serbia and Kosovo be the same so that people would be able to move more freely. A mayor of a northern Kosovo town stressed that until the plates of Serbia and Kosovo are mutually accepted, driving problems will continue to plague his divided town.

A Serb engaged in the government in Pristina urged a member of the opposition to use his authority to influence local authorities to eliminate obstacles impeding returns. Although returns may seem a smooth process at the central level, more than one municipality has stalled progress due to numerous reasons, often insignificant.

Another Serb politician observed that the discussions on this issue have changed from asking Serbs to return to Kosovo to asking those already in Kosovo to stay. He was referring to the international community's unofficial shift from prioritizing the return of Serb refugees to focusing on developing the communities of those Serbs who never left.

Another Serb reminded the participants that while the Serbian Government's Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija is making lists of those who are serious about returning, not much can be done unless there is engagement with the Kosovo Government's Ministry of Community and Returns, which neither side has been willing to do. In essence, the participant reminded others that if the Kosovo government is serious about returning Serb refugees to Kosovo, it needs to begin discussions with the Serbian government. Until one side acquiesces and engages the other, the issue of returns will remain stalled.

A participant from the north urged the other participants to utilize the presence of Kosovo's senior leadership to make small positive gestures to help "keep up the pace." A long-time Serb leader urged that the message to the public must be that "although we do not agree on some things, we have to talk." He called on Pristina and Belgrade to assist in the creation of a single political body that would unite different political factions of the Kosovo Serbs.

The boycott of Kosovo institutions continues to be a contentious issue in the Serb community. "We lost a lot by not being present in the Kosovo institutions," continued a Serb participant, "our complaints are now often sidelined." Once a Serb party (Independent Liberal Party) broke the boycott and entered the institutions, 150 houses were built and 160 Serbs received employment. This same Serb party drew unprecedented support from other Serb participants at the roundtable who argued that despite the difficult situation, it is always better to have someone on the inside of the political arena.

We lost a lot by not being present in the Kosovo institutions.

The dissolution of the parallel institutions remains unlikely so long as the Serbian government continues to pay disproportionately high salaries to those Serbs who maintain control of their municipalities and refuse to acknowledge the Kosovo government's authority. A participant pointed out that if Serbs were to leave their Serbian jobs and accept legal positions in Kosovo's institutions, they would forgo three-fourths of their income. The same participant claimed that Serbs would only end the boycott once they received assurances that the Kosovo government's salaries would be raised to at least 50% of what the Serbs are currently receiving.

It must be emphasized that this was the first time that senior Serb political leaders from Kosovo sat at the table with the Prime Minister and addressed questions to him in front of the media (present only for the first part of the meeting).

Interethnic Collaboration

On July 23, 2009, the third interethnic meeting of PER's Kosovo project was held in Pristina. It marked the culmination of the past year's efforts to meet with Albanian and Serb leaders separately to solidify their positions before gathering for joint sessions.

The meeting began with a discussion of the recent statement made by the President of Serbia regarding the fact that no conditions were present in Kosovo for the Serbs to not take part in the local elections. This statement was originally interpreted as silent assent, but later interpretations by Serb intellectuals were characterized as regretful and adding a negative meaning to this statement.

While most Serb participants reported that they have to listen to the voice of Belgrade, there seemed to be an explicit preference that Kosovo Serb leaders decide on more issues by themselves. It was also noted that if the dispute on electricity is any guide, Belgrade is likely to ultimately blame the local Serb leaders for not taking responsibility for their own actions, or lack thereof.

It was clear that a group of credible Kosovo Serbs has to call for an end to the political boycott of local elections if there is to be widespread participation.

A Serb leader from southern Kosovo criticized most Kosovo Serb leaders for their lack of courage in telling Belgrade what they think, accusing them of earning their leadership by being obedient and accurately quoting Belgrade's statements.

It was clear that a group of credible Kosovo Serbs has to call for an end to the political boycott of local elections if there is to be widespread participation – but that is where consensus stopped.

Several participants concluded that the Serbs south of the Ibar River would take part in elections simply because they have no other alternative. Since they are local elections, the first reaction could be that it is easier to persuade Serbs to vote than in case of a national vote.

Ample advice was put forward that the most effective way to deal with the Kosovo authorities and get the best out of them was to impose the presence of the Serbs within the institutions. At least three SLS leaders presented evidence that by being inside the political process they could implement Serb-friendly policies and channel resources to Serb areas. One example presented was SLS's achievement in obtaining a much better proposal regarding electricity than the final one negotiated with the Serbian Government's Coordination Center for Kosovo.

A representative of the Kosovo government advised the Serbs how to make the best of their difficult situation. He asked them to be pragmatic politicians and to search for

Those who do not participate do not exist politically.

the best possible outcome. If they wait for their preferred outcome, they may lose what they can get now. He said that those who do not participate do not exist politically. Moreover, he argued that the Ahtisaari Plan might make Serbs who accept it be labeled as traitors, but that many Albanian politicians have survived this labeling for accepting the same plan, and the Serbs will too once their communities see the benefits of decentralization.

Non-Serb Minorities in Kosovo: Integrating Communities

On June 24, 2009, in Pristina PER organized a meeting that addressed daily problems confronting non-Serb minority communities in Kosovo, and how Kosovo institutions and the international community can help integrate these often forgotten minorities into Kosovo's society.

The upcoming local elections in Kosovo and the consequential effects on the minority communities were included in the discussion. It was also discussed whether or not the Kosovo government was doing enough to resolve the problems confronting minority communities and alternatively if the representatives of the minority communities are cooperating fully with Kosovo's institutions.

The main argument was that Kosovo has completed adequate legislation for all ethnic communities in Kosovo, but that implementation has been lagging behind. The participants were generally satisfied with the legal framework and statements, but they thought that after ten years the rhetoric must pave the way for addressing problems more seriously. They

agreed that there is no reason why the excellent legislation that Kosovo has adopted should not be implemented immediately.

The Ministry of Communities and Returns and the Office for Communities of the Prime Minister's Office came under heavy criticism, and were accused of focusing mostly on the Serbs and neglecting the rest. Not only was most of the funding being spent on the Serbs, but they are also benefiting the most from decentralization.

All communities should unite for the next local elections.

The Ministry was also accused of distributing funding for communities in drastic disproportion to the size and needs of communities, e.g. €160,000 for the Gorani and €40,000 for the much more numerous Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians, despite the fact that there is a Governmental Strategy for the latter.

A novelty of this roundtable was the presence of the Montenegrin community. While it existed in Kosovo during the times of former Yugoslavia, it has since been subsumed under the Serb community. They reported the problem of not being at all present in any of the laws, hence not having any quota privileges, or any other benefits. The representative of this community in the roundtable called attention to the fact that Montenegro is now a country and that Montenegrins in Kosovo must be equal to other communities. He vowed to prove that his community is sizable in the upcoming elections of November. He added his belief that all communities should unite for the next local elections.

Promotion of Interethnic Dialogue and Reconciliation

Simply engaging locals in the process of reconciliation is not sufficient in Kosovo. Because of the depth of the problems in this small country, locals need to become the main stakeholders for community development. In essence, they need to become the owners of the integration process.

In order to foster this momentum, a general modification in behavior needs to occur throughout Kosovo, both in the Albanian and Serb communities. They must first change the misperceptions each community has about the other.

A Forum for Dialogue and Reconciliation comprised of Albanian and Serb influential representatives, including ethnic relations experts, civil society

activists, and local businessmen is one of the best means of accomplishing these goals. The origins of this Forum stem from a previous PER event during which several Serb and Albanian participants persistently argued about the need for a Forum of influential individuals who had the ability to contribute to interethnic reconciliation through dialogue.

Forum for Dialogue

On April 23, 2009, PER organized a meeting consisting of a select group of Albanian and Serb intellectuals to discuss the formation of the Forum for Dialogue. On May 27, 2009, PER organized a second preparatory.

During both meetings, there were various opinions about which issues the Forum should tackle. Some claimed that ultimately the Forum should bring Pristina and Belgrade together for a serious dialogue. Others suggested that the goal should be to bring the radicals from both sides to the same table. There were also some who argued that the goal should be to create a relaxed atmosphere and to present topics before the public.

I lost four members of my family. If I can look forward, everyone can.

An influential Albanian intellectual thought that the main message of such a project should be the further exploration of the main interests of the average Serb citizen living in Kosovo. A Serb participant urged the Forum to contribute towards decentralization and to push greater participation in upcoming elections.

All agreed, however, that to accomplish any of these goals, the Forum would first have to reconcile the conflicting sides within Kosovo by influencing political elites, civil society and the people at large.

All participants agreed that the Forum should be comprised of a wide range of individuals, including those who have personally suffered from past events. "I lost four members of my family. If I can look forward, everyone can," one participant said.

Many participants agreed that it would not be useful to replicate the membership structure of other forums consisting of only non-government organizations and academics. While these gatherings serve their purpose, PER's strength is in its ability to convene political leaders – this will set it apart from other collaborative efforts, as well as provide an additional level of authority.

There were several participants who expressed concern about the inclusion of politicians and argued against their participation. They suggested that it would be best if politicians were included by meeting-by-meeting invitation only. A consensus was reached that politicians who exhibit moderate platforms and who garner influence should be invited.

Another contentious discussion was whether to include other minority communities in the Forum. Most participants felt that it would be best to have an Albanian-Serb Forum at the beginning and maybe open up to other communities at a later stage. The advantage of not including them was to get to the crux of the problem directly, namely the relations between Serbs and Albanians. One Serb official argued that “other communities look towards us to reconcile, so we should deal with this directly and without them.” The inclusion of other communities might soften the impact or lower the pressure on some participants, making progress difficult.

There were several names proposed for the Forum. Some suggested calling it the Serb-Albanian or Albanian-Serb Forum. However, most participants were against labeling altogether. Also discussed were “The Forum for Dialogue” or “The Forum for Dialogue and Reconciliation.”

To achieve sustainability, “we need to pass through several cycles of dialogue,” a senior Albanian civil society leader said. He proposed a specific agenda to hold three roundtables in Albanian areas and three in Serbian areas. He recommended not spending energy in developing an organizational structure or particular profile, but rather to have a coordinative structure leaving institutionalization to the future. He advised that the meetings focus on limited issues, the resolution of which would carry significant impact. A suggested topic for the first meeting was: “The Need for Dialogue and Reconciliation.”

A senior Serb participant argued that while Kosovo Serbs cannot accept independence they must learn to assent to it. Hopefully through the advent of the Forum, Serbs in Kosovo as well as Belgrade will learn how to move forward without sacrificing their cultural identity.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

From past experience, PER knows that one ethnic group is often more comfortable engaging with their perceived antagonists outside of their home setting – it is not uncommon to have more genuine and practical discussions in a regional context. Over the past eight years, sessions with regional participation played an important role in strengthening the intra-Kosovo dialogue, and it is believed that this same method will be of use when consolidating interethnic cooperation in Kosovo.

With this in mind, PER organized a regional roundtable in Kolasin, Montenegro, on June 20, 2009, that allowed Serb and Albanian representatives to exchange best practices of interethnic cooperation with counterparts from different multi-ethnic municipalities in the Western Balkans. The meeting provided an opportunity for Albanian and Serb leaders from Gjilan, Novo Brdo, Strpce and others to discuss the situation in their municipalities

For the first time in a PER meeting neither Kosovo Serb nor Kosovo Albanian participants mentioned the issue of Kosovo’s status.

and to propose ways of resolving certain problems. The majority of the Serb participants used the presence of the Kosovo Government’s Minister of Local Self-Government Administration and turned a part of the meeting into an impromptu question and answer session.

For the first time in a PER meeting neither Kosovo Serb nor Kosovo Albanian participants mentioned the issue of Kosovo’s status. Instead, a



Left to Right: Jovica Buduric, Radojica Mrdzinac, and Nikolle Camaj.

local conservative Serb leader pointed out that it seemed likely that most Serb politicians would be ending their boycott of Kosovo's institutions and would be taking part in the November elections if a proper political environment is created before hand. His Democratic Party (DS) colleague seconded him and added that the main precondition is achieving Belgrade's consent to Serb participation.

Participants from outside of Kosovo encouraged the Kosovo Serbs to stop wasting the unique window of opportunity that is opening for them by the Kosovo government's commitment to decentralization and the upcoming local elections. A participant from Serbia called on the Kosovo Serbs to address their party headquarters in Belgrade, educate their Serbian peers on the real situation in Kosovo, and adopt decisions that best fit the needs of those living in Kosovo not Belgrade.

Several other participants seconded the necessity for a timely decision on participating in Kosovo's public life, elections being the most essential. A PER participant advised the Kosovo Serbs that the timing is never perfect, and when it looks perfect it might be too late.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS*

(English alphabetical order)

Kosovo Participants

- Ragip Abazi**, Democratic Party of Kosova, Novoberde/Novo Brdo (2)
Urim Ahmeti, Program Management Specialist, USAID Mission in Kosovo (3)
Petar Aksic, Member, Central Board, Serbian Radical Party, Gjilan/Gnjilane (5)
Ahmet Aliu, Director of Administration and Personnel, Municipality of Strpce/Shterpce
Momcilo Arlov, Program Coordinator, Center for Civil Society Development
Naim Behluli, Ministry of Local Government Administration, Government of Kosovo
Jovica Buduric, Socialist Party of Serbia, Strpce/Shterpce (2)
Arif Butuc, Mayor, Municipality of Mamusha
Agim Ceku, President, Social Democratic Party of Kosova (2)
Srboljub Djokic, Democratic Alternative, Novo Brdo/Novoherde
Beqir Fejzullahu, Democratic Party of Kosova, Strpce/Shterpce
Sadri Ferati, Minister of Local Government Administration, Government of Kosovo (5)
Alush Gashi, Minister of Health, Government of Kosovo (3)
Asdren Gashi, Chief of Division for Civil Registration, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Government of Kosovo
Ardian Gjini, Member, Presidency, Alliance for the Future of Kosova; Head, AAK Parliamentary Group, Assembly of Kosovo (4)
Dukagjin Gorani, Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo (2)
Habit Hajredini, Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo
Murselj Halili, Gora Citizens' Initiative; Member, Assembly of Kosovo
Ali Halimi, Deputy Mayor, Strpce/Shterpce (3)
Hamdi Haliti, Democratic League of Kosovo, Strpce/Shterpce
Ramush Haradinaj, President, Alliance for the Future of Kosova
Ismet Hashani, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Community and Return, Government of Kosovo
Lutfi Haziri, Head, Parliamentary Group of Democratic League of Kosova, Assembly of Kosovo (2)
Enver Hoxhaj, Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Government of Kosovo
Nevzat Hydaverdi, Deputy Chairman, Municipal Assembly of Pristina
Ylber Hysa, Political Advisor to the Mayor of Mitrovica (3)
Bahri Hyseni, Member, Assembly of Kosovo (Democratic League of Kosova)
Skender Hyseni, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of Kosovo
Bashkim Ibishi, Deputy Head, Office of Communities, Office of the Prime Minister
Sadik Idrizi, Coalition VAKAT; Member, Assembly of Kosovo
Valdete Idrizi, Director, Community Building Mitrovica
Sladjan Ilic, Former Mayor, Municipality of Strpce/Shterpce (3)
Sreten Ivanovic, Citizens' Initiative, Novo Brdo/Novoherde (3)
Svetislav Ivanovic, Citizens' Initiative, Novo Brdo/Novoherde

Naser Jashari, Committee for Community Affairs, Novoberde/Novo Brdo
Srdjan Jovanovic, Deputy Mayor, Municipality of Gjiilan; Independent Liberal Party, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (4)
Vesna Jovanovic, Social Democratic Party, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (3)
Enver Keciku, NGO KCIC, Gjiilan/Gnjilane
Lejla Kolenovic, Program Management Specialist, USAID Mission in Kosovo
Mita Kovacevic, Democratic Party, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (4)
Dragisa Krstovic, Democratic Party, Leposavic (3)
Hajredin Kuci, Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo
Fatmir Limaj, Minister of Transport and Telecommunications, Government of Kosovo
Ibrahim Makolli, Head, Parliamentary Group of the Alliance New Kosova, Assembly of Kosovo; Vice President, Alliance New Kosova (2)
Leon Malazogu, Head, Office in Kosovo, Project on Ethnic Relations (15)
Shkelzen Maliqi, Publicist
Halil Matoshi, Publicist, Koha Ditore (3)
Arben Mehmeti, Democratic League of Kosova, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (3)
Ramush Mehmeti, Democratic League of Dardania, Novoberde/Novo Brdo (2)
Ljubomir Mihajlovic, Commercial Bank, Mitrovica
Petar Miletic, Secretary General, Independent Liberal Party (4)
Radojica Mrdzinac, Democratic Party, Strpce/Shterpce (3)
Dzezair Murati, Coalition VAKAT; Member, Assembly of Kosovo
Qemajl Mustafa, Mayor, Municipality of Gjiilan/Gnjilane (4)
Bujar Nevzadi, Democratic Party of Kosova, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (2)
Xhevdet Neziraj, President, New Democratic Initiative of Kosova; Member, Assembly of Kosovo
Dragan Nikolic, G17 Plus Party, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (3)
Randjel Nojkic, President, Kosovo Branch, Serbian Renewal Movement, Gracanica (4)
Nebojsa Peric, President, Citizens Group Vidovdan, Gracanica (5)
Slobodan Petrovic, President, Independent Liberal Party, Pristina (5)
Mehmet Prishtina, Journalist
Nenad Radosavljevic, Director, RTV Mir, Leposavic; former UNMIK Coordinator for Return (3)
Berim Ramosaj, Deputy President, Democratic League of Dardania
Nenad Rasic, Minister of Labor and Social Welfare, Government of Kosovo (2)
Sasa Rasic, Minister for Communities and Return, Government of Kosovo
Anamaria Repic, Journalist, RTK
Bajram Rexhepi, President, Association of Kosovo Municipalities; Mayor, Municipality of Mitrovica (2)
Vidak Ristovic, Citizens Group Vidovdan, Gracanica (3)
Izet Sadiku, Principal Adviser to the Minister of Local Government Administration, Government of Kosovo (2)
Teuta Sahatqija, President, Reformist Party ORA (2)
Gazmend Salijevec, Member, Kosovo Roma and Ashkali Forum (KRAF)
Fatmir Sejdiu, President of Kosovo
Srdjan Sentic, Office of the Prime Minister, Capacity Development Facility/UNDP (6)

Behxhet Shala, Director, Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms
Haki Sinani, Democratic League of Dardania, Strpce/Shterpce
Slavisa Staletovic, Democratic Party of Serbia, Strpce/Shterpce
Stojan Stanojevic, Serbian Radical Party, Novo Brdo/Novoberde
Predrag Stojkovic, Democratic Party of Serbia, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (2)
Dragana Stolic, Media/Policy Assistant, European Commission Liaison Office to Kosovo (2)
Veton Surroi, Publisher, Koha Ditore
Ismail Sylja, Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo
Bekim Sylja, Manager, Roma Ashkali Documentation Center
Edita Tahiri, Member, Assembly of Kosova (2)
Shpend Terdevaj, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Local Government Administration, Government of Kosovo (2)
Hashim Thaci, Prime Minister of Kosovo; President, Democratic Party of Kosova
Milorad Todorovic, Democratic Party of Serbia, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (3)
Momcilo Trajkovic, President, Serb Resistance Movement of Kosovo (7)
Rada Trajkovic, President, Executive Board, Serb National Council of Kosovo and Metohija (4)
Vladan Trific, Decentralization Officer, International Civilian Office, Pristina (2)
Dragan Velic, President, Serb National Council of Central Kosovo and Metohija (2)
Malisa Venhari, Associate, Project on Ethnic Relations, Pristina (3)
Azem Vllasi, President, Association for Interethnic Cooperation (5)
Slobodan Vujcic, President, Association of Montenegrins of Kosovo
Mahir Yagcilar, Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning, Government of Kosovo
Bajrush Ymeri, Mayor, Municipality of Novo Brdo (4)
Sinan Ymeri, Director of Finances, Municipality of Strpce
Jeta Xharra, Journalist, Jeta ne Kosove, RTK
Saranda Zeqiri, Associate, Project on Ethnic Relations, Pristina (2)
Milivoje Zivkovic, Office of Community Affairs, Municipality of Gjiilan/Gnjilane
Islam Zuzaku, Deputy Mayor, Gjiilan/Gnjilane (5)

* 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 during the time period in which this project has taken place. Only the titles at the time of their latest attendance are listed.

Other Participants

Werner Almhofer, Head, OSCE Mission in Kosovo
Lukas Beglinger, Ambassador of Switzerland to Kosovo (2)
Nikolle Camaj, President, Municipal Assembly, Urban Municipality of Tuzi, City of Podgorica
Slobodan Draskovic, Mayor of Medvedja, Serbia
Pieter Feith, Head, International Civilian Office in Kosovo
Shpetim Gashi, Senior Program Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations, USA (15)
Alex Grigor'ev, Executive Director, Project on Ethnic Relations, USA (15)
Tina Kaidanow, US Ambassador to Kosovo
Edit Kovacs, Policy Adviser, EULEX
Andrzej Mirga, Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues, ODIHR/OSCE
Fernando Mora, Adviser on Communities, Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo (3)
Raphael Naegeli, Head, Community Affairs Unit, International Civilian Office (2)
Angelique Olmo, Administrative and Development Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations, USA
Livia Plaks, President, Project on Ethnic Relations, USA (11)
Patricia Rader, Director, USAID Mission in Kosovo (2)
Zoran Rajcevic, Foreign Policy Adviser to the Mayor of Podgorica
Armin Rieser, Regional Peace Building Adviser, Swiss Embassy in Macedonia (2)
Oliver Schmidt-Gutzat, Head, Communities Division, OSCE Mission in Kosovo
Tom Yazdgerdi, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy in Kosovo (3)

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- *Strengthening Albanian-Serb Dialogue in Kosovo* (2008)
- *International Roundtable on Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians of Kosovo: Challenges and Prospects of Sustainable Integration* (2009)

