

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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2005-2008



MONTENEGRO

**DEVELOPING A
COMPREHENSIVE
MINORITY POLICY
IN MONTENEGRO**

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PREFACE

The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) began its work on Montenegro's interethnic issues in 1998, and the dialogue that PER facilitated between the state's majority and minority leaders ultimately led to a number of significant outcomes – the adoption of the Minority Law, establishment of the system of minority councils, and a six-point agreement to satisfy the Albanian minority's immediate demands. The latter outcome, brokered in 2001 and known as the “Ulcinj Agreement,” included provisions for establishing a maternity hospital in Ulcinj, restoring municipal status to Tuzi (a predominantly Albanian suburb of Podgorica), opening of an Albanian-language faculty at the University of Montenegro, allowing official recognition of diplomas granted by universities in Tirana and Pristina, opening additional border crossings with Albania, and holding consultations with local authorities to appoint ethnic Albanians as the chief of police and the head judge in Ulcinj. With PER's assistance, all of these points were fully implemented by 2005.

While this progress was remarkable, Montenegro remained deficient in its minority policy legislation. The country's first Minority Law remained stagnant in draft form despite the comments and encouragement of outside reviewers such as the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. The problem was a lack of political consensus on several contentious points, and an inability to break the political stalemate and move forward.

To address the specific issue of the political stalemate over the Minority Law as well as Montenegro's general deficiency in minority policy legislation, in July 2005, with funding from the Global Opportunities Fund of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, PER launched a three-year initiative devoted to helping Montenegro develop and strengthen its state policies toward ethnic minorities, and in the process galvanize the authorities to show more political will in helping minorities in the country.

Success was achieved early on in the project. In May 2006, Montenegro finally adopted the Minority Law and opened a new chapter in the history of majority-minority relations in Montenegro. But the Montenegrin path to minority accommodation was not without its setbacks. In July 2006, two key provisions of the Minority Law were declared unconstitutional by the Montenegrin Constitutional Court. The rejection of these provisions, which guaranteed seats in parliament and local assemblies for representatives of ethnic minorities, was perceived as a let-down by many minority leaders and continues to be an increasing source of tension between them and the majority. Mutually beneficial majority-minority relations have been the core of Montenegro's successful model of interethnic accord. Damage to these relations will be the destabilizing factor in this multi-ethnic country.

To offset this set back in Montenegrin interethnic accord, PER continued its work to strengthen majority-minority dialogue by encouraging the formation of minority councils. Minority councils, also known as national councils, provide a modicum of self-governance and an opportunity for ethnic communities to have an official voice respected by government. Unlike non-government organizations or civil society groups, minority councils are composed of democratically elected minority representatives and are allotted funds from the state budget. In most instances, minority councils include government, parliament, and local officials, each with the ability to create legislation according to the community's interests. PER also encouraged the development of governmental Minority and Roma Strategies – action plans for further integrating minority communities in the political, cultural, and economic growth of Montenegro.

Five of the minority communities (Croat, Roma, Bosnjak, Muslim, and Albanian) have completed the elections of their first minority councils. The Roma Strategy, which was the goal of a parallel PER project, was adopted in November 2007 and is considered uniquely progressive with regards to European practice in Roma related policies in that it requires the Montenegrin government to allocate 0.2% of its annual budget for the strict purposes of implementing elements of the strategy. The Minority Strategy was adopted by the Montenegrin government in July 2008.

The new Constitution allows for the possibility of permanent minority representation and it is the responsibility of the parliament to decide on how this representation will look like. Securing permanent minority representation in the parliament of Montenegro and local assemblies is imperative for strengthening the Montenegrin's model of interethnic accord.

The following report is a compilation of PER's discussions with Montenegrin officials and minority political leaders over the course of the three year project. Some of the chapters are summaries of meetings that took place prior to Montenegro's independence from Serbia, and others just after. Readers will be able to see how Montenegrin officials negotiated their positions on minority issues and developed a multi-ethnic, modern state of Montenegro. In essence, this report bears witness to nation building, or at least the construction of one pillar of a new state through the support of a sustained majority-minority dialogue.

The authors of this report are Alan Moseley and Adrienne Landry, both Program Officers at PER. The text has not been reviewed by participants, and PER takes full and complete responsibility for its contents. To encourage frank and open discussion, all of PER's roundtables are closed to the press. However, many of these meetings were followed by brief press conferences, and members of the press were allowed to take pictures and TV footage during the opening remarks. For the most part, the events were widely reported in Podgorica and in the regional media.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office as well as the British Embassies in Serbia and in Montenegro and especially to Dino Pasalic, Ivan Vukcevic, and Nela Jelic for the financial and professional support. We would also like to thank the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and all our supporters who made our work in Montenegro possible. Most especially we would like to thank the Montenegrin Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection, in particular Minister Fuad Nimani and former Minister Gezim Hajdinaga. As always, PER's work in the Balkans depends on our network of friends and associates who often have to rearrange their already hectic schedules to participate in our discussions. Special thanks go to the busy political leaders in Montenegro and representatives of the international community who nevertheless found time to attend our meetings.

Lastly, we would like to acknowledge our hardworking colleagues at PER for their dedication in making this report possible.

Livia B. Plaks, *President*

Alex N. Grigor'ev, *Executive Director*

Princeton, New Jersey

July 2008



Left to right: Livia Plaks, Gezim Hajdinaga, and Alex Grigor'ev.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

“Serb” and “Croat” are used as ethnic terms, whereas “Serbian” and “Croatian” are employed when referring to Serbia and Croatia, respectively.

Except as otherwise noted, the terms “Albanian,” “Bosnjak,” “Roma,” “Croat” and “Serb” are used to refer to persons belonging to ethnic groups living in Montenegro.

CREATING CONSENSUS FOR A NEW MINORITY LAW

On October 21-22, 2005, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized a roundtable in Pržno on the draft of Montenegro's Minority Law. The goal of the discussion was to help Montenegro's parliamentary parties reach accord on remaining points of disagreement.

The roundtable was co-chaired by PER President Livia Plaks and PER Director for the Western Balkans Alex Grigor'ev. Senior representatives of all Montenegro's parliamentary parties and officials from the government took part in the discussion, along with experts from the working group on drafting the minority law and outside observers from the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the US Office in Podgorica, and the British Embassy in Belgrade.

Several issues were prominent in the discussion, including: the question of the reserved parliamentary representation of minorities in Montenegro; the most appropriate terminology for describing Montenegro's minority ethnic groups and the name of the law; the minority councils called for in the draft law; and the special issue of the Roma.

Political Representation of Minorities

The most important unresolved issue in the draft Minority Law was the question of the reserved representation of minorities in Montenegro's parliament. Article 25 of the draft law stated that 13 seats in the parliament will be permanently reserved for representatives of minorities. While the principle of special reserved seats for minorities was supported by most political parties, the specific arrangements for these seats required further clarification, and an agreement was needed as to how these seats would be allocated and what this would mean for the overall composition of the parliament.

The most important unresolved issue in the draft Minority Law was the question of the reserved representation of minorities in Montenegro's parliament.

During the discussions, a senior parliamentary leader offered the following formula for allocating minority reserved seats: an ethnic minority making up between 1-5% of the population according to the most recent census would receive one reserved parliamentary seat, and minorities making up more than 5% of the population

would receive two seats. The holders of these seats would be chosen through a procedure of "double voting," wherein in addition to choosing parties for regular

parliamentary seats, minority voters would also select representatives from special lists for minority seats.

This proposal was accepted by a senior leader of an ethnic Albanian political party, who provided further elaboration and suggested an additional provision. According to this formula, he explained, Croats and Muslims would receive one reserved seat each, and Bosnjaks and Albanians would each receive two seats. In addition, the special predominantly Albanian electoral district in Montenegro that now elects four members of parliament (despite its small population, which would normally entitle it to fewer seats), should now be represented by only two MPs, and these will be set aside for representatives of ethnic Albanian political subjects.¹ Thus, under this proposal ethnic Albanian parties would have four representatives in parliament, up from their current two. This additional provision, he explained, reflects the "language and cultural specificities" of Montenegro's Albanian population.

The plan to set aside seats for minorities according to their percentage of the population was accepted by all the participants at the roundtable except a leader of the opposition Serb People's Party. This participant questioned the constitutionality of the proposal, and indeed many other provisions of the draft law. Another opposition leader, while not rejecting the law overall, also raised the issue of its constitutionality, reminding the group that according to Montenegro's Constitution, each parliamentary seat represents 6,000 votes – plans to alter this formula in the interests of ethnic minorities would potentially be unconstitutional. Another participant reminded him that if this is the case, the current system of a special Albanian district is unconstitutional as well.

Despite these misgivings, the majority of the roundtable participants supported the proposed formulation for granting ethnic minorities reserved seats in the parliament. As for the mechanics of the "double vote," it was suggested that these details should be considered by the working group on the draft law, and subsequently resolved in revisions to the electoral law. "The important thing is to achieve agreement on the fundamentals of minority political representation," one participant observed.

A final issue was noted in relation to the allocation of minority seats in parliament. According to the most recent census, the Roma constitute less than 1% of the population, and thus would not be represented in parliament through a reserved seat if the proposed system of representation is accepted. The accuracy of the census with regard to the Roma is highly questionable – while the official

¹ At the time of the meeting in Pržno, two of these four seats were held by representatives of ethnic Albanian parties and two by the Democratic Party of Socialists.

number of Roma in Montenegro is 2,601, experts put the real number at somewhere in the area of 20,000 (approximately 3% of the population). Some mechanism for assuring a permanent parliament seat for the Roma should be found otherwise it would be the only historic minority in Montenegro without parliamentary representation.

Terminology

A second point of contention was the appropriate terminology for referring to ethnic minorities in the draft law. Ethnic Albanians preferred the term “national minority,” since, in their view, it best captures their particular status as a group with strong ties to a “kin state,” and allows them access to European institutions created with this in mind. Others, however, disagreed with this term, finding it less appropriate for other minority groups in Montenegro, and also objecting to any tendency to oblige individuals to take part in a collective identity that may not be of their own choosing.

A compromise over this issue was reached during the discussion. Rather than refer exclusively to “national minorities,” the first section of the new draft will identify the law as applying to members of “minority peoples, national minorities, and other minority national and ethnic communities.” Throughout the text, the term “minorities” will be used as a reference to all such groups, and it will be explained that each individual has the right to choose for himself his own status and may elect to exercise the rights guaranteed in the minority law. Further, it was also stipulated that the law will include language to indicate that it applies also to members of the majority population when they are a minority in local settings.

Minority Councils

One key provision in the draft law is the establishment of special national-level minority councils. Most participants in the roundtable did not object to such councils, but there was considerable discussion of how they would be formed, who would participate in these councils, and what their powers would be.

It was agreed that the councils should include minority members of all parliamentary party lists as well as individuals elected directly to the councils. Some participants also argued that the presidents of local assemblies or mayors should have a seat on the councils.

While all agreed that leaders of civil society organizations should be included in the minority councils, two caveats were noted with regards to their participation. First, several participants advised that these council members be elected rather than appointed, as has been the practice in the case of other governmental bodies in Montenegro. Second, there was also consensus that a majority of

council members should be members of parliament and local assemblies, even if only a majority of “fifty plus one.” In this way popularly elected representatives would ultimately have a majority vote in the councils.

Finally, minority councils, the participants agreed, should have powers only in areas related to the “cultural” questions of minorities, including integration policies but not other areas that are the proper prerogative of the national parliament and government.

Conclusions

While there was broad agreement on most points discussed at the meeting, including, significantly, on the need to adopt the Minority Law as soon as possible, there were also some dissenting voices. The representative of the Serb People’s Party was the strongest opponent of the proposed draft of the law, asserting that it would damage the current positive interethnic relations in the republic. This participant also expressed skepticism about the state’s ability to implement the provision of the proposed law, as well as its chances for passage in parliament.

A leader of an ethnic Albanian party also voiced his concern that the draft law would not be properly implemented. He charged that a number of articles of the Montenegrin Constitution and previous agreements with the government on special measures for Montenegro’s Albanian community were not carried out as promised. He expressed particular frustration that the Albanian language does not yet have the same official status as Montenegrin and is not used in official documents or local administration in cities where Albanians are the majority. However, this participant did not reject the draft law, and stated that he agrees that it should be adopted.

Following the roundtable, participants agreed on the following communiqué for public distribution:

PRZNO COMMUNIQUÉ

The Project on Ethnic Relations, a US-based institute, together with the Ministry for the Protection of Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic Groups of Montenegro held a roundtable in Przno on October 21-22, 2005 under the title “Developing a Governmental Minority Policy for Montenegro.” The meeting was sponsored by the British Embassy in Serbia and Montenegro. Participants included members of the parliament of Montenegro representing all parliamentary parties.

The main topic of the discussion was adoption of the law on minority rights.

Following are the main items of the consensus that was reached at the meeting:

- The parliamentary parties agreed on the need to pass this law as soon as possible;
- Differences on terminology used by the law were resolved and new terminology was agreed upon;
- Serious progress was made in resolving the issue of political representation in the parliament of Montenegro (Article 25 of the draft law). All minorities that number more than one percent of the total population of Montenegro according to the latest census will be represented in the parliament of Montenegro through representatives from separate national minority lists having in mind ethnic and language specifics as well as the already achieved rights of Albanians;
- A high degree of consensus was achieved on the issue of the formation and functioning of the national minority councils that are envisioned in the draft law;
- The draft law will oblige the government to develop a strategy for effective socialization and integration of the Roma in Montenegro;
- In addition to the already foreseen television programs in the languages of national minorities, special programs will be produced in the state language about minorities in Montenegro.

The Serb People's Party expressed a different opinion on these issues, and offered a different approach.

The participants agreed that the working group of the Ministry for the Protection of Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic Groups will complete the final draft of the law and will deliver it to the parliament of Montenegro before the second half of November.

The participants will ask the Government of Montenegro to complete all necessary work in order for this law to be adopted by the end of the year.

The Project on Ethnic Relations will brief the US State Department in Washington and the European Commission in Brussels on the conclusions reached at this meeting.

*Przno, Montenegro
October 22, 2005*

MINORITY COUNCILS: PURPOSE AND POWER

On May 10, 2006, Montenegro marked a major milestone with the passage of the Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms. While this was a significant step forward for the country – legislators had been working on the law since 2002 – it also represented the beginning of a new set of challenges connected with the law's implementation. One of the first issues to be tackled was the establishment of minority councils – a key provision of the new law.

PER's roundtable in Kolasin, held on June 2-3, 2006, was an effort to facilitate discussion among representatives of ethnic minority communities, leaders of political parties, and key government officials on how the councils would be established, and how they can function most effectively. PER also invited representatives of international organizations with experience in the field of minority rights and experts from neighboring states to speak about their countries' approach to minority councils.

The discussion focused on a number of issues pertaining to the councils. The most important of these was the question of who would serve on the councils, and, more particularly, how strong a role ethnic minority and civic political parties should play in them. Participants also considered the proper sphere of competency of the councils, several key technical questions regarding their formation, and the special situation of the Roma.

Minority Parties and the Balance of Power

The question that received the most intensive discussion in Kolasin was how seats in the minority councils should be apportioned among elected officials from political parties on the one hand, and independent intellectuals, leaders of minority-related NGOs, or other representatives of civil society on the other.²

Some participants argued that individuals elected to public office from minority lists (which could include not only ethnic minority political parties but other minority organizations and representatives as well), should hold the balance of

² The new Minority Law provides for the inclusion of both elected political representatives and others. Article 33 states:

The Council shall be comprised of: the members of parliament elected from the minority candidates list, members of the Government at the proposal of the candidates from that minority candidates list, mayors of municipalities in which the majority of the population belongs to the minority and other members of the parliament and Government, as well as mayors of municipalities from the respective minority who wish to participate in the Council, presidents of minority parliamentary parties and presidents of the caucuses of the minority parties in local assemblies.

Other members of the Council shall be elected by secret ballot at the constitutive assembly of the minority concerned.

power on the councils. These participants asserted that it is important that the majority of council members have the popular legitimacy of being elected by their respective minority community as their political representatives. As one Albanian political leader put it, “We should not allow the balance of power to be held by those who do not hold any political legitimacy in society.”

A representative of an ethnic Croat party stated, “We believe the majority of the council should be political representatives,” since “political parties have decision-making responsibility and accountability.” A leader of an ethnic Hungarian political party in Serbia confirmed that the Hungarian Council in Serbia was organized such that elected political representatives from ethnic minority parties would have a dominant role. “The influence of political parties cannot be excluded,” he said, “but they must be very wise in working with the councils.”

A formula suggested during the discussion was that “50% plus one” of council members should comprise elected representatives of “minority lists.” There was agreement among the majority of the participants that this would be an acceptable arrangement.

At the same time, however, a number of participants emphasized that non-party affiliated leaders of ethnic communities should also have an important place in the councils. Several arguments were offered in support of this position. The first was that minority councils should represent the interests of the entire minority community in the country, rather than the more narrow interests of one political party. In the words of a participant from Serbia, there is a need “to separate the role of minority councils as protectors of ethnic identity, language, culture, etc., from political struggles.” In Serbia, he added, “minority councils were often used for political means.” This issue is especially important considering the fact that minority councils exercise a degree of financial power over the media of their community’s language, and “media should represent the entire community, not only political parties.”



Left to right: Bozo Nikolic, Mevludin Nuhondzic, Ferhat Dinosh, and Koca Pavlovic.

A representative of an international organization presented another argument, asserting that NGOs should have a large share of power on the councils, “to provide for openness and transparency.” This participant expressed disappointment that Article 33 of the Minority Law gave civil society such a small role.

While other participants did not dispute the importance of NGO leaders, independent intellectuals, or minority politicians who belong to civic parties, they maintained that representatives elected to public office from minority lists should preserve a “50% plus one” majority in the councils. This proposal was accepted by a large majority of the participants, who emphasized finding a proper balance between the popular legitimacy of elected minority representatives on the one hand, and balancing influence of independent minority leaders, who would broaden the range of views held in the councils and safeguard against their being captured by a particular political party, on the other.

We should not allow the balance of power to be held by those who do not hold any political legitimacy in society.

On a related topic, participants also considered how councils can be established and structured to cause minimal division within minority communities. A representative of the Roma community in Montenegro warned participants that “we need to avoid the situation in Serbia, where there are several different councils for Roma. For example,” he asked, “will the Ashkali and Egyptians have their own councils” in Montenegro? This issue was not “fully regulated” in the Minority Law, he concluded.

An ethnic Hungarian leader from Serbia stated that councils will include not only “a plurality of interests, but also competition. There will be competition for resources,” he said. “Divisions cannot be fully preempted.” However, he added that such divisions “can be dealt with.” The best way to deal with this issue, he said, is to make sure that all state legal provisions concerning the councils are perfectly clear.

The Role of Minority Councils

Participants agreed that minority councils should be consulted on questions concerning “cultural identity.” Thus, questions of language, education, the media, and culture are clearly the primary areas of concern of the minority councils. Several participants, however, suggested additional roles that minority councils can play in Montenegro. A US participant argued that the councils will be important counterparts for the government of Montenegro. “Today, the government cannot select a counterpart for discussion of minority issues” without

being accused of favoring a certain political party or NGO, he said. “The question of legitimacy will be resolved with these councils.”

An ethnic Hungarian political leader from Serbia offered several additional ways minority councils can serve minority interests. In the case of the Hungarian minority in Serbia, he said, the national council “has become an element in the bilateral cooperation between the ‘mother state’ and the ‘home state.’” He added that the Hungarian National Council in Serbia also assists the Hungarian government in its effort to provide financial support to Serbia’s Hungarian community. “We give suggestions as to the distribution of this support,” he said, and “this is a very important and responsible duty.”

A leader of the Roma community in Montenegro (a community currently without a political party or parliamentary representation) offered his view that councils are important “not only for communication with the government, but also as a chance for minorities to discuss among themselves issues that are important to them.” Another Romani participant argued that the councils should help keep the Roma community better informed of government policies and programs for Roma. A participant representing an international organization echoed these remarks, adding that minority councils will help build the capacity of minority groups to take part in Montenegro’s public life.

Participants also discussed the power minority councils will have to influence government policy. Several emphasized that councils will not hold the power to veto policy or legislation, but rather will serve as consultative bodies with which state institutions are obliged to consult prior to taking steps in areas of direct concern to minority communities (see Article 35 of the Minority Law).

Technical Issues

One Montenegrin participant from the civil sector raised the question of how minority councils can be constituted under current electoral law. In particular, he said, in Montenegro there are two minorities that are not politically organized – the Roma and the Muslims. While the Minority Law provides for their inclusion in local or national decision-making bodies, thus establishing elected representatives who can take part in minority councils following Article 33, under the current system there are no Romani or Muslim officials who hold public office on the basis of minority candidate lists. Thus, to avoid this problem, “perhaps we should first amend the election law, then have elections, and then establish the councils,” he said.

A second issue of interest to the participants was the question of who will be able to take part – as a voter or as a candidate – in elections for minority councils, and how such voting will be regulated. On this subject a leader of an opposition party, who noted his party’s disagreement with some provisions of



Left to right: Vaselj Beganaj, Nedzmedin Salja, Andrzej Mirga.

the Minority Law as well as “the atmosphere in which the law was adopted,” asserted that “no person should be pushed into identifying themselves as belonging to a certain group and being represented through the ethnic parties of that group.”

In response to questions from the other participants, an official with the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities of the Government of Hungary explained how voting for minority self-governments (similar to Montenegro’s minority councils) is arranged in her country. According to this participant, legislation was passed setting the following procedures: representatives serving in minority self-governments are elected directly and in elections that take place at the same time as municipal elections. Only Hungarian citizens who declare their membership in a minority community are eligible to vote.

The issue of voting eligibility was the most difficult and controversial in Hungary, explained this participant. In the end, it was decided that citizens’ declarations of membership in a minority group will be kept by the chief administrator of a given settlement, who would not make the information public or have any right to judge the content of the declarations. The administrator’s role vis-à-vis the declarations would be purely supervisory, and after elections these records would be destroyed.

As for candidates, representatives of organizations that have existed for three years or more are allowed to run for office in minority councils, this participant explained. No independent candidates are allowed. Candidates also have to make a declaration of their membership in the minority group and state whether they speak the language of that group – though knowledge of the language is not a requirement.

These rules, she said, were adopted as an effort to prevent abuse of the system, which has been a problem in Hungary.

Minority Councils and the Roma

During the roundtable several participants referred to the particular situation of the Roma in Montenegro, who, according to the last census, number 2,601, though generally accepted unofficial estimates are between 15,000 and 25,000.

Roma, as an ethnic minority recognized throughout Europe, “are entitled to have the same rights as any other minority, regardless of their number in the population.”

The low census count of Roma puts them below the threshold of 1% for proposed guaranteed representation in the national parliament. (Roma will, however, have guaranteed seats in municipal assemblies where they make up greater than 1% of the local population, according to Article 24 of the Minority Law).

While several participants expressed regret over the fact that the last census did not reflect the reality of the Romani

population in Montenegro, a government official stated that the current official census, however flawed, must be used. This, he said, is the law, though hopefully “the situation will be rectified in the future.”

An ethnic minority parliamentary leader noted that there are discrepancies between the official and unofficial numbers of other minority groups in Montenegro as well, and suggested that admitting unofficial census numbers would open numerous difficult debates. However, a government official involved in the development of the Minority Law pointed out that Article 7 calls for the government to undertake special measures for the integration of Roma in Montenegrin society, and stated that this is an important provision included for the Roma. He added that a minority council will be especially important for the Roma community, given their lack of representation in the national parliament.

An ethnic Albanian parliamentary leader suggested an opposing view. He noted that Roma are not politically organized in Montenegro, and raised the question of whether the Roma community would in fact be well served by having a minority council, or whether other mechanisms, such as a governmental Roma Strategy, would not be better suited to their particular case. This suggestion, however, was rejected by a number of participants, who asserted that Roma have a right both to minority councils and to a targeted state strategy for their integration. One participant cited the recommendations of the Council of Europe in this connection, which assert that Roma, as an ethnic minority recognized throughout Europe, “are entitled to have the same rights as any other minority, regardless of their number in the population.” Another participant noted that the point is moot, since these rights for the Roma are now part of Montenegrin law.

Conclusions

With regards the composition of minority councils, the principle of maintaining a “50% plus one” majority for representatives chosen from minority lists was decided. Other council members, it was agreed, would be chosen through an electoral assembly.

Participants recommended that the Montenegrin parliament adopt new electoral legislation as soon as possible. Participants agreed that the next parliamentary elections (likely in fall 2006) should be held in accordance with the new Minority Law, and that following these elections minority councils should be formed.

Following the advice given by the official from the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities of the Government of Hungary, participants agreed that the rules for establishing the councils require that organizations and individuals seeking membership in the councils “prove their long-term connection to a given minority and to the mission of improving minority and human rights.”

Participants reached a consensus on the issue of setting a minimum number of seats on the councils – something which is not included in the Minority Law.

Following the roundtable, participants agreed on the following communiqué for public distribution:

KOLASIN COMMUNIQUÉ

The Project on Ethnic Relations, a US-based institute, together with the Ministry for the Protection of Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic Groups of Montenegro, held in Kolasin on June 2-3, 2006 its second roundtable in the series on Developing a Governmental Minority Policy for Montenegro. The meeting was sponsored by the British Embassy in Serbia and Montenegro. Participants included members of the parliament of Montenegro, government officials, leaders of ethnic communities from Montenegro, and international experts.

The main topic of the discussion was implementation of the law on minority rights, especially the establishment of minority councils that are envisioned in this law.

Following are the main items of the consensus that was reached at the meeting by the majority of participants:

- The implementation of the law on minority rights and freedoms must improve Montenegro’s already good interethnic practice;
- To encourage the parliament of Montenegro to adopt the new electoral

legislation as soon as possible by taking into consideration provisions of the law on minority rights and freedoms;

- Taking into consideration the fact that the law on minority rights and freedoms gives the Ministry for the Protection of Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic Groups of Montenegro one year to draft the minority strategy for Montenegro, the ministry should be encouraged to draft the rules of establishing the minority councils and to form them as soon as possible according to the specific features of each minority;
- The Ministry for the Protection of Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic Groups of Montenegro will produce the first draft of the rules on establishing the minority councils and will present it to the participants upon its completion;
- The law on minority rights and freedoms sets up the maximum number of members of minority councils; the rules should include the minimum number;
- The rules will provide for representation from non-governmental organizations and intellectuals; these organizations and individuals should prove their long-term connection to a given minority and to the mission of improving minority and human rights;
- The state should strive for the council membership to be as authentic and representative as possible in relation to a given minority while respecting the provisions of the law on minority rights and freedoms; a possible solution might include the provision that 50%+1 members of the total number of council members should come from the minority lists.

The participants will provide all support needed to the Ministry for the Protection of Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic Groups as it works on drafting the provisions necessary for the formation of the minority councils.

*Kolasin, Montenegro
June 3, 2006*

A NEW CONSTITUTION: MINORITY RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATION

In July 2006, after being questioned by the opposition People's Party, Articles 24 and 25 of Montenegro's Minority Law – two key provisions which guaranteed seats in parliament for minorities – were declared unconstitutional by the Montenegrin Constitutional Court. The rejection was unexpected. It was also interpreted as a set back by minority leaders since the adoption of the law prior to Montenegro's referendum was an agreed upon precondition for securing the minority vote in favor of independence. To counterbalance this development, PER organized a roundtable held on March 9-10, 2007 in Becici to discuss possibilities for reinstating the two provisions in the text of the new Constitution.

The other big issue tackled during the roundtable was the Ministry for Protection of Human and Minority Rights' draft on the "Rules and Instructions for the Elections of Minority Councils" – another key provision of the Minority Law. The following report is a summary of these two discussions and an outline of the agreements reached by the participants on solutions to unresolved questions, as well as a rundown of issues which remain divisive.

Minority Political Representation

Whether or not Montenegro's draft Constitution should be based on a civil or nation state concept (in which Montenegro will be branded as a state of Montenegrins and other ethnic groups who live there – Serbs, Bosnjaks, Albanians, Croats, etc.) dominated the debate. The question is of particular relevance as it is directly connected to the issue of minority representation in local and state government which is at the heart of the Minority Law in its original form.

Civil State

One prevalent viewpoint supported by several participants at the roundtable advocated for a "one person – one vote" civil concept in which the Constitution does not provide for guaranteed minority seats in parliament, and instead focuses on individual rather than collective rights. As one participant stated, "Guaranteed seats for minority representatives means that ethnicity becomes the basis for electoral legislation in a unicameral parliament, which is a clear violation to the democratic principle of one person – one vote."

When advocating for this position, the most recent census (2003) was often used by the participants for corroborative evidence as it clearly outlines Montenegro's lack of an ethnic majority.³ From their perspective, because each ethnic

³ According to the last census (2003), Montenegrins comprise 43.16% of the population, Serbs 31.99%, Bosnjaks 7.77%, Albanians 5.03%, Muslims 3.97%, Croats 1.1% and Roma 0.46%.

group in Montenegro is technically a minority (under 50%), the need for proportional representation in parliament is obsolete and/or discriminatory.

According to one participant, a civil state concept has been recommended by the Council of Europe as the most practical structure given Montenegro's current demographic composition and size. Another participant specifically drew correlation to the US and French models of civil states claiming them as particularly representative of genuine democracies. Speaking for his party, this participant stated that a civil state would, theoretically, create the preconditions for a political environment in which all individuals are equal, and unite all the various ethnic groups in Montenegro under one government, one constitution.

Nation State

The counterargument to the “one person – one vote” premise, vocalized by a number of minority leaders at the roundtable, is based on their perception of current political realities in Montenegro which have, according to them, the distinct aura of discrimination towards minority groups in connection with political representation. As one participant stated, “There are ethnic groups in Montenegro that are more equal than others. My people are in an inferior position economically, socially, and even with regards to media exposure.”

Those coming from the “Montenegrians and others” state perspective advocated a two chamber parliamentary system in which one chamber would represent all citizens of Montenegro and the other would represent all of Montenegro's various ethnic groups. According to some minority leaders in attendance at the roundtable, this system would guarantee that the minority voice is heard at the highest, national level, would give minority representatives a powerful veto, and would dismiss any possibility that minority groups would be entirely out voted.

Direct Political Representation

During the roundtable, the most vocal proponent of the two chamber parliament initiated what he saw as a compromise by stating, “Direct proportionate representation in the parliament and bringing Articles 24 and 25 of the Minority Law back through changes in the Constitution will satisfy minority demands in Montenegro.” This compromise between the civil and nation state concepts is one in which the civil structure incorporates a positive discrimination policy towards its minorities thus guaranteeing them political representation at the national and local levels by reserving a determined number of seats in parliament proportionate to their demographic composition in the country. In essence, maintain the civil state concept but reinstate Articles 24 and 25 of the Minority Law. However, even among those who agree that this arrangement would be the best solution, there was still vast disagreement on how to implement the compromise.

According to one roundtable participant who reported on the Constitutional draft committee's progress, the issue of direct political representation for minorities has been the most divisive. Their solution was to draft the Constitution in such a way that it provides for an indirect *possibility* of minority direct representation in parliament to be determined later by relevant laws. Hence, the Constitution would provide a constitutional basis for reserved parliamentary seats, and the new election law would determine how many seats are reserved for minority groups and how they are filled.

As one participant stated, “It should be left to the law, not the Constitution, to find in the upcoming period a mechanism of safe passage or a certainty that the minorities will find their way to the Montenegrin Parliament.” According to this perspective, electoral law is a more flexible and adaptable instrument that can be structured to fit the needs of minority groups.⁴

However, there was general consensus among minority representatives that the provisions for minority representation must be reinstated into the Constitution itself if the country is to avoid another battle in the Constitutional Court; or worse yet, alienate moderate minority leaders. The ambiguity of the proposed Constitutional Articles means that there is no guarantee that the laws on minority rights will not change according to the whims of whichever party is in power.

One international participant confirmed this misgiving by saying, “What we have learned from our past experience working in the region is that if there is to be dialogue, it is much better to have it now than tension later on.” There was also grave concern among some leaders that if the problem is not resolved now, the lack of resolution may give various ethnic groups impetus to claim that the Constitution does not apply to them as they had no say in its creation.

What we have learned from our past experience working in the region is that if there is to be dialogue, it is much better to have it now than tension later on.

International participants at the Becici roundtable observed that tension in Montenegro is slowly escalating, and minority leaders are struggling with the new state's lack of progress towards greater minority rights. As one ethnic Albanian representative stated, “We need to come up with a specific solution in Montenegro and I see no such political will for that. There will be consequences in the future. I know [my party] started serious processes in Montenegro, but we will not support it further if there are no legal solutions. We cannot speak about subjectivity and rights of minorities without affirmative action.”

⁴ In order to be adopted, the Constitution requires a two-third majority consensus in the parliament.

Rules for the Formation of Minority Councils

Following PER's roundtable in Kolasin (June 2-3, 2006) during which relevant actors discussed and agreed on a number of issues pertaining to these councils, the Ministry for Protection of Human and Minority Rights drafted Rules for Minority Council Formation which were presented to participants at the Becici roundtable – these rules were developed during the winter of 2006-2007 during which the Ministry consulted with PER and experts engaged by PER on this document. A senior official of the Ministry for Protection of Human and Minority Rights presented the draft and asked for the participants' help on certain areas which remain the most problematic. These areas are as follows:

Council Composition

Article 14 of the "Rules and Instructions for the First Elections of Minority Councils" addresses the number of members elected to each council and how many of those members are there due to their parliament, state or local government function.⁵ Article 33.5 of the Minority Law states that eligible members *ex officio* are: "members of parliament elected from the minority lists, members of the Government appointed at the proposal of representatives of minority lists, presidents of municipalities in which the majority of the population belongs to the minority, and other members of the parliament and Government, as well as presidents of municipalities from the respective minority who wish to do so, presidents of minority parliamentary parties and presidents of the parliamentary clubs of the minority parties in local assemblies."

Because Article 33.4 of the Minority Law stipulates that "The Council cannot comprise of more than 17 members," the inevitable conundrum arises of what to do in cases where a minority group has more than 17 members *ex officio*. For example, what if the Albanian minority has 21 officials who ought to be members of the council due to their elected position?

Several possible solutions to this dilemma were proposed during the roundtable. Some participants suggested setting the minimum number at 17 but leaving the maximum number open. Others recommended providing a range determined by the size of the minority group. Still others advocated for setting a maximum number of members, but changing the terminology from a fixed number to stating "up to" the maximum number allotted. This option bears in mind small minority groups with no members *ex officio* – there is a concern that smaller

⁵ The second paragraph of Article 14 states:

The number of members that are to be elected at the Electoral Assembly shall be determined by subtracting from 17 the number of those members ex officio who have accepted their nomination into the Council.

minority groups, like the Roma who have no members *ex officio*, will have difficulty filling 17 spaces.

Some participants even mentioned doing away with a minimum or maximum requirement, and leaving the size of minority councils up for each minority group to decide. However, several international participants as well as participants from neighboring countries highly recommended setting a fixed number as the best way to avoid wrangling over legislative legitimacy later on.

By raising the maximum number of council members from 17 to 35, there would be more than enough seats to accommodate all who are members *ex officio* as well as members elected by secret ballot by the minority constituent assembly. However, this solution entails changing Article 33.4 of the already adopted Minority Law. The compromise reached during the roundtable was to change the Minority Law, set the number for council members at 35, and to add the sentence: "the council will decide how many members from then on." The Ministry has already asked the parliament to approve such a change.

Council Members

During the discussion on the number of council members, another dilemma arose. What should be the official recourse of action when a member *ex officio* is unable or unwilling to assume his duties? A participant from a neighboring country cited a specific example in which a member of his minority council died, and the council had to continue through its mandate with fewer members. What if someone who is supposed to serve on the council because of his function refuses? Will his seat remain empty? Even more problematic, what if the official mandate of a member *ex officio* comes to an end? Does he continue to serve on the council even though he no longer holds his office? These are just some of the hypothetical problems mentioned during the course of the roundtable.

There was consensus that many of these issues will be resolved according to the rules that each council adopts upon its formation. However, the Ministry agreed to change the text of the rules by stating that "If the duty of a council member comes to an end, the new person will be elected if he is a member of the same minority and accepts membership in the council. Or, the replacement could be a person who received the largest number of votes at the Electoral Assembly but was insufficient to being elected to the council in the first place."

However, if it is stipulated in law that each council should have a majority of members *ex officio*, the inevitable problem arises for minority groups like the Roma who have no members in elected offices or Croats who have few members in elected offices – without a majority of members *ex officio* required by law, they will not be able to meet the legal requirements necessary to have a minority

council. As one international participant stated, “We have to look at those who are less developed politically. If there is a law, it has to be applicable to everybody and you have to find a common ground for those who have no functions in the state authority...otherwise it would be discriminatory.”

Majority Rules

An important part of the discussion focused on Article 7 of the rules and the rights of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to nominate council members.⁶ The concern voiced by several participants was that the rules were giving NGOs a distinct advantage over individuals. As one participant stated, “It is well known in the Ministry that an NGO can be registered if it only has 5 members.” There was unease that NGOs, especially those only set up formally, may have the possibility to exploit this rule if they are not required to collect the same number of signatures as unaffiliated nominations. In order to preempt the possibility of misuse of Article 7 by NGOs, the Ministry agreed to state that NGOs should collect the same number of signatures as individuals thus equalizing the right to nominate council electors. In doing so, the rules will keep to a majority system for nomination of electors.

Council Elections and Mandates

There was some confusion at the roundtable as to whether or not these rules were for the first election in minority councils or for all elections pertaining to the formation of minority councils. According to the Ministry, the “Rules and Instructions for the First Elections of Minority Councils” only apply to the first election as it is stipulated in the Minority Law that each council will decide its own protocol from there on out. As a participant from the Ministry stated, “All other rules will be adopted by the councils themselves which will regulate their own future elections. We want to give rights and trust these councils with adopting their own regulations.”

However, general consensus was reached at the roundtable that should a newly formed council not perform its function to elect officers or adopt its own protocols within a timely manner, an oversight institution must have the legislative ability to dismiss the dysfunctional council in lieu of a new one. Speaking from past experience of working with divided minority groups and the turbulence surrounding the creation of functional councils in a neighboring country, one

⁶ Article 7 states:

Any citizen who declares himself as a person belonging to a minority concerned and provided that his nomination is endorsed by at least 100 persons belonging to the same minority who have right to vote, or he is nominated by one non-governmental organization or association of that minority, shall be eligible to be an elector.

international participant strongly recommended the need to set a specific period of time during which newly formed councils must gather and begin their work.

The Ministry agreed to insert into Article 16 of the draft rules the missive that if the council does not begin its work within 6 months, the Ministry, as the official authority to provide oversight for the proper implementation of the rules, will dismiss the council and restart the process anew.

Conclusions

Instead of progressing with their minority rights legislation, the above report shows how there has been some regression on both the part of the government and minority leaders in their dialogue during the summer of 2006. Past agreements are being rehashed and reevaluated, and cooperation is increasingly being replaced by frustration. Minorities are questioning the government’s political will with regards to minority rights.

That said, the roundtable also showed that the basic agreement on the need to institutionalize a policy of minority rights in Montenegro remains strong. The overall majority of speakers reiterated the need for more minority representatives in parliament and in local assemblies, the only difference being whether or not it is based on permanent, direct representation.

Several times throughout the roundtable, PER reminded participants of the need to maintain productive and progressive dialogue, for minorities to seek compromises, and for government officials to reward moderate minority representatives seeking unity with governmental institutions. In the words of one PER chair, “The beauty of Montenegrin interethnic accord is that moderates on both sides of the ethnic divide were rewarded for their moderate behavior. If you break that accord and stop rewarding those moderates, those people will lose to extremists who will take their place. Or, you will transform those moderates into extremists because of their frustration.”

EFFECTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS

On July 20, 2007, in Podgorica, PER organized an event which focused on how the Montenegrin government and parliament can better communicate about minority issues to its citizenry and to the international community. To this end, PER enlisted the help of Corinne Goetschel, founder of the Public Relations Agency CGC in Switzerland, who presented on the importance of and best methods for pro-active communication strategies, how government institutions can cultivate media as a democratic tool for dispersing timely and accurate information, and how to promote or mitigate minority issues. Having served as the spokesperson for one of the seven Federal Counselors (ministers) in Switzerland, and having worked as an advisor to the government of Macedonia, Ms. Goetschel was uniquely qualified to share her expertise with Montenegrin officials and government staff on effective media relations and their importance.

The event was broken into two parts. The first part was held in the morning during which Ms. Goetschel gave a formal presentation to a select group of parliamentarians, members of the parliamentary committee on human rights and freedoms, and officials from the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection. The second part of the event was a private workshop held at the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection, with only PER and Ministry officials in attendance. The following is an account of both meetings.

Seminar: “Effective Media Relations” Corinne Goetschel Presenting

The seminar was opened by Alex Grigor’ev, PER Executive Director, and Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection, Fuad Nimani. During his opening remarks, Mr. Grigor’ev announced to participants that the Rules for the Formation of Minority Councils were published that same morning, on Friday, July 20, 2007, in the main Montenegrin daily “Pobjeda.” According to Minister Nimani, an Albanian translation of the rules would be published in the country’s Albanian-language weekly “Koha Javore” the following week. The official process, however, would begin the following Thursday (July 26, 2007) after the government gazette published the official text of the rules – after this official notice, minority leaders would have the right to contact the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection to set up the first elections of their minority councils.

Following this unexpected yet welcome announcement, Mr. Grigor’ev encouraged the government to prioritize adopting the Roma Strategy – a highly regarded document needed to promote Roma inclusion in Montenegrin society. Its quick adoption is necessary if it is to be included in the state’s budget for the upcoming year. He also advised the Ministry and attending minority leaders to

work fast to form the minority councils so they might weigh in on Montenegro’s Constitutional proceedings currently underway and in the creation of a comprehensive governmental Minority Strategy.

Mr. Grigor’ev continued the meeting by discussing how communication strategies are an integral part of effective governmental policy. “The media are particularly powerful when they manipulate public opinion – they can even bear responsibility for such events as the outbreak of ethnic violence,” he remarked. While it is clear that many extremists and nationalists know how to use the media to their advantage, it is often not so clear that moderates are as capable at capturing the media spotlight.

“Democratic ways of dealing with the media are essential – in a democratic society, the media and government are partners,” said Mr. Grigor’ev. An open environment for media and governmental transparency are just a few of the standards the western world uses to judge whether or not a country is democratic and free.

Minister Nimani reiterated Mr. Grigor’ev’s opening remarks by stating, “Media relations are extremely important given Montenegro’s diversity.” While media can play a very important role in promoting minority rights, it can also play a very destructive role when it comes to minority and human rights misconceptions. “The Ministry has an excellent relationship with the media in Montenegro, but we need to be more aware and more careful about what sort of statements we give, what sort of tone we are setting, and what sort of environment we can create,” he concluded.

Democratic ways of dealing with the media are essential – in a democratic society, the media and government are partners.

“It is maybe not a coincidence that a Swiss media consultant is called to Montenegro,” began Ms. Goetschel’s presentation. While speaking about Switzerland as a country composed of diverse ethnicity, cultures, languages, and as a model of peaceful coexistence for many different groups, she also touched on the fact that lingering conflicts remain in Switzerland, and they inevitably require strong communications strategies on the part of the government for effective media relations.

“Media has the power to empower you and also knock you down,” she said, “but what is worse is for them to ignore you.” By engaging the media with true and transparent information, a government not only has a partner for quick dispersal of timely information, they also are able to set the agenda for how a message is publicized to their constituents and the international community. “The government should be heard on matters of national importance – if this

information is not provided by the government, it will be provided by someone else and probably less factually,” she advised.

Q&A and Constitutional Debate

A parliamentarian observed that when it comes to exercising minority rights in Montenegro, there is a lack of quality communication between political elites and the media. Without quality communication and explanation, simple governmental ideas like “affirmative action” are misinterpreted and misunderstood. Concepts such as these are particularly relevant considering their prevalence in the draft text of the new Constitution. “Even political elites are not sure of these concepts. We need to clarify and educate so we can develop the capacity to present our ideas and receive support for them,” he stated. The parliamentarian then opined that the centralized information service of the government is not a sufficient mechanism for information dispersal, and recommended that the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection develop its own information service.

A minority leader agreed and reconfirmed that, “There are those who are not informed about the rules of the game – this creates misconceptions and misunderstandings. Without affirmative action, minorities cannot find themselves in the parliament – and if they’re not in the parliament, you cannot say that they are taking part in the development of their own society.” The participant then referred to the case of Albanians in Montenegro. Albanians have their own language and culture, and comprise a significant proportion of the Montenegrin populace, yet the government has so far been unable to translate adopted laws into the Albanian language. “We have only one weekly in the Albanian language, and you can’t expect the Albanian population to follow Montenegro’s processes with such limited information,” he argued. He then suggested that the Ministry and Parliament work together to initiate a translation of Montenegro’s basic laws into Albanian, or at the very least, introduce a daily paper in the Albanian language.

An international participant then floated the idea of a press conference during which Parliament’s Chairman for the Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms and the government’s Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection might come together and explain to the public their views on minority policy in Montenegro. “In other countries it is common for the head of a government’s ministry and for the chairman of a parliamentary committee to address the public together as a show of unity and cooperation on a significant policy issue, but this has not yet happened in Montenegro,” he observed.

A member of the Ministry promised to look into what the Ministry could do in regards to the above suggestions. He then announced that there was already a

plan for the Ministry to hire a public relations officer. That said, the hiring process was facing several hurdles. For starters, the criteria for a qualified public relations officer was fairly stringent – it is difficult to find a qualified candidate with a degree in communications who is able to speak the local language, Albanian, and English, and who is also willing to work on the salary the Ministry is capable of providing. “The application process is ongoing,” he said, “and hopefully sometime in the near future we will have a person at the Ministry who is devoted to nothing else but communicating our message to the media.”

“Regarding this very important issue of how we communicate to our constituents – irrespective of religion, cultural or political affiliation – information affects all citizens,” one participant observed. As he saw it, the problem in Montenegro is a lack of development in the freedom of publicity or access to information – underdeveloped media affects all Montenegrins regardless of their ethnicity. “It’s true that when it comes to Albanians in Montenegro, they represent a very specific group just because of their different language. For that reason, Montenegro is obliged to make the maximum effort to ensure that information is provided much more in their language than what was provided in the past. I agree with my colleagues that Montenegro needs to have a daily in the Albanian language,” he concluded.

The same participant pointed out that there are not so distant instances in which authorities in Montenegro have manipulated minorities. According to the participant, the most obvious case involves the adoption of the Minority Law ten days prior to the referendum that established Montenegro as an independent state. Right after the referendum, the Constitutional Court abolished the law’s two key articles related to direct representation in the parliament, thereby undermining the reason for the overwhelming minority support in the referendum. “As we have heard, we are about to establish a new Constitution, and there is a possibility to move beyond this type of action. We need the media to inform the public about our views and about the way in which these issues are regulated internationally so we can adjust our provisions to the needs of Montenegro,” he said.

Workshop: Developing a Communications Strategy

Following the seminar, PER staff, Corinne Goetschel, Minister Fuad Nimani, and Ministry staff met at the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection to put into practice what Ms. Goetschel discussed in the morning’s session. The workshop started out with the Ministry staff listing everything on their agenda that they intend to inform the public about in the upcoming year. The list included but was not limited to: the Ministry’s role in the minority councils’ first elections, the adoption of the new Constitution, the creation of

the Minority Fund, the adoption of the Roma Strategy, the adoption of the governmental Minority Strategy, and the creation of a Center for Minority Cultures.

Ministry staff began formulating a plan for a possible media trip to areas where minorities are in majority throughout Montenegro as a means of establishing better relations with both local and international media representatives, and broadening the scope of topics in interethnic relations that journalists might be interested in writing about.

Conclusion

Both the seminar and the workshop were described as “extremely useful” and “timely” by participants, especially when considering the current status of Montenegro’s politics. Several participants said they were eager to present handouts from the seminar to their respective parties. The ministry’s intention to coordinate a media trip, if successful, could increase information about majority-minority relations in Montenegro, minorities in the country, and about the government’s policies towards them. It was the opinion of certain international participants that there was some momentum built during the day’s proceedings for Montenegrin officials to get more involved with communicating about minority issues.

DEVELOPING A MINORITY STRATEGY: ACTION PLANS FOR A COHESIVE SOCIETY

The year 2007 witnessed remarkable progress in Montenegro’s minority rights legislation. The new Montenegrin Constitution, adopted in October 2007, allows for the possibility of reconsidering the issue of securing permanent parliamentary representation for minorities. Montenegro’s first ever Roma Strategy was passed in November 2007 – this document is often touted as uniquely progressive with regards European Roma policy in that it commits the Montenegrin government to allocating 0.2% of its annual budget for the strict purposes of implementing elements of the strategy. By explicitly allocating a percentage of its national budget to Roma issues, Montenegro’s government declared its firm commitment to prioritizing minority issues, especially concerning those most marginalized.

Another important step for a more cohesive minority policy began in July 2007 with the government’s publication of the Rules on the First Formation of Minority Councils – the announcement officially began the process of minority council commencement. In the months following the announcement, the Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection, Fuad Nimani and the ministry’s staff, met with representatives of each minority community in Montenegro, and explained the logistics of this important legislative document.

In conjunction with this progress, PER and the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection convened a discussion on the draft of the Minority Strategy – a document which will not only help Montenegro in its quest for European integration but also represents an important step in strengthening the cohesiveness of its citizenry, and in improving its all-inclusive democratic governance.

The roundtable took place in the Montenegro Parliament building in Podgorica on December 14-15, 2007, and brought together government officials, senior representatives of Montenegro’s parliamentary parties, leaders of Montenegro’s ethnic communities, domestic and foreign experts, and foreign diplomats. The meeting was opened by Minister Nimani and PER President Livia Plaks.

Presenting Montenegro’s First Ever Minority Strategy

One of the experts responsible for drafting the Minority Strategy summarized the draft, and the logic behind its provisions, to the roundtable participants. The expert informed those present that, “What all international legal instruments emphasize is that states have the final say with regards to protection of minority rights,” and that this strategy’s aim is to raise the level of Montenegro’s protection with respect to each citizen’s personal, ethnic, or religious identity. “We need to get to a point where everyone feels that they are a part of the Montenegrin state. We also need improvement of relations in the immediate

neighborhood so that each citizen feels comfortable identifying with his or her state of ethnic origin,” the expert advised.

When asked about the difference between individual and collective rights, the expert responded that the strategy text explicitly focused on protection of the individual, and the need to protect that individual from discrimination. Collective rights are inherently protected if each individual in that collective group have these rights, the expert answered.

The expert spoke of the Minority Strategy’s attention to education as a perfect example of protecting collective rights through the individual. By addressing the right to education of each child in the Albanian minority, the government is also addressing the Albanian minority’s collective right to education in their own language.

We need to get to a point where everyone feels that they are a part of the Montenegrin state.

The expert then explained the government’s need to make each citizen in Montenegro aware of minority cultures in Montenegro. In this way, the strategy is not focused entirely on minority communities, but also on creating a cohesive society in Montenegro proud

of its diversity. The expert recommended that while each member of a minority community should have a right to use their own language, other members of Montenegrin society, especially members of the majority, should have a right to learn that minority language as well – that this might be one more additional way to integrate society. One way of doing this is to ensure that there is space in both electronic and print media formats dedicated to entertainment and information in minority languages.

When it comes to political participation, said the expert, this strategy emphasizes Montenegro’s duty to fully regulate the representation of minorities in Parliament on the basis of the new Constitution and the Minority Law. Encouragement and assistance in establishing minority councils will benefit this process, the expert advised. The strategy also pays particular attention to minority representation in the police and military, especially in locations where minorities are the majority.

The expert concluded the presentation by addressing the need to create special commissions and inter-ministerial cooperation in order to ensure timely and efficient implementation of the strategy. “The adoption and implementation of the strategy is, of course, up to the government of Montenegro and its working bodies – the main coordinator is the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection which has a special role to play,” said the expert. That said, implementation will not

be possible without joint efforts and open communication between other governmental bodies also involved in the implementation process.

As it was explained, “The task of this commission will be to pay attention to multiple strategies and see the bigger picture so that during implementation, there is no collision between. Because, honestly speaking, in the past 5 years, Montenegro has adopted a lot of strategies. A lot of those strategies were not simply because of a desire for that strategy, but because certain international institutions told us that without them, we cannot move forward. We’ve had a lot of ambitious projects and ambitious ideas, but implementation has often fallen flat. We try and have good will, but sometimes it is not realistic or feasible based on the realities of our budget and capacity. The special commission’s mandate will be to see these deficiencies and find solutions to work around them.”

Timelines and Action Plans

An international participant noted that the period for implementation was too long, but expressed more concern about the length of preparation time. One of the experts advised that, “A period of ten years is a deadline which, from an international practice in this region, seemed to be the best and most acceptable considering the number and complexity of the activities. A social environment must be created to overcome some of the obstacles and this strategy recognizes that it does not happen over night.”

It was also observed that, “the timeline of ten years might sound too long, but for a state that has just got out of a conflict (with Serbia) and especially keeping in mind the context in which Montenegro has to live – the timeline isn’t so long and is realistic. We need to also allow some time to the private sector to benefit from some of the shorter goals in this strategy so that they can help us move forward with the process.”

Another expert observed that, “We must also take into consideration the security of the region. If the region remains stable, I imagine the interethnic policies of Montenegro will improve exponentially. If there are problems or conflicts, there will be a destabilizing factor in Montenegro which we must be aware of and prepared for.”

A compromise was proposed in which the drafters would create schedules for each individual chapter in the strategy thereby setting shorter deadlines within the implementation process. The text in the strategy would also identify specific actions to be completed within that shorter timeframe, thus guaranteeing that implementation of the Minority Strategy would not be delayed until the final year. For example, the issue of language could be resolved within 2 years while the issue of political participation in 3 months.

Minority Communities and Their Respective Needs

It was recommended by participants that each minority group should have a specific activity and part of the action plan as each have different priorities. Many minority groups observed that the needs of the Albanian minority do not match the needs of the Croat minority – and neither of these needs match the needs of the Roma. Said one participant, “for every minority, there is a specific issue that should be addressed. For Albanians, it’s education. For the Croats, it’s the issue of employment. The biggest ethnic distance is towards the Albanians – why? – there needs to be research done to discover the roots of this distance.”

While Montenegro has adopted a separate strategy for the Roma, it was advised that there be cross references placed in the text referring to the Roma Strategy which will be attached as an appendix when the document is brought forth for adoption.

Permanent Representation and Political Participation

During the roundtable, minority representatives placed special emphasis on the need to reinstate the two articles of the Minority Law which were rendered

unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. One participant stated, “Without authentic minority representatives, we cannot talk about minority policy in a real way.”

Other government officials acknowledged that the new Constitution and the Minority Law left little doubt as to whether or not minority communities should be represented in parliament but that how to do this legally and fairly remains problematic. A participant

responded that a solution must be figured out soon if Montenegro is to keep its reputation for serving as a good role model for interethnic relations in the Balkans.

A local expert commented that, “Political participation is not the most important thing. It is a significant issue but not the *most* significant issue. If you look at these issues from the perspective of human rights – for both the Albanian population and the Roma, the most important thing is to have access to education. They ask why there are no Albanian or Roma judges? We don’t have Albanians and Roma with the ability to be judges because of lack of education. Education, therefore, is the most significant issue.” “Political representation,” responded the participant, “will only speed up this process.”

If you look at these issues from the perspective of human rights – for both the Albanian population and the Roma, the most important thing is to have access to education.

Faulty Data and Unreliable Statistics

All participants acknowledged that there is a very serious problem in Montenegro with regards accuracy of statistics. Said one participant, “The 2003 census states that there are 0.4% Roma in Montenegro. I’ve been living here and if you go to just one part of Montenegro, you will see not 2,500 Roma but 5,000. You can’t adopt measures on the basis of such a faulty census. If we look into the actual situation of the Roma in Montenegro, we know there are well over 1%.”

While generally agreeing with these observations, the drafters of the strategy insisted that this problem should not be an issue of the Minority Strategy, but an issue of the state. “In 2013 we will have a new census,” said one of the experts. “We don’t want to make speculations and would prefer to use exact data but that’s not possible at present. We still need to move forward.”

Implementation and Funding

It was generally recommended to the experts in charge of drafting the strategy that presidents of the minority councils should serve on a special commission responsible for monitoring the implementation of the strategy. By involving the minority councils, Roma, who have no other means for representation, will be included in the implementation process. It was also advised that the commission



Left to right: Alex Grigor’ev, Fuad Nimani, Livia Plaks, and Rifat Rastoder.



Left to right: Kevin Lyne and Roderick Moore.

be headed by a Deputy Prime Minister and include the Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection. It was observed by PER staff that the text of the strategy also includes provisions for inter-ministerial cooperation, a solution that PER has been encouraging since the inception of this project.

“Frankly speaking,” said one international participant, “one of the most important parts of the Roma Strategy is that Montenegro is the only country which has put in a budgetary allocation – this has impressed everyone. No matter how marginal it is, I think this should be put into the Minority Strategy as well, no matter how small.”

“Just by looking into the document,” observed an expert, “your suggestion for financing is very much welcome. A financial framework for meeting the demands in Montenegro will have to be determined. We will rely on available data to make this assessment. But again, we don’t have exact data so this financial framework can’t be fixed. We need to come to a satisfactory position until we have more reliable data. This will be our recommendation. It needs to be determinable but not determined.”

“In regards to the financing of this strategy,” responded a representative from the Ministry for Human and Minority Protection, “funds will be taken from the Minority Fund which was adopted in November 2007. It seems to me that we won’t need that much money – not as much money as we needed for the Roma. Why? Because many of the minorities have been already integrated to a degree not done by the Roma. Everyone unanimously supported the Roma Strategy when it was adopted by the government in October. Everyone understands that in regards to the position of Roma in Montenegro, something radical has to be done. Obviously there is strong will coming from the government with regards minority issues, and this will translate into implementation.”

Conclusions

The general tone of the meeting was that the current draft of the Minority Strategy is a good and comprehensive document. In the text there are definitions of “affirmative action” and other terms, which have been used in the political life of Montenegro but so far have not been officially defined in detail. It was also observed that the strategy draft gives a good balance between the concepts of individual and collective rights, and emphasizes integration over assimilation.

As shown, the deadlines set forth in the strategy draft proved to be contentious. A member of the international community pointed out that it is fairly common with such documents that minority representatives feel that the time period for implementation is too long while government representatives worry it is too short.

Permanent political representation of minorities in parliament proved to be another contentious issue. Some minority representatives felt that the new Constitution along with the Minority Law guaranteed them this right.

There was consensus that the statistics used in the Minority Strategy, and in most other government strategies in Montenegro, are unreliable. That said, a solution to this problem has not yet been produced and all agreed that it was more important to move forward than wait.

EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCE: MONTENEGRO, HUNGARY AND ROMANIA

At the invitation of the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER), Montenegro's Minister for Human and Minority Rights, Fuad Nimani, and Assistant Minister, Sabahudin Delic, accompanied by PER staff, visited Hungary and Romania.

In the countries' two capital cities, Budapest and Bucharest, the Montenegrin delegation and PER met with various parliamentary committee chairmen, commissioners, presidents of local minority self-governments, secretaries of state in the governments of both countries, as well as with experts on minority rights. During the trip, Minister Nimani and Assistant Minister Delic discussed best minority related practices in Hungary and Romania, as well as presented Montenegro's achievements in creating a comprehensive governmental minority policy.

By meeting with government officials from Hungary and Romania, two countries with their own stories of successful minority practices, Minister Nimani and Assistant Minister Delic had the opportunity to exchange ideas on how to capitalize on Montenegro's recent minority rights legislation progress. They also discussed how to facilitate and sustain successful administrative bodies capable of addressing minority needs, and learn from the positive practice in Hungary and Romania.

Budapest, Hungary

On April 7-8, 2008, the Montenegrin delegation met with the Hungarian Office of Ombudsman, Members of the Hungarian and European Parliaments, leaders in the National Roma Self-Government, officials from the office of the Prime Minister, and the State Secretary for Minority National Policy of Hungary. During discussions, the Montenegrin delegation was informed about the Ombudsmen's system in Hungary, the structure and prerogatives of minority Self-Governments, and implementation of state policies towards minorities living in Hungary. Special attention was paid to the issue of the Roma.

A leader from the Roma community in Hungary informed the delegation that the Hungarian government continues on implementing Roma policies without Romani participation. The Montenegrin delegation was congratulated for their governments' inclusion of Roma leaders when developing minority policies, despite Montenegro's general lateness in addressing minority issues. The Hungarian Roma Self-Government offered to jointly cooperate with the newly elected Roma Minority Council in Montenegro. Their experience might be of use to Montenegro's new council as it develops its administration and capacity for implementing community projects.



Left to right: Livia Plaks, Laszlo Teleki, Alex Grigor'ev, Katalin Szili, Dubravka Kubatov, Fuad Nimani, and Sabahudin Delic.

A common theme during the meetings was Hungary's and Montenegro's ongoing struggle to resolve the issue of permanent parliamentary representation for minorities. The Romani leadership in Hungary stated that it has been fourteen years since the adoption of the Minority Law in Hungary, yet its provisions for permanent parliamentary representation for minorities have still not been implemented. Montenegro, for its part, is currently working on attempting to return the 2006 provisions of its Minority Law that allow for permanent representation in their parliament. A Hungarian representative in the European Parliament commended Montenegro for passing its progressive Minority Law. The majority of European Parliament members agree, he said, that any future EU candidate will have to have such a law as a prerequisite for EU accession. The President of the Hungarian Parliament remarked that in the year 2011, when Hungary takes on the EU Presidency, minority issues will be its top priority.

After the meetings in Budapest, the Montenegrin delegation remarked to PER staff on their need to develop further steps on how to implement minority policy at the local level. So far, the greater part of the focus in Montenegro has been in defining and developing the national legislation – little thought has been given to how local governments will actually enact it. In this regard, they stated, the Hungarian experience was extremely instructive.

Bucharest, Romania

On April 9, 2008, the Montenegrin delegation met with officials from the Romanian Prime Minister's office, various State Secretaries in the Romanian government and the office of the Prime Minister, the Romanian government's

Department for Interethnic Relations, senior officials from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and various Romanian Parliament members.

The visit to the Romanian Parliament was particularly instructive for the Montenegrin delegation. Romania is one of the few countries that has actually implemented the policy of reserved permanent parliamentary seats for minorities. During meetings it was remarked that minority representation in parliament is crucial when promoting minority interests.

It was also stated, however, that permanent parliamentary representation should not be the only vehicle for ensuring minority presence in the parliament. In Romania, leaders from large minority communities struggle with being equated with numerically insignificant groups. They suggested that a policy that equates someone who receives 150,000 votes and someone who receives a few thousand votes is flawed – instead of receiving 3 or 4 representatives, they are limited to just one. For example, even though only 50,000 votes are required for a seat in Parliament and the Roma party receives 150,000, they are limited to one seat because their party does not receive a 5% political threshold and qualifies for only one minority reserved seat. Plus, the political weight of one seat is hardly sufficient for successfully passing legislation for the minorities that one seat represents.

Officials at the Romanian government's Department for Interethnic Relations (DIR) informed the Montenegrin delegation about their programs and projects. They stressed the importance of working not only with minorities but also with majorities – this dual approach is the only way to alleviate the country of prejudice. For example, extreme right wing groups recruit mostly from the majority's youth population – if not educated and made aware about minorities, these youth might become tomorrow's neo-Nazi movement.

With regards educational programs, the department focused on the need to produce textbooks in minority languages and a textbook on multiculturalism (mandatory for second grade students in Romania). DIR officials stressed the need for minority participation in government and said that only through such participation it is possible to resolve minority needs effectively.

The most important conclusion drawn from the meetings in Bucharest was the Romanian officials' stress on the importance of political will when resolving minority issues. Even the most perfect laws and regulations serve only as a mechanism for establishing a working dialogue between majority and minority communities. It is through this dialogue and not the legal framework, minority policy achieves sustainable results.

MINORITY INTEGRATION IN MONTENEGRO: NEXT STEPS

One June 27, 2008, in Podgorica, PER organized its concluding activity in the three-year long project titled "Developing a Governmental Minority Policy in Montenegro." Minority representatives and government officials came together to discuss how the new legislation and government strategies resulting from the PER project (Minority Law, Minority Fund, Roma Strategy, Minority Strategy, Rules on the Formation of Minority Councils) have improved the daily lives of minorities living in Montenegro, how minority communities can utilize the legislative tools now available to them, and what future steps are needed to secure minority integration in the country.

The responsibility for our future is in our hands – regardless of the good intentions of PER and other international organizations – it is up to us if we want to be the role model for good interethnic accord in Europe.

The conversation ranged from congratulatory remarks on how far the Montenegrin government has come along its path towards minority integration and cautionary reminders of how far both the Montenegrin government and minority communities have yet to go. In terms of minority policies in Montenegro, there remains much to debate. Ambiguities persist about already established institutions like minority councils – a consistent vision for their organization, functioning, authority, and influence continues to be a topic of uncertainty. Practical issues such as the constitution of the Minority Fund continue to be a problem. And lastly, the mechanism for permanent minority representation in the Montenegrin parliament and local assemblies continues to be unresolved, and more importantly, increasingly contentious.

Opening Remarks

"The events in the past year have shown very clearly the minorities' belief and trust in the authorities in Montenegro," stated PER President Livia Plaks in her opening remarks, "and it is this belief that has led to the country's continued stability." She praised the government for its accommodation of minorities, especially with regards the ongoing debate about permanent representation of minorities in parliament and concluded by stating, "in Europe today, there is a very important lesson to be learned – namely, that the management of interethnic relations is above all in the national interest."



Left to right: Avdul Kurpejovic, Miodrag Vukovic, Vuksan Simonovic.

Montenegrin Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection, Fuad Nimani, began his opening remarks by stating, “We’ve stopped counting the activities we’ve held with PER – there are just too many. At the first events, we focused on the states’ relations with the Albanian community. We are in the 4th generation of students at the Albanian-language faculty, our border crossings with Albania are working well, the maternity ward in Ulcinj has been open since 2005 – the list of our joint successes continues.” He then went on to say that Montenegro has an additional obligation to raise the level of minority accommodation even higher than that of other democracies – raising

minority rights to the level of European standards is only the beginning. “The responsibility for our future is in our hands – regardless of the good intentions of PER and other international organizations – it is up to us if we want to be the role model for good interethnic accord in Europe,” he concluded.

Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Presentation

Assistant Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro Sabahudin Delic presented his Ministry’s main priorities and achievements over the past year. “Article 33 of the Minority Law states that every minority can select its own minority council, from 17-35 members,” he reported. In July 2007, the Ministry began this process by publishing the Rules for the First Formation of Minority Councils, after which they began a publicity campaign to educate the public about what these minority councils are supposed to do and why they are important. “We’ve published in multiple languages information about these councils on websites, TV, radio – and met with NGOs privately. We went to the localities of minorities and explained the procedures for electing the first councils. The Croatian Council, then Bosnjak, then Roma, then Muslim, and finally Albanian Council (April 19, 2008) have been formed. The establishment of each council was followed by registration by the government – with this registration, the councils have obtained the status of legal entities.”

With regards the Minority Fund – financial support for all language, cultural, educational and other activities of minority communities – the ministry had difficulty engaging the parliament which, according to the ministry, showed a lack of interest in developing a law on the fund. The ministry had to take the

initiative and the statutes of the fund were adopted by the government in February 2008 and 0.15% of Montenegro’s 2008 budget has been allocated for these activities (approximately 1 million euros). Representatives of minority councils along with government officials are supposed to serve on the board of directors for this fund – this has been delayed because the minority councils have been slow in nominating their representatives. “We still haven’t received the names from certain minorities of who will be representing certain councils on this board of directors, and until the board is completely formed, we are unable to disperse the funds.”

The official concluded his presentation by announcing that Montenegro’s Center for Minority Cultures is fully equipped and up and running – this center’s main priority is to protect the cultural identity of all communities living in Montenegro. The Roma Strategy – the government’s plan to help the Roma specifically from 2008 – 2012 has been allocated 400,000 euros in 2008 alone for special projects. And the Minority Strategy is in its final revision stage and should be adopted within the month.

Minority Councils

A member of the Croat Minority Council reported that the first problem the Croat community faces in Montenegro is the inability to use the Croatian language in schools, the media, on TV, radio, etc – and the fact that they do not have their own media. “This is something that represents the basic problem in trying to preserve our identity,” she stated. The second problem, she acknowledged, is the inability of Croats to participate at the national level in institutions.

A member of the Albanian Minority Council then reported on his council’s recent progress. Since the establishment of the Albanian Council (19 April 2008), five sessions have been held and the rules for procedure have been adopted. The council, however, faces an uncertain future since certain members *ex officio* are boycotting and refusing to work with the current council. These members claim the election of the Albanian Council was unfair and does not represent the Albanian minority community. International participants noted that this boycott is symbolic of Montenegro’s already acknowledged intra-ethnic Albanian political discord. If this problem is not resolved quickly, it could lead to delegitimization of the Albanian Council, and Montenegro’s minority councils in general.

A member of the Bosnjak Minority Council commented that the current problem in the Albanian Council is symbolic of a greater danger – the focus on political identity in Montenegro rather than cultural. “I represent the Bosnjak Council, and what my primary interest is that we have no funds, no offices.

Fourteen members *ex officio* have automatically become members of my council and I don't think this is good – it leads to automatic politicization of how the council operates and what it focuses on. We have the opportunity to be the bridge between the east and west, and as the second largest ethnic community in Montenegro, there's no reason why we can't be a leader in this movement. We need to know how to apply for the funds for the councils, for the funds for minority activities. We need to know how to tap into additional funds from international resources," he concluded.

A member of the Muslim Minority Council informed participants that his community faces a different set of problems. Since the Muslim people in Montenegro are not established into political parties, they do not have the same problems with politicization. That said, because the council is mostly composed of intellectuals, they may not wield the same political clout as officials in their fellow councils. The participant then proudly informed the others that the new Muslim Council is one of the few institutions that has prioritized gender equality – 5 out of the 25 of its members are women.

A member of the Bosnjak Council suggested establishing a coordination committee responsible for coordinating the activities of minority councils in Montenegro so they can work proactively together. "It is not enough for each council to focus on its own cultural and identity. We must work together for all minorities in Montenegro."

An international participant advised that the councils work faster to elect members to the Minority Fund's Board of Directors. Without all five councils doing this, the Ministry will not be able to disperse finances from this fund. The same participant reminded those present that while it may seem like things are moving slowly, Montenegro is moving forward quite quickly with implementation. Just one example of this is the Roma Strategy which was adopted less than a year ago but has already begun financing 17 projects for Roma related activities. What obviously determines whether or not a policy or new institution does well is the political will of the minority community to take advantage of tools already accessible to them.

The same international participant suggested that once the councils are established and representatives appointed that the Ministry host a meeting to discuss what each expects from the other – what the government expects from the councils, and what the councils expect from the government. "Apparently there is some confusion about what the councils are supposed to do," he noted. "Obviously the government needs to clarify this better. A conversation is what is needed."

Permanent Parliamentary Representation

A minority representative and member of parliament opened his statement with: "what we've heard so far is a nice story, and the intentions are definitely on the right track. But the key to all this is how to define the mechanism of political representation of minorities in the parliament. Without this definition, we cannot speak about integrating minorities or improving their access to cultural self-identification. If you're not present in parliament, you're not present in politics."

A member of the Albanian Minority Council reminded participants that minority rights have always depended on the ruling party. "When they need us, they are very accommodating. When they don't need us, they set us aside," he stated. Because of this perceived discrimination, the participant insisted on the need to focus on parliamentary representation. Without permanent political representation, this participant said, there can be no agreement on harmonious interethnic relations in Montenegro.

Conclusion

"As a member of the ruling party, I can admit that some of the things we agreed, we have not been able to fulfill," said one parliamentarian at the roundtable. "But we have achieved a great deal of many things that were agreed to. The process has been long, but we have not lost our way." The participant then spoke about Montenegro's EU accession process and how the country has been treated the same as Bosnia, Serbia and Macedonia. According to this participant this treatment is unfair. "No one has ever shot a gun or killed anyone during elections in Montenegro," he said. "We're on a much higher level of interethnic accord than the countries in our surrounding region. It is our joint achievement that we have a majority tolerant society willing to negotiate with minority communities. I am proud of that."

One minority representative stated, "Today is better than it was yesterday, and it is worse than it will be tomorrow. We are constantly improving. If we have learned one thing from PER, it is to 'take it step by step.' We can't do it all at once. We need to go one step at a time and continue with dialogue."

At the conclusion of the meeting, future steps were outlined for further improvement of minority issues in Montenegro. These include:

- Financing of minority councils
- Minority council capacity building
- Implementation of the Minority Strategy and minority related legislation
- Creation of a minority council coordination committee
- Resolving the issue of permanent parliamentary representation for minorities

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