



Developing a Minority Policy for Montenegro: Effective Media Relations

Meeting Report

The “Effective Media Relations” seminar and its subsequent workshop at the Montenegrin Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection was part of the Project on Ethnic Relations’ (PER) major policy initiative to assist Montenegro in developing a government minority strategy. The project is funded by the British Embassy through the Global Opportunities Fund of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and is conducted in cooperation with the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro.

PER has held three roundtables devoted to the adoption and implementation of Montenegro’s minority law, an integral component to the government’s overarching minority policy. During these discussions, participants, representing all parliamentary parties in Montenegro, reached a number of important conclusions (reports of these meetings available at www.per-usa.org) which helped move the law toward its adoption in the Montenegrin parliament in May 2006.

In order to capitalize on this progress and reinvigorate forward momentum, PER organized on July 20, 2007, 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 Ms. 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.

Turning to the more practical issues of Montenegro's minority policy, Mr. Grigor'ev then discussed 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 out break 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. "The media explains to citizens a government's vision. And it also educates the rest of the world about Montenegro," commented Mr. Grigor'ev. "The rest of the world needs to know about Montenegro's history of good interethnic cooperation and harmonious co-existence. There are also misconceptions that need to be cleared up – there is a perception that Montenegro is stagnating on the issue of minority relations. Some of this perception is justified, some is not," he cautioned.

Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection, Fuad 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.

After an introduction by Mr. Grigor'ev and a brief welcome by Minister Nimani, Ms. Goetschel began her presentation. "It is maybe not a coincidence that a Swiss media consultant is called to Montenegro," she opened. 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.

After a brief breakdown of relevant internal and external dialogue groups in Montenegro, Ms. Goetschel offered some "tips and tricks" on how to best communicate with these varying bodies. "When communicating with external groups, the aim is to be understood. This means, you have to speak in their language," she stated. By translating a maximum of government documents on important matters, the government not only controls the dispersal of information, but also how accurate it is. Ms. Goetschel then presented on such topics as "How to Prepare a Key Message," "How to Develop a Communications Plan," and "How to Mitigate a Crisis." She often reinforced the fact that the government needs to take the initiative when fostering good relations with the media. "Become the first reference," she reasoned. "By actively informing all dialogue groups, the government becomes the leader for information – everyone else becomes just reactionary."

Q&A and Constitutional Debate

Ms. Goetschel's presentation was followed by a brief Question & Answer session during which Montenegrin parliamentarians sought out advice on specific media situations. The first question, as presented by a member of parliament who heads a minority political party, was "what is to be done when a member of the media interprets a statement inaccurately – and what is an appropriate recourse of action when they do it intentionally?"

To this, Ms. Goetschel recommended a professional yet personal negotiation with the journalist – ask that the statement be corrected, or that they write another article that corrects the original quote. In many western countries there are laws in which a person can ask for a rectification of false or misrepresented facts, if necessary through legal action. But the first recourse should be for the government member and the journalist to work together for the good of accurate information. When asked if refusing to work with unprofessional, misquoting journalists was an option, Ms. Goetschel replied, "It is not possible to threaten journalists not to talk to them. It shows them that you're not professional with information. Of course, there are journalists you like better than others, but the same basic information needs to be provided to everyone and it will earn you respect."

One parliamentarian questioned the applicability of Ms. Goetschel's answer by referring to the criticisms of the media made by former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as he was leaving office. He observed that politicians in young

democracies are limited in their abilities to vocalize dismay about unprofessional journalism. Such criticism is simply perceived as non-democratic, anti-transparent or 'backwards.' "As politicians we need to be aware that the Balkans have particular handicaps. We can't use all your suggestions because we know in the Balkans that not all media are the same," he concluded.

One participant commented, "Having in mind that the media can ride you to the stars but also pummel you into the ground, we need to be careful. Montenegro is very sensitive to the delicate issues of minority rights and every word I say could cause disturbances in the state." To this, an international participant responded, "The real issue that I'm concerned with is something that does not exist anywhere else in the Balkans, but something that you have here in Montenegro and something that you are not always careful with – this is the completely outstanding relationship between majorities and minorities here in Montenegro. Of course there are disputes, but you have created an outstanding level of communication. You are searching for compromises through dialogue – this is very special and too rare in the Balkans."

Ms. Goetschel agreed and reminded participants that "that there is a lot of work to be done to establish a basis in which you prove that you're a professional information service – it does not happen overnight and it cannot happen if one side is threatening the other. Both partners need to be in a trusting environment in order to have a genuine and sincere dialogue – rules will be profitable to everybody especially when you don't agree." In the end, she advised that no matter where in the world or what the situation might be, the spokesperson and the journalist need to have the same goal which is to provide information that is timely and truthful.

Another 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 with the above parliament member's statements 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. While the idea was met with general interest and enthusiasm, no commitments for such an event were made during the roundtable.

It was then suggested that a possible system for building the government's and the parliament's capacity could be made through the use of internships. Interns could draft press releases, work out the logistical coordination of media events, and even do light translation. By hiring young people who are still studying at university but mature and professional enough to carry a significant amount of work, the government might find inexpensive assistance from future leaders who want nothing more than the experience and the satisfaction of being a part of a new country's development.

According to a parliament member, there are already interns working at parliament. In particular, he referenced a law student who helped draft the text of the legislation on establishing the Minority Fund, a financial fund of the government envisaged by the Minority Law that will appropriate monies to the function of the government's minority policies. "The problem is that the physical capacities of the facilities in the parliament building are rather modest," he concluded, "We don't even have room for our committee meetings."

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.”

Prior to the seminar, several attendees requested that should time allow, the meeting be opened to include dialogue about the new draft of the Constitution, especially in regards to Montenegro’s minority policy and how it is communicated to the public. “There is a need that the ethnic communities be informed about our laws. What is even more important is communication and establishing trust between majorities and minorities,” said one of the participants.

“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 law on minority rights 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.

“What we need to say is that Montenegro is a multi-ethnic country and that the only legal act is to remove discrimination,” responded another parliament member. “The small charter [of the former State of Serbia and Montenegro devoted to issues of human and minority rights] needs to be integrated into the text of our new Constitution, and we need to be more open about sharing dilemmas with the public. The public needs to know that the small charter doesn’t talk about direct representation,” he concluded. The same member then criticized the Ministry for not working more quickly and moving ahead with the establishment of the Minority Councils – their presence could be very useful in the debate about the Constitution. He also expressed his concern that the Roma Strategy remained in limbo. “We need to live and work with the Roma and they need special consideration,” he said.

A participant from the Ministry then gave an update on the calendar for the Roma strategy’s adoption. After the completion of the final draft as discussed at a PER roundtable in March 2007, the strategy was dispersed to all relevant ministries for their analysis, and to gather their opinions about their role in its implementation. After their comments have been analyzed by the Ministry, the strategy will be sent before Government for its adoption, most likely in early fall. In reference to the Minority strategy and the Minority Fund, the Ministry intends to submit the documents to Parliament in the fourth quarter of this year. “It is our great hope that some of the minority councils will exist by Christmas – probably not all, but hopefully some,” he stated.

The meeting reached its conclusion with the following missive from an international participant: “The councils need to be established in order for the minority policy to be implemented. There needs to be understanding that all minorities need to be included in this process.”

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 Studies.

As the Constitution is of vital importance to the government's minority policy, and is currently the main topic of conversation in Montenegro, the workshop attendees asked to concentrate on how the Ministry can communicate to the public about this process, and what the process means for Montenegrin society.

The participants then devised three different scenarios for the upcoming Constitutional decision. These scenarios were categorized as "ideal," "worst case," and "probable." After outlining a possible key message for each, the workshop addressed the "probable" scenario, devised a plan on how to educate the public about the developments that led up to this particular scenario, and listed which dialogue groups would be available for the Ministry to approach in order to disperse information.

Ministry staff then 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. This trip could also be the first step in creating the basis for a long-term effective communications strategy through professional credibility, a topic of which Ms. Goetschel spoke in the morning seminar.

After discussing logistical coordination and documents needed for a successful media trip, the Ministry tentatively scheduled the event for some time in September, a few weeks prior to when the draft text of the Constitution is supposed to go before Parliament. International participants strongly cautioned the Ministry to keep the event small, as a large media trip would most likely be too cumbersome and time consuming. Ms. Goetschel recommended that the Ministry invite an editor-in-chief from each newspaper, not just random journalists, as well as several members of the foreign press. She also stated that it was important for the Ministry to invite representatives from all media sources, even the ones that are not writing positively on minority issues.

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. Where this momentum will take the participants will be seen in the upcoming months.

List of Participants

English Language Alphabetical Order

Gazmend Cuca, Senior Legal Adviser, Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro

Ferhat Dinosa, Member, Parliament of Montenegro; President, Democratic League of Albanians

Corinne Goetschel, Founder and President, CGC

Alex Grigor'ev, Executive Director, Project on Ethnic Relations (USA)

Amer Halilovic, Member, Parliament of Montenegro (Bosnjak Party)

Adrienne Landry, Program Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations (USA)

Fuad Nimani, Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro

Koca Pavlovic, Chairman, Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms, Parliament of Montenegro (Movement for Changes)

Rifat Rastoder, Vice President, Parliament of Montenegro (Social Democratic Party)

Orhan Sahmanovic, Secretary, Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro

Vuksan Simonovic, Member, Parliament of Montenegro (Socialist People's Party)

Vasel Sinishtaj, Member, Parliament of Montenegro; President, Albanian Alternative

Ivan Vukcevic, Political Officer, British Embassy Podgorica

Miodrag Vukovic, Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations and European Integration; Chairman, Club of Deputies of the Democratic Socialists, Parliament of Montenegro

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