



Institutional Arrangements for Implementation and Monitoring of the Montenegrin Roma Governmental Strategy

Fourth Roundtable
March 7, 2007
Podgorica, Montenegro

Summary Report

On March 7, 2007, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized the fourth and final roundtable discussion in its two-year initiative on "Institutional Arrangements for Implementation and Monitoring of the Montenegrin Roma (RAE) Governmental Strategy." This project was 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 Protection of Human and Minority Rights of Montenegro. The meeting was attended by various government officials, Romani leaders and activists, and international experts, and opened by the British Ambassador, John Dyson, Montenegro's Minister for Human and Minority Rights Protection, Fuad Nimani, President of the Romani Circle Coalition Nedzmedin Salja, and PER President, Livia Plaks.

The focus of the fourth roundtable was the second draft of the first Montenegrin Roma strategy written by Professor Nebojsa Vucinic, a Montenegrin lawyer and expert on minority issues, who has been responsible for drafting the document during the course of the PER project. PER distributed a copy of the second draft to a range of stakeholders, including Romani leaders, government officials and representatives of international organizations prior to the meeting.

The roundtable provided a forum for participants to discuss and strategize on best practices to adopt, finance, and implement the Roma strategy. The main thrust of the dialogue focused on the strategy's priorities which were articulated as: education, housing, political participation, the issuance of official documents, and human rights. The following are the major points and recommendations made in the course of the discussion.

The roundtable was co-chaired by PER President Livia Plaks and OSCE/ODIHR Senior Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues / Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, Andrzej Mirga. PER President, Livia Plaks, emphasized in her opening remarks the importance of Roma inclusion into Montenegrin public life as integral to the country's European integration process. According to Ms. Plaks, Montenegro, as an aspiring EU country, needs to formulate concrete plans to integrate the Roma, and that providing them with a voice conducive to their political representation is an obligation.

After the opening remarks, Professor Nebojsa Vucinic presented the second draft and remarked on the vast input given to him from previous PER roundtables, as well as from consultation with Roma activists and leaders. The facilitation of a governmental office to provide free legal services for persons belonging to the RAE community to inform them of their rights, and the inclusion of a financial structure in which the government allocates 0.2% of the state's annual budget for the implementation of the Roma strategy were among some of the major suggestions incorporated into the second draft.

After outlining the main points of the document, he addressed some of the difficulties pertaining to the implementation of the strategy. He shared the opinion with other participants that the two major obstacles to the strategy's implementation are lack of financial resources and lack of sufficient political will. He urged the government to commit more resources to the implementation of the strategy and strongly advised allocating at least 0.2% of its annual budget for this purpose. According to several participants, this would not only indicate the willingness of the government to accommodate its minorities but also encourage international donors to continue supporting the process.

Although the delay of Montenegro to adopt a Roma strategy has disadvantaged the Roma community, one participant stated that through the second version of the strategy it is possible to see how disadvantages can be quickly turned into assets – delay had granted the participants insights about the mistakes and successes of other countries in the region that have adopted similar strategies. One such example is the inclusion of state budgetary resources for the strategy’s implementation. According to this participant, no other country in the region has included into the text of the document financing for implementation – something which will greatly enhance the state’s ability to implement the initiative.

The inclusion of a financial structure in which the government allocates 0.2% of the state’s annual budget to the Roma strategy’s implementation was highly praised by all participants. It was agreed that the allocation of funds will not only signify the government’s dedication to the improvement and inclusion of the RAE communities, but also serve as legitimate proof to its citizens and the international community that Montenegro is finally moving forward with one of the most important aspects of its minority policy.

Although there was agreement about the necessity of state funding, there was disagreement over the amount of funds needed for the implementation of the strategy. One local governmental official stated that although the draft is one of the best strategies the state has adopted so far, the 0.2% of the state’s annual budget is highly insufficient given the scope of problems the Roma community faces. This opinion was shared by several participants, but the 0.2% was accepted by consensus given the fact that there is possibility to increase this amount as Montenegro’s economy grows and stabilizes.

The constructive role of the Roma community and continued engagement of local NGOs in the process were also identified as key factors to successful implementation of the strategy. Although the document is similar to other strategies already adopted by more than twenty European countries, the Montenegrin Roma strategy is tailored to specifically address problems facing the Montenegrin Roma community. One participant asserted that the document represents the beginning of a long process of emancipation for the Roma community in Montenegro and will be the impetus for gradually improving collective rights of the Roma as well as all minorities.

The discussion then evolved into brief comments about the strategy, the need for both the government and the Romani community to express greater political will, and methods for moving forward. In stark contrast to the first draft presented at the third roundtable, the second draft was met with marked enthusiasm by Roma representatives. Many of the Romani participants welcomed the inclusion of their suggestions into the draft and remarked on how the second version presents a more comprehensive package.

Although the second draft far exceeded the expectations of many participants, the bulk of the discussion was focused on the need for further improvements. Various suggestions were made including a clause on the preservation of culture and tradition, the addition of special scholarships, the need for a special section on gender equality, environmental concerns and their relevance to health and housing, the role of the media in raising awareness, and special school curriculum.

Strengthening the system of education was considered an important element of preserving identity, and key to Roma integration. A Roma participant highlighted the importance of education in the development of the Roma community. He maintained that the government must provide incentives, such as scholarships, to reduce the school dropout rate among primary school Roma students, who, according to him, tend to dropout as early as 5th grade. It was generally agreed upon that poor education is the culprit for most of the problems confronting the Roma community, such as high unemployment, and poor living standards. This participant also recommended that the largest amount of the state allocated funds go towards education programs. A junior government official viewed education as a means to integrate Roma community into the country’s public life, but he doubted that significant improvements in education can be achieved without first meeting other preconditions, such as providing adequate housing, improving social conditions, hygiene, healthcare and nutrition. “We need to meet these preconditions to ensure a normal life, otherwise children will continue to drop out of school and be sent to the streets to beg.” That said, all the participants agreed that education was a main priority, and one with several facets that cannot be resolved by the Ministry of Education alone. Participants agreed that several governmental ministries, like the Ministry for Social Welfare and the Ministry for Finance, will need to take an active role in the educational development of the RAE community.

The issuance of identification cards was another issue raised during the meeting. Some Roma representatives asked to expedite the card issuance process – shortening the waiting period from two to one year – so as to enable Roma people to benefit from social services. Other participants agreed with this suggestion but wondered whether the state has the institutional and financial capacity to do so in the near future. An international participant stated that prior to the process of issuing identification cards, the government needs to know the size of the current Roma population in Montenegro. This should be achieved by conducting a survey which, it was agreed upon, should be the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights’ first initiative. Such a survey would serve as a surrogate for a more expensive repeat of

the national census. The need for an accurate count of the Roma in Montenegro is urgent as the implementation of the strategy and other Roma related government programs depend on it, agreed the participants. A Roma representative, however, said that the survey would not be as simple a process and would not produce as accurate information as hoped. He pointed out that Roma often refuse to identify themselves as such for fear of reprisals.

As a means to increase public awareness about Roma problems, the incorporation of awareness raising through media into the strategy was also recommended and would serve as a complement to the system of education. An NGO activist stated that media outlets in the Roma language or other languages covering Roma issues would be of utmost importance for the integration of the community. She suggested that some of the funds should be allocated for financing media programs on Roma. According to one Roma representative, ten Roma students have completed journalism training recently, yet none of them have been able to find jobs. The Ministry of Culture was identified as another actor that could plan and implement Roma-related media programs.

Roma NGO representatives asked that an action plan for ensuring the implementation of the project be included in the strategy. Some of them expressed fear that the document may remain only on paper for a long time. They cited some of the previous initiatives which were adopted but never fully implemented. Although the government was often blamed for such failures, an NGO Roma activist stated that the Roma community must take greater responsibility to ensure that this strategy is not ignored and is properly implemented. He referred to the impending National Roma Council which will serve as a means to coordinate activities among Roma NGOs, and serve as a legitimate political institution capable of interacting with the local and the national government. Furthermore, he argued that bottom-up approaches have proven to be more successful in minority community integration than top-down ones.

The strategy provides for affirmative action, such as giving free textbooks and meals to Roma students. Although this was welcomed by participants, some participants argued that providing such benefits only to Roma students might contribute to their further segregation, since in many areas students from non-Roma communities are just as poor. An international participant disagreed with this premise. She pointed out that affirmative action for Roma is a standard policy in many countries, such as Hungary, Poland, and Romania, and it is seen as a compensation for their historic discrimination and present marginalization.

During the roundtable, an international participant cautioned against overloading the draft strategy with too many details and focusing on bigger, overarching aims. "Taking into account the limited state resources and the lack of political will, we should focus on the main elements that will improve life for Roma in the long run." Governmental representatives, in particular, addressed the current levels of the government's capacity to implement these initiatives. While expressing great desire to move forward with the strategy, local and national government officials communicated great concern about their ability to build houses, donate free textbooks, or even issue documents in the allotted time, given their present economic and political situation. According to one international representative, their presentations were of particular use to international participants who will be able to better design their future initiatives around these statements, as well as to Roma leaders and activists who can focus on keeping their expectations realistic and focused on priorities.

The Roma Strategy and its acceptance by the Montenegrin government will be the Minority Law's first success since being adopted in 2006. It is also a genuine good faith show of effort by the Montenegrin government to the international community which will hopefully be more inspired to contribute to Montenegro's budding minority policy work. From the international perspective, several participants touted this document as being "one of the best in the region."

While this roundtable was the final in this specific project, there is still much work to be done. Next steps should include assisting various Montenegrin Ministries in developing projects related to the Roma strategy which could be funded by international organizations or through assistance from foreign governments.

It will be a PER priority to make sure this document is properly implemented and does not become just another paper fallen to the wayside of good intentions. The special inter-ministerial commission proposed in the strategy, which provides for permanent Romani participation, will have the responsibility for monitoring the strategy's implementation, and will be a strong governmental body which will give ownership of the strategy to Roma leaders by insisting on proper supervision in cooperation with relevant authorities. The establishment of the National Council of the Romani Minority in Montenegro – another GOF funded PER project – will be another assurance that the Roma strategy proceeds in conjunction with oversight by legitimate Minority representatives. Both of these bodies will achieve this project's overarching objective which is to achieve greater inclusion of Roma into decision making processes.

List of Participants

English Language Alphabetical Order

Remzija Ademovic, Senior Adviser, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare of Montenegro; National Coordinator, the Decade of Roma Inclusion

Ramadan Alija, President, Association "Children Are Our Future", Podgorica

Paraschiva Badescu, Ambassador; Head, Mission in Montenegro, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Marsha Barnes, Charge d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy in Montenegro

Veselj Beganaj, President, Pocetak, Niksic

Mehmet Berisha, Mladi Romi, Herceg Novi

Senad Cobic, President, RAE Ulcinj

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

Viktor Damjanovic, Protector, Representation in Montenegro, UNHCR

Sabahudin Delic, Assistant Minister, Ministry for Human and Minority Rights Protection of Montenegro

Fana Delisha, Coordinator, Center for Roma Initiatives, Niksic

Zena Dubovic, Enfants-Djeca, Berane

John Dyson, Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to Montenegro

Cazim Fetahovic, Assistant Minister of Education and Science of Montenegro

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

Zlatko Ivanovic, Political Specialist, U.S. Embassy in Montenegro

Samir Jaha, Activist, Herceg Novi

Hadzi Kabasi, President, Association of Egyptian Refugees "Zajedno"

Branka Kovacevic, Head, Office in Podgorica, United Nations Children's Fund

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

Darka Minic, Community Services Assistant, Representation in Montenegro, UNHCR

Goran Miranovic, Secretary of Labor, Health and Social Welfare, City of Podgorica

Tatjana Miranovic, Democratization Program Assistant, OSCE Mission to Montenegro

Andrzej Mirga, Senior Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues, Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe, Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues

Sinisa Nadazdin, Executive Director, Philia Ministries

Vera Nakic, RAE-Ulcinj, Ulcinj

Fatima Naza, Center for Roma Initiatives, Niksic

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

Jelena Perovic, Program Officer, Office in Podgorica, Save the Children

Livia Plaks, President, Project on Ethnic Relations (USA)

Behija Ramovic, Executive Director, Zensko Srce, Podgorica

Nedzmedin Salja, President, Romani Circle Coalition

Tamara Srzentic, Program Coordinator, Representative Office in Montenegro, Foundation Open Society Institute

Muhamed Ukovic, Coordinator, Bjelogorac, Ulcinj

Aleksandra Visnjic, Project Associate, Social Support for RAE in Montenegro, Office in Podgorica, United Nations Development Program

Nebojsa Vucinic, Professor, Law Department, University of Montenegro; Director, Center for Human Rights

Ivan Vukcevic, Political Officer, British Embassy Podgorica

Ana Zec, Project Manager, Office in Podgorica, Council of Europe

Aleksandar Zekovic, Executive Director, Roma Scholarship Fund

Rafaella Zoratti, Democratization Officer, OSCE Mission to Montenegro