



**International Roundtable on
Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians of Kosovo:
Challenges and Prospects of Sustainable Integration**

**Pristina
9 February 2009**

Report

Although the conflict in Kosovo ended a decade ago, few of Kosovo's 120,000-150,000 Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian citizens have returned. The host countries in Western Europe, which provided temporary protection for a large number of refugees, are increasingly keen to send back those residing without legal status to Kosovo. Independent Kosovo is bound to accept these groups of people, but many of them do not see a benefit in returning. They are aware that those who remained in Kosovo are in continuous need of assistance and that the vast majority live off of handouts and social assistance in conditions of extreme poverty. The few return projects hardly can be considered success stories. The troubling example of IDPs, who have continued to live on toxic lead camps in Cesmin Lug, and Osterode nearly a decade in appalling health conditions, does not encourage others to return.

A number of policy documents referring to voluntary return and repatriation of those without legal status in host countries have been developed by or with the involvement of Kosovo authorities and the international community since 2006. Some of these documents provided normative and policy frameworks for the integration of returnees or for their repatriation. Such documents include the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Communities and their Members in Kosovo (NO 03/L-047), the Provisional Institutions Self-Government (PISG), Recommendations to Updating Return Policies and Procedures from May 2006, the Revised Manual on Sustainable Return which was last revised in July 2006, and the Protocol on Voluntary And Sustainable Return, signed June 2006 by UNMIK, the Government of Serbia, and PISG. In addition, most of the municipalities developed Municipal Return Strategies. In 2007, UNMIK and PISG finalized a Strategy for the Reintegration of the Repatriated, addressing the situation of refugees being forcefully returned to Kosovo. Finally, the Strategy for the Integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians adopted in December 2008 by the Kosovo government devotes one chapter to return and reintegration.

International communities and governments which have Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian refugees on their territories speak of the return process as a right of displaced persons to return to their place of origin and as an effort for the preservation of the multi-ethnic fabric of Kosovo society. On the other hand, those who may face repatriation and some civil society advocacy groups call upon decision-makers to avoid the creation of secondary displacement for those who already attained some level of integration in host countries, even if they are no longer under temporary international protection status. They also argue that the eventual return process should meet adequate conditions in Kosovo in order for the return to be sustainable and successful. Finally, the UNHCR upholds its position that certain categories of refugees still need international protection and should not be returned to Kosovo. This includes Kosovo Roma, but also Kosovo Serbs and Albanians in situations where these groups constitute a minority.

On February 9th, 2009, The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized a second international roundtable designed to foster high-level dialogue on challenges and prospects for sustainable integration of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians of Kosovo, whether they reside within Kosovo or in host countries. Over 70 participants gathered at the meeting. Among those present were representatives of the Kosovo government and opposition, international community and diplomatic corps, as well as representatives of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians from Kosovo and from outside, and members of civil society.

At the first PER organized meeting on this subject, held in Vienna October 2008, participants concluded that even though the violence in Kosovo has ended, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians should not be forcibly repatriated. In addition, participants concluded that returns from their host countries to Kosovo should be undertaken on a strictly voluntary basis and that those who choose to return should be given the full spectrum of their legal rights and should be provided with the opportunity to earn a living and enjoy decent housing.

PER chose Prishtina as the location for a follow-up discussion in order to allow participants the opportunity to assess the issues of return and reintegration within the context of recent Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian policy initiatives in Kosovo. Both Vienna and Prishtina roundtables were financially supported by the OSCE ODIHR CPRSI.

Opening Remarks

At the opening of the roundtable, Kosovo's Deputy Prime Minister declared that the integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities is a priority as well as a moral obligation for Kosovo authorities. The Kosovo Constitution and other acts provide a framework for the protection of the rights of these communities. The deputy prime minister underlined that there is good will on the part of the government to integrate these communities and that the adoption of the Governmental Strategy for the Integration of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians is an

PER is an international non-governmental organization that has worked for the prevention and management of ethnic conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union. During its eighteen years of existence, PER has been a neutral facilitator in some of the most difficult interethnic issues in the region. During this time, the issue of the Roma has remained high on its agenda. In many instances, PER has convinced governments to show more political will in addressing the problems of this population. Similarly, this roundtable's purpose was to provide constructive criticism and recommendations for further improving the situation of Roma in Kosovo, as well as those throughout the region.

Language note. While PER uses Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians throughout the paper, this is only to simplify reading and it does not denote any attempts to cluster them into a single group.

additional sign of the willingness of authorities to ensure that members of these communities live a dignified life and have full and equal rights in Kosovo.

In his opening remarks, the representative of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo welcomed the government's adoption of a strategy for Roma, Ashkali and

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Egyptian communities. The OSCE has been instrumental in its elaboration. The representative stressed that the strategy should be complemented with concrete action plans, a realistic timeline and adequate financial allocations. He also pointed out that the existence of unregulated informal settlements serves as an impediment for integration and the returning process. Effective integration requires a comprehensive multi-sector approach. This

strategy is a step forward, and Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians should play an active role in its implementation and should have ownership over the process. The representative's mention of this strategy recalled the example of the Reintegration Strategy for Repatriated Persons, which was adopted in October 2007 but was not implemented due to lack of funding.

In her opening remarks, the President of PER stressed the need for the overall improvement of the situation of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians who live in Kosovo. Such improvements would serve as a foundation upon which sustainable returns can be built. While security remains intimidating only in some parts, all other aspects present obstacles to any returns across Kosovo. Some progress has been made in terms of the issues of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians involving decision-making. However, there still exist numerous concerns and this continues to be serious issue to be dealt with in Kosovo.

Wherever circumstances allow them to stay and integrate into a host country, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians should have this opportunity

There are few incentives provided for those wishing to return to Kosovo. In addition, it is worth noting that there are people who do not see themselves as having a future in Kosovo and who do not wish to return even though they face the prospect of forced return. The president of PER recalled one of Vienna's roundtable conclusions stating that informed and voluntary returns can be rendered effective. This means that governments may consider looking at alternatives to forced return. Therefore, wherever circumstances allow for them to stay and integrate into a host country, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians should have this opportunity. The president of PER also highlighted that some good practices in this regard already exist as some countries, such as Switzerland, provide residence permits for some Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians.

Welcoming the Governmental Strategy for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, the president of PER urged participants to assess ongoing return

projects and to analyze the situation of the Roma in Serb enclaves and in the north as well as the prospects for their integration into Kosovo society. This is a complex and sensitive issue which needs to be tackled. It should be recognized that some Roma choose to move there and to be surrounded by the Serb community receiving pensions and social benefits from Belgrade and sending their kids to Serbian schools. A crucial question is whether the Kosovo authorities have a defined policy to facilitate their integration and what are the expectations of the Roma in enclaves and in the north? Is the Strategy designed to help them as well? The president of PER remarked that some significant players are missing from these discussions, namely those displaced in Serbia, along with Serbian authorities. To accommodate such discussions PER has plans to organize two additional roundtables, one in Belgrade, in co-operation with the Serbian authorities and participation of Roma, and another one in Western Europe.

The Situation of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Communities in Kosovo: Issues and Challenges

Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian representatives living in Kosovo upheld a position shared also by some local authorities and opposition representatives. They maintained that before bringing back larger number of refugees and IDPs to Kosovo, much more has to be done on the ground and for all those who are residing in Kosovo. Without ensuring them conditions for successful integration or inclusion into society, new arrivals will just be a burden to all. The representatives claimed that currently, there are no conditions in Kosovo conducive to the return and repatriation for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians.

Interestingly, the question of security for minorities did not dominate the discussion, though some raised it. It has been mostly about mistrust or little trust that the members of the communities have towards KFOR, or local police. Even here however, they were ready to notice some positive changes, though not enough, they claimed, to make people feel fully secure. Nevertheless, representatives of these communities paid more attention to living conditions, opportunities for making a living and issues related to poverty, representation in public office, and cultural issues. They have also viewed the neglect for their concerns and unequal treatment as problematic when compared with the Serb minority. In addition, there has been a visible difference between the views and opinions of Roma and especially Egyptian representatives. Some representatives underlined the unique identity of Egyptians and the distinction between Roma identity. They were also interested in attaining more representation in public offices and entering politics.

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Some representatives of these communities recalled the everyday experiences of some individuals. A person working as a municipal official in Gjilane asserted that he is dealing with cases of individuals who are unemployed, have no electricity, water or waste collection, and live with sick people in their house. He concluded

that “until this is fixed, let's not talk about any returns.” There has been a consensus among these speakers that poverty still plagues their communities disproportionately more than the otherwise high Kosovo average. The poverty they mentioned causes families to refrain often from sending their children to school since they cannot provide them with clothing and school materials, and many of them go to school hungry. An international official summarized the all-encompassing dimensions of the problem: “challenges are of social, economic and security nature, and these must be kept in mind in the process in order to achieve successful returns.” To improve matters, these communities need more assistance, which he argued is not forthcoming. Another individual summarized this experience and said “for us who remained in Kosovo, poverty is a standard”. He pointed out that relatives living abroad are a lifeline for most families in Kosovo.

Some community representatives complained that the highest attention was given to Serbs and that Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians were ignored or received inadequate attention. This approach is reflected in a huge discrepancy in allocating and spending resources between Serbs and other minorities. Several people accused the Ministry of Communities and Returns for working solely for the interests of the Serbian community. An Ashkali NGO activist claimed that most of the budget is absorbed by the Serb community. He requested that budgets be allocated in proportion and rhetorically wondered if radicalizing would help receive more attention. Some community representatives were ready to acknowledge the fact that they “cannot be equal with Serbs in Kosovo”.

While there are some small improvements regarding security matters, in the view of some of the Roma representatives, it is not enough to make people feel fully secure. At the community level there is still little trust towards KFOR and local police. While representatives of local authorities claimed that all minorities enjoy freedom of movement inside Kosovo, insecurity is no longer a reason for leaving. In fact, people persistently tend to live apart from one another. “We should focus on integration and employment, which is a hardship for all living in Kosovo”. The representative also cautioned that segregation as well as self isolation, is wrong and does not promote integration. .

A representative of the opposition supported this remark and stated that there is a challenge coming from the culture of separation which is upheld by communities in Kosovo. He said that “minorities should be able to preserve their identity but otherwise, the state and authorities should address and solve problems of minorities within the framework of the constitution and according to their rights as citizens.”

Some criticism has gone towards the municipalities and their policies on returns. One Roma activist from a mixed town complained that he was a passive observer of the municipal strategy on returns which does not meet any conditions for sustainable returns. He said that decentralization presents a chance and that attention should be placed on local governments, as they will be acquiring more power regarding the current process of decentralization. On

the other hand, as cautioned by a representative of civil society, despite the multitude of “care”, the situation on the ground is not improving. She blamed this on the mismatch between the laws and their implementation.

Government officials on the other hand argued that it should be recognized that some positive steps have been made, including the steady development of legislative and policy frameworks. Some of these steps are very recent, like the

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Governmental Strategy. In order to see results, time is needed. Several ministerial officials also asked those present to understand that while such institutions are conceived of, they lack actual offices and equipment, curtailing implementation. Some of them were ready to acknowledge that “we are not happy with your situation either, but we are trying our best.” A government official called upon Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities to trust the authorities, “trust is a matter of perception and this must change. It will indeed be a long and difficult process, but there is progress already.” There was also encouragement from the part of representatives of Albanian authorities, and a call was made to Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians to be more vocal in spelling out their requests. In response, it was stated that the government has to be more pro-active and not responsibilities to NGOs. The deputy chairman of the Pristina Municipal Assembly pointed out that the capital has a specific and important role to play when it comes to the implementation of integration measures as well as the return policy. He emphasized in his address to the participants that while there is will from the part of institutions, there exists a lack of funding. He hoped that decentralization will serve to solve, at least partially, this shortcoming.

The opposition representative critically reviewed the government policy to date. In his view the government did not do enough to improve the situation of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo. Regarding government policies towards these communities he “wishes that anybody should be able to mention a few such policies.” But there is confusion here as there is a need for an inventory on what has been done or it is currently being done, the knowledge of what needs to be done, and what needs improvement. The government is simply buying time with promises but it is not achieving much. He also considered that the best way to encourage return is to establish effective policies with concrete outcomes for communities in Kosovo and that this should be a priority. The government should start to improve the situation of the Roma and come up with a list of concrete objectives to be actualized.

Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Communities’ Priorities in Kosovo: Ownership, Property Claims, Compensation, Job Opportunities, and Representation

One of the main priorities for these communities was the right to assert and claim their property. In many instances, as it was recalled by Roma, Ashkali and

Egyptian representatives, the “mahalas” or neighborhoods they lived in prior to the conflict, no longer exist or have been heavily devastated. In those that do exist, basic conditions and infrastructure are missing. Several insisted that they have had houses prior to the conflict that were destroyed or looted by the owners and that consequently they should be properly compensated for their losses. A representative of UNHCR supported their claims but pointed out that the lack of property documentation remains a serious obstacle: “How do you legally compensate someone for property when the owner has no proof of ownership?” he asked. “There are generations of people passing property to one another without proper documentation,” he added.

The existence of buildings or whole “mahalas” established on municipal land without legal titles has been another major issue of concern. One international representative challenged the government by saying that the real test is if they would be ready to give formal ownership to those who have been illegally settled on public land for the past few decades. The same international official has been critical about the justice system, calling it dysfunctional since it is not helping community members to reassert their property titles. He noted that the absence of the Ministry of Justice is very unfortunate, especially since this ministry decides on property issues. Without a clear situation in this aspect you cannot discuss integration. This comment was disputed by several participants including

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a member of the opposition.

This senior opposition leader also argued that one should not mix collective and individual rights, as collective rights are asserted by negotiations.

A representative of UNHCR raised the problem of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian populations lacking personal documents, either due to the conflict or displacement. Lack of property documentation is also a serious issue, as there are generations of people passing property to one another without proper documentation. The issue of property built on municipal land also needs to be addressed. The representative raised the issue of civil registration and citizenship. In this context he underlined that the readmission of a person does not solve the problem with the person’s ID and citizenship. The criterion on statelessness is currently blurry and one should look at it carefully to ensure that a person is properly registered and is provided with documents. According to a representative of the Roma and Ashkali Documentation Center, between 20-40% of these communities might have no IDs in Kosovo.

Many others lamented that there are no job opportunities for them in Kosovo. There are some projects supporting income-generating initiatives for minorities but in principle it’s hard to make a living. An activist from one of the largest Roma “mahala” in Prizren stated that around 60 young people recently left Kosovo because they did not see themselves as having any future there. Another activist

argued that there was no point in building homes if the people who lived in them were unable to support themselves or their family. Construction is not enough, these communities need job opportunities.

Challenges to the viability and sustainability of integration ultimately brought up the topic of representation. Some brought up the usual question of who it is that legitimately represents the interests of communities, whether it is those who establish an NGO, or elected officials and party leaders. An Ashkali political leader from Ferizaj asserted that representation in municipalities is the real issue to discuss. According to the constitution and some legal provisions, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians should have proportional representation among employees in public office. "There are 16 ministries and there are no representatives of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities within them and this is deplorable," he stated.

A call was made by several representatives of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians stating that there has to be a significant increase in the number of people hired within the government and public services. "We are not even the cleaners in the public sector," one of them argued, saying that this is the main reason why youth do not see a future in Kosovo. Another speaker complained that there are no representatives of these communities employed in managerial positions either in public enterprises, airport, or KEK, customs services, police, etc., which is a violation of the constitution. Even worse, many Albanians declare themselves as Ashkali to be able to assume job positions under quota foreseen for these communities. An Ashkali representative claimed that there are no Ashkali working in the Ministry of Communities and that they are under-represented compared to the Roma. As a result they are also in a less favorable position. He stated that in order to solve this problem, community education is a priority, yet no Ashkali works in the Ministry of Education.

The head of the Governmental Office on Community Affairs insisted that the law provides for proportional and adequate representation of communities in public office. Every institution paid for by the Kosovo budget, in other words every public institution, must have proportional employment, not only in general, but also at every level. This includes adequate representation among employees in senior positions. The Mayor of Djakove/Djakovica reminded participants that even in cases where only 10% of the population is a minority in a locality, representation of minorities must be ensured according to law. But in order to exercise this, he called for everyone's support. The law on decentralization and communities also provides some advantages for the community's representation, as the municipality must have a deputy president of the municipal assembly, a person who represents the minority community.

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The acting municipal deputy representing the Ashkali community in Ferizaj complained that this post was only window-dressing. He asserted that he is powerless, participating only once a month at the session of the municipal assembly. He has no office and receives a meager salary which only covers phone expenses. He recommended that the deputy president or chair of the municipal assembly be turned into a deputy mayor, in other words, to belong to the executive arm of the municipality.

The representative of the board of associations of Kosovo municipalities said he will ensure that wherever minorities are not represented yet in administration, the issue will be addressed. He recalled also that all deputy presidents of municipal assemblies are supposed to have an office as chairs of the office of communities at the local level. Moreover, he said that there was a specially allocated budget that such persons should make use of for their work. He argued that his municipality maintains good statistics that are for public access. Since there are legal and institutional solutions, as well as good will, he called upon the participants not to give the wrong impression if they do not know how the system functions. The Deputy Minister for Communities and Returns stressed that the government does not differentiate in providing social assistance to citizens. He mentioned a recent project in Novobërde/Novo Brdo which will be beneficial to Albanians and Serbs alike, but above all will benefit the Roma families there.

An official of the government addressed the issue of employment in public institutions. His office initiated a survey of minority employees in institutions to identify how many people work and in what positions. At the end of this process there will be recommendations to address this matter. The head of the governmental office on community affairs said that his office has clear plans and invited members of communities to prepare projects and access funds which are available. He also encouraged competent candidates to apply for the existing vacancies and said that members from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities would be preferred for these positions.

Returns of IDPs and Refugees and Enclaves: Fears, Hopes and Reality

Debate on the sensitive issue of return has revealed exaggerated but partly justified fears among those who were subjected to the process or may face it in the near future. Especially Roma feared a possibility of mass return to Kosovo from their current places of residence in the West. The existing evidence did not show that it is actually happening. The return process has been rather insignificant if compared with actual numbers. The data available show the various trends; while there was a decrease in the number of voluntary returns during the last year, involuntary or forced return has increased¹. The first trend

¹ According to UNHCR only 582 minority community members returned voluntarily to Kosovo in 2008 (compared to 1,816 in 2007 and 1,669 in 2006). As of November 2008 the Kosovo Ministry of Interior took over the processing of readmission request, formerly carried out by UNMIK. A number of 2,495 persons were repatriated involuntarily to Kosovo in 2008. For more,

can be associated with the declaration of independence by Kosovo, the second one with signed readmission agreements with the EU member states and Kosovo's aspiration towards EU membership. It has also been claimed that involuntary or forced returnees of Roma if sent to Kosovo, would end up in the north of Kosovo or in Serbia.

Against the statements of several participants fearful of mass return, a Swiss representative countered such views as having no substantiating facts as their basis. He gave figures of asylum claims in Kosovo (670), half being from Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. The numbers of those returning were 350 in 2008, a figure that is much smaller than the number of those entering Switzerland.

Asylum claims are reviewed and considered on an individual basis, he said, committing to the fact that Switzerland "will not return those having problems with their security, or lacking means to sustain their life in Kosovo". He recognized that sustainable return is very difficult to be achieved but "we are doing our best." For many participants, Switzerland has been an exceptional and positive case as measured against other countries which are less inclined to keep members of these communities on their territories.

The fact that Kosovo authorities lack the capacity, resources, and will to effectively integrate members of these communities, both those who remained there and some voluntary returnees, is an opinion which has been reiterated by many Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian representatives. There were also claims that the authorities would be even less prepared to handle those who are or will be forcibly returned. Few return projects, like the ones in the Roma Mahala in south Mitrovica, in Gjilan, or Peja, can hardly be considered success stories. For

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successful returns to occur, projects have to be well prepared and adequately funded providing job opportunities. In addition, projects should be coordinated with local authorities, and most importantly, authorities should have the capacity to integrate these people. It should be noted also that several invited representatives from north Mitrovica refused or excused themselves from attending this roundtable for a variety of reasons, including security matters².

A former inhabitant of the Roma Mahala in south Mitrovica who currently lives in France, characterized the position of Kosovo Roma Diaspora on returns. He

see: Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, 17 of March 2009, S/2009/149; p.6

² Recent report describes overall security situation in Kosovo as 'stable' except some concerns for the region on Mitrovica, where a series of inter-ethnic incidents occurred and continues to occur. For more see: Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, 17 of March 2009, S/2009/149, p. 3;

stated that “there are people who will never want to return to Kosovo. Their preference is to remain in the West and be compensated for lost property.” He requested that those in Western Europe be allowed to stay for a while, and later to re-check their plans for returning.

A Roma (born in Ishtok and currently living and working in Germany) representing the Diaspora, raised a question: “Do we people in Diaspora feel comfortable with what the majority in Kosovo has done regarding Roma, so that they will be confident to return?” He questioned whether Albanian authorities seriously considered issues related to the restitution of Roma's properties or compensation. He also asked if the government is prepared to handle the cases of returning families and providing institutional assistance and support once such a family reaches the airport in Prishtina.

An Ashkali political leader from Ferizaj, in Kosovo, expressed concern with the return of IDPs and not the return of those who are in Western Europe. He pointed out that “in Germany alone there are some 35,000 mostly Kosovo Roma refugees and a basic question is where one could place them if returned, in camps?” Some governments and international organizations seem to be keen to simply return people and not care about their real integration. In his view most of the return projects to date were more like experiments and were mostly unsuccessful. “Why should we encourage our relatives to return, if such experiments failed?” he wondered. He also claimed that the ministry of returns so far deals with and protects the interest of the Serbian community. 98% of the budget is absorbed by the Serbian community and only 2% is dedicated for the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities.

A former inhabitant of the Roma Mahala in south Mitrovica was also critical of the return projects. In his view, the Roma “mahala” project in south Mitrovica was a failure and that while a lot of money was invested, nobody is happy to return there. It did not help to solve the most urgent problem of those who were temporarily placed by the international community in lead-contaminated camps in north Mitrovica. As it was stated by others, many families are cut off from electricity, there are no jobs, and half of the private houses which were reconstructed are empty. Some of the families did not even pick up the keys to these houses. There are also instances of families who return to camps in north Mitrovica, as these provide more opportunities and benefits. Some blamed the international community for the failure of the returns to Romani Mahala projects, stating there were many promises made but only a few were kept. Echoing these speakers, an Ashkali representative asserted, “little has been done on reconstruction and some projects were done without consultation with those concerned, and now the constructed houses are simply uninhabited”.

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A deputy chairman in the municipal assembly, an Egyptian himself, referring to the return project in Ishtok which involved some refugees voluntarily returned from FYROM, claimed that such projects should have been initiated later. In any case the government should lead the process, not the NGOs. It should be ensured however, that the civil society is closely involved and consulted.

The Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues recalled his visit to Mahala Avdullah Presheva in Gjilan and what he learned from it. The “mahala” existed for 200 years; there were some 8000 people living there before the conflict, now only some 500 are left. There were 460 houses in the “mahala”, many of which have been completely destroyed. According to representatives of the organization “Sukar Drom”, 57 families that returned voluntarily from Serbia and from FYROM live in the “mahala”. Return and housing was financed by the Kosovo government and the UNDP. According to them, the Roma in the “mahala” currently do not receive any help from the municipality and are unemployed. These individuals make their living thanks to help from families abroad. They send their children to Serbian schools – 71 to primary schools and 6 to high school. They do however, receive support from Belgrade. There are only a few opportunities for jobs or business and Albanians do not employ them. The Roma also claimed that Albanians are taking their houses in the “mahalas”. According to the deputy Mayor, the Kosovo Property Agency is dealing with abandoned property and if some houses are occupied, the Agency ensures that rent is paid to the former owner.

An activist from Gjilan confirmed that although returnees to Gjilan were initially supported, the construction materials they received were of low quality. The humanitarian entitlements were provided for three months after which they stopped. As a conclusion to what has been described above, she informed the participants that many houses of Roma in Gjilan are “for sale” now. She complained that there is no sustainable, long term prospect for integration of returnees there and elsewhere.

A public servant at the local municipality of Peja, a Roma himself, brought up yet another disturbing example from this city. He claimed that mostly Serbs have been benefiting from reconstruction there and that the entire return project seems to be a failure. Out of the 400 houses that have been rebuilt, only 10 % are inhabited. He was not happy with the pace of construction of houses for Roma who returned there or the fact that these projects were simply neglected. A similar situation was described by the Deputy of the Municipal Assembly in Ferizaj. He claimed the Office of Community and Returns built 80 houses in Babush which are entirely uninhabited. Another

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participant mentioned the village of Trebovic where properties of some Roma families were completely devastated and nobody took any responsibility for this matter. Another participant noted that the municipal strategy for returns in Prizren provides no guarantees for those wishing to return for sustainable integration. For example, in the case of Djakova, a residential building for Serbs and Roma which was built in a former cemetery in Plementina, there is currently no water in any of the apartments.

The representative of the opposition supported the view that the return process, and especially forced returns, should be looked at in terms of the current conditions and prospects (economic, infrastructure, etc) in order for them to be sustainable. Lessons must be learned from what has been realized and from the cases brought up by participants. Some Albanian representatives claimed that repatriation is in fact a bigger problem for the majority than for minorities -more Albanians will be forcefully returned. However, an Ashkali political leader disagreed with this view. According to him, Albanian authorities speak in vain about this issue, but Albanians will not return. Many Albanian families in Kosovo are still dependent on help provided by their relatives living in western countries as many Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians currently are living in these countries. Therefore, there are strong incentives for remaining there.

Against these opinions a senior representative of UNMIK claimed that there are several instances of return projects that could be regarded as successful. He agreed, however, that there were many promises and commitments, including funding, which were not kept by the international community or by the Kosovo authorities.

A Roma activist from Gracanica described a grim picture of his community in the enclaves. He claimed that the situation of Roma there is the worst since they are a minority within a minority. Usually there is a lot of talk about problems and how they affect Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo, but nothing is being done to address these problems in enclaves. He deplored the fact that after so many years following the conflict, some Roma are still condemned to live in camps, including lead-poisoned ones. He asserted that "people feel hopeless living in such areas". He underlined the fact that no one shall be surprised that many families are trying to get out from enclaves and that many have left for Germany, Belgium, or other western countries. Just recently 35 families left central Kosovo. There are no job opportunities, and there is no infrastructure or investment in this area. He complained about the fact that the road which was paved in his neighborhood stopped short of the Roma houses.

He also observed that the Roma in Serb-dominated enclaves get the feeling that the government does not really care about them. On the other hand, the government and the Albanian majority might have the impression that Roma there are pro-Serb. He observed that Roma are integrated with Serbs in enclaves as they have lived among them for centuries. He declared that Roma in enclaves request equal

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treatment and respect of their identity and want to be part of the Kosovo society. He concluded that it makes little sense to have forced returns of Roma to Kosovo in general, but even less to return them to enclaves.

A representative of an international organization highlighted that the Serbs' parallel system in enclaves offers sometimes more to Roma than does the Kosovo system. In enclaves they have education in Romani once a week, whereas in the Kosovo system, only recently have they introduced a course which covers aspects of Roma culture, language and history. He also observed that Belgrade offers more incentives to Roma there in terms of higher social assistance such as benefits and pensions. This may also be one of the reasons why Roma families want to stay in North Mitrovica instead of moving to the south "mahala" project.

Albanian officials, including some mayors, while recognizing the difficulties and discrimination of Roma living in enclaves, cautioned against the model of Serbs who have separated themselves for political reasons. They were ready to acknowledge that it is not the Roma to blame but the politics which uphold the divisions between communities. An opposition leader claimed that the government has no policy towards the enclaves and the Roma community there. The UNMIK representative agreed with this observation. He asserted that since 2006 the government did not make any real effort to come up with or update policies towards the enclaves.

The head of the Prime Minister's Office of Communities addressed the criticism that most projects go to the Serbs. He stated that the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians are a priority for his office and that he will make sure projects and actions will address their needs. A governmental official, himself an ethnic Roma stated that each return program needs to be tailored to fit the specific needs of the community in question. He cautioned against using ready-made templates for return projects. He also observed that most of the people repatriated from the West end up in most cases in North Mitrovica, or in Serbia. He also underlined that the Strategy did not include or address the issue of Roma in enclaves. The return process needs to be closely monitored, as this matter is highly politicized.

Kosovo Authorities and the International Community: Policy Measures and their Implementation

The Strategy for the Reintegration of the Repatriated addressing the situation of refugees being forcefully returned to Kosovo and the Strategy for the Integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians, are the two main policies addressing problems faced by Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. The debate focused entirely on the latter policy, though some participants, mostly those representing the international community, reflected on the former as well. They were concerned that this strategy has been adopted but never implemented. They also wondered whether the same fate will follow the other strategy. For some Roma participants, like the one from Prizren it was a surprise to learn about the Strategy

for Reintegration and Repatriation and about the fact that it has been worked out but not has not been consulted by those concerned.

Regarding the Strategy for the Integration of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities launched on December 24, 2008, most agreed that its adoption represents an important step forward and a basis in the process of integrating these communities. The criticism mainly centered on the question of the commitment of the authorities, especially at the local level, the lack or limited involvement of concerned communities, its likely implementation, and the availability of funding. More specifically, several people suggested that a shorter and more practical document might stand a better chance of implementation. Despite criticism toward the Strategy, most would rather see it succeed than fail.

An Egyptian member of the Kosovo Assembly and a leader of a political party considered the Strategy as too elaborate, stating that it was a document with many things which are inadequate and inaccurate. He expressed his concern that it will remain a paper document never implemented. He complained that the document includes his name, although he never participated in the working groups which developed the Strategy. He suggested to hold discussions with ministries and MPs on implementation and called upon the government to “let us have less paper and a shorter strategy but a functional one”.

“This Strategy is the only document done in broad consultation with relevant actors and concerned minorities.”

Ashkali and Egyptian participants were also more vocal against the terminology used in the Strategy, namely the use of the word “integration”, arguing that “these communities have lived in Kosovo for centuries, so we cannot talk about a problem of non-integration”. Most participants agreed not to talk about “integration”, for they were well integrated, but to talk rather about decent living conditions and equality. As a Roma journalist from Prizren said “we all want integration without assimilation”.

Some of them saw danger in focusing too much on separate or exclusive policies towards given minorities. As an Egyptian politician observed “let’s not draw a thick line between minorities in light of building a multiethnic society in Kosovo.” Clustering too much the policies on minorities will end up in segregating people. Minorities should be able to preserve their identity, but otherwise, the state and authorities should address and solve problems of minorities within the framework of the constitution and according to their rights as citizens.” He added that “Egyptians have difficulties in accessing opportunities, as they are told ‘you speak Albanian, you don’t have problems’, which pushes /constrains people to consider playing with their identity”. He further complained that they have no desire to be subsumed under the heading of “RAE”. They share some problems with the Roma, but share many common aspects with Albanians. They prefer having a right to freely choose self-identification as opposed to being

slotted forcefully into “RAE”. He wondered if “we will end up creating special soccer teams for Serbs and the Roma”.

Several participants also lamented the lack of a kin state to act on their behalf. “When the Turks have a problem, it is solved in a week, since the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey intervenes,” a civil society activist said.

A Roma representing the Diaspora requested that a joint committee should be established to work out the action plans for implementing the Strategy. The government should establish close contacts with RAE communities and civil society and build the capacity to support the implementation of the Strategy. Cooperation with political parties of the RAE is also very important.

A senior member of the opposition asked that before one jumps to conclusions, there is a need to know what areas need further improvement. He also joined those who thought that the Ministry of Communities and Returns, according to its mandate, should engage to work for the communities, make their everyday livelihoods normal, and assist them with jobs and decent housing. A senior representative of this Ministry assured the participants that they do not discriminate among various groups and that the doors of the Ministry are open to all for 8 hours a day. Moreover, he called all not to engage in accusations and counter-accusations, but rather to be constructive.

“Instead of always blaming it on the government, we need to admit our failures as well, and our lack of coordination is among them.”

A member of the opposition advised the participants to try to frame their requests in a better way. One Roma activist disputed that they cannot frame their request well enough: “I do not want it to look like the Roma do not know what they want. Perhaps you do not understand our messages. We want to be part of the Kosovo society and we need help on this path,” he said. He suggested that government and international community should help come up with a proper plan, such as what is to be done in 2009. He dismissed from the prevalent argument that such planning cannot be supported because of lack of funds.

The government representative in charge of the Strategy came to its defense. He said that “this Strategy is the only document done in broad consultation with relevant actors and concerned minorities.” He added that all three communities had representatives participating in its drafting. He also argued that there are no specific outcomes yet since the document is merely a political vision at this stage. The corresponding action plan of the Strategy is expected to design the way the objectives will be accomplished through activities and timeframes.

Overall, most participants agreed that the Strategy is a workable document that can be improved. A civil society activist said, “Instead of always blaming it on the government, we need to admit our failures as well, and our lack of coordination is among them.”

The Deputy Minister of Local Government Administration argued that due to the multiple recent changes and to the fact that the institutions are new, the authorities may have omitted some things, but stressed that 2009 “will be used to improve things in local government and strengthen the capacity and the implementation of laws.”

The Minister of Internal Affairs asked for understanding and said that “our state has existed for only one year and many things are still under development.” He informed the participants that his Ministry was involved in some bilateral processes for returns. He called for a greater utilization of various programs and assistance of European programs, as well as seasonal work agreements with Germany, Slovenia, etc, and appealed to other countries to do the same to offset the situation. He vowed to treat minority communities fairly with regard to their involvement in such programs. Most importantly, he called on the affected communities to work jointly and remain involved. More specifically, he invited members of these communities to be involved in the process of returns, including the negotiations that the government has with other countries. He also pledged to request this from his staff. His priority will be to push for implementation, monitoring, policy review, and co-ordination of the governmental strategy for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. His task will also be to cooperate with the international community, ministries and local authorities.

“Trust and confidence have to be built on both sides, and this is needed in Kosovo.” He reminded everyone that “our state has only one year of being; many things are still under development.”

The Ministry for Communities and Return acknowledged that his ministry has neither the mandate nor the funds to assist those who are forcibly returned. As of now, this is the competence of the Ministry of Interior. A representative of UNHCR pointed out that there is confusion among government agencies regarding who is taking responsibility for voluntary or

forced returns. He reminded the participants that it is the Ministry of Interior who is in charge of readmission agreements and is tasked to deal with repatriation or forced returns. He critically noted that the Ministry is currently deciding who is admissible for return. Yet decisions regarding where such persons will live, how they will earn their existence, or what will be their prospects for re-integration have not yet been coordinated. At the local level there are separate offices for communities and for returnees. There is also a strategy for repatriation which remains only on paper, as no funds have been provided for its implementation since its adoption.

The international community welcomed the adoption of the Kosovo governmental strategy for integration of the RAE communities hoping that there will be a quickening of the pace of improving the life and status of these communities.

An official from the Swiss Embassy in Kosovo responsible for migration issues said, “Switzerland is very concerned and aware of the socio-economic situation in

Kosovo, and in particular the very low standards of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities.” Despite the “care” the situation on the ground is not improving.

He expressed support for Kosovo authorities at all levels and recognized that a good job has been done when one considers the government's given circumstances and context. Moreover, “we are contributing and will continue to contribute with projects and this will remain a priority.”

A representative of EULEX insisted on the need for spotting what is not sustainable and trying to identify solutions. He sees the need for a greater focus on determining the barriers /obstacles and what needs to be done in order to overcome them successfully. He emphasized the fact that he has heard too much about needs for funding and donorship and too little about responsibility. On the other hand, representatives of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians requested that EULEX should address the deficiency of representation and employment of Roma in public office.

A representative of the UNHCR pointed to the lack of coordination among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian organizations and said there was a need to empower such a network in Kosovo. It was also noticed that displaced Roma abroad largely felt out of the loop and have not been consulted in the drafting process of the strategies.

In view of some criticism raised against the government, a representative of the Office of the Prime Minister, tasked with RAE issues, said “we aim to coordinate all issues when it comes to the implementation of laws and policy, and to suggest ways together with other actors how to implement policy and find relevant mechanisms. One of the components in addition to what I mentioned before is to address practical needs.” In a similar way the Minister/head of office of good governance replied that the Strategy is the only document, done in broad consultation with relevant actors and concerned minorities. The Deputy Minister for Communities and Return added that the Strategy should be seen as a guide to addressing the problems; it is not a closed/rigid document, but rather one that can be amended. He declared that the government is committed to strengthening cooperation with representatives of these communities. Some funds are already committed to this purpose. He assured the participants that the government is going to look into the issue of employment, although financial problems make it more difficult. He noted that “perhaps is not possible to have representation in every single institution; we have to take into account also criteria of competence”. He insisted on a lesson from history, “trust and confidence have to be built on both sides, and this is needed in Kosovo.” He reminded everyone that “our state has only one year of being; many things are still under development”.

Conclusions

The organizers of the second roundtable chose to hold the conversations in Prishtina in order to enable participants to discuss the situation and recent

developments regarding Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo for the sustainable return and re-integration process.

The agenda included the examination of experiences and lessons learned from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian return projects, issues related to Roma in Serb enclaves, and prospects for their integration in Kosovo society as well as the Kosovo government policy for integrating these communities.

The major conclusion was that despite good political will to aid the integration of these communities and notable improvements in security that have been made, much more has to be done on the ground to ensure viable conditions for return. The need for overall improvements in the situations of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians who live in Kosovo was stressed, as it is a main factor in the sustainable return process.

Most participants agreed that while security remains intimidating only in some parts, there are still many formidable obstacles to any returns throughout Kosovo. This is primarily due to persistent problems involving personal documents, property restitution, the reconstruction process, and opportunities for making a living. For any successful return to take place, projects must be well prepared, adequately funded, and must provide job opportunities, and be coordinated with local authorities. Most importantly, authorities should have the capacity to integrate the returnees.

The government showed openness at the table and there were specific commitments made by several ministries to do their best to integrate Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities into Kosovo's society. Some important steps have indeed been made, such as the adoption of the **Strategy for the Integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians**, and setting up an institutional framework for implementation along with a number of progressive laws. Some participants however cautioned that good will is insufficient in the face of critical obstacles.

Local authorities and Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian representatives shared a common view that before bringing back a large number of IDPs and refugees to Kosovo, much more has to be done on the ground and for all those who are residing in Kosovo. Without ensuring conditions for their sustainable integration or inclusion into society, new arrivals will just be a burden to all.

Representatives of the communities complained that the Kosovo government and the international community have neglected smaller communities, instead focusing their attention on the Serb community.

The challenging issue of Roma living in Serbian enclaves was also debated. While recognizing difficulties and the discrimination against Roma living in enclaves, caution was expressed not to seek the model of Serbs who have separated themselves for political reasons. It was also acknowledged that Roma are integrated with Serbs in enclaves as they have lived among them for centuries

and they are dependent on the existing parallel structures there. However, Roma in enclaves should be treated equally and should be a legitimate part of Kosovo society and receive full respect for their identity as was requested by members of the Roma community.

Critics of the government, which included the opposition but also some Ashkali and Egyptian politicians and the international community, pointed out that this was the beginning of a process which requires more specific measures, especially financial resources and the active involvement of the affected communities.

Throughout the discussion, there was abundant criticism regarding the Strategy. However, most would rather see it succeed than fail. The criticism mainly centered on the implementation of the strategy, the involvement of concerned communities, and the availability of funding. More specifically, several people suggested that a shorter and more practical document might stand a better chance of implementation.

Better coordination of the responsible authorities as well as ensuring a genuine involvement of these communities in the processes affecting their situation was considered essential. It was recommended that the Government establish closer contacts with a wider array of political representatives and civil society organizations of these communities. It was also recommended that the government become more actively involved and better equipped to support the implementation of the strategy. More consultation and guidance by relevant participants of these communities is needed in order to help the authorities channel their attention and resources more effectively.

The representative of the Office of the Prime Minister committed to visiting Municipal Assemblies which face problems in addressing issues of these concerned communities. A Roma activist suggested that EULEX and the Government establish an additional ministry for the Roma minority since the Ministry of Communities is overburdened and the Roma are neglected as a result.

Many of the local Roma officials await decentralization with eagerness and believe that this presents a chance for them to exercise more influence, as power passes to municipalities from the central level. Several participants suggested that Roma departments, with autonomous budgets and authority to interact with local communities, be created in municipalities. Most importantly, there were recommendations to transform the deputy municipal president from a post of the Legislative to a deputy mayor that would be part of the executive arm.

If the returns cannot be stopped, they should at least be postponed, most argued. Before engaging in return processes, the situation of those Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians already residing in Kosovo should be improved. For the time being their situation remains precarious as claimed by these communities and acknowledged by the authorities. New returns, whether voluntary or forced, will just add an additional burden to an already difficult situation, which is

especially true as many of those who remain in Kosovo make a living from family members who work abroad.

Several return projects that were discussed, such as Mitrovica, Gjilan, and Peja, revealed that these and other initiatives could hardly be considered success stories. It is alarming news that nearly half of those houses that were rebuilt and returned to owners in south Mitrovica are still uninhabited. For successful returns to take place projects must be well prepared and job opportunities have to be provided.

That the discussion was so lively reflected a major gap of deliberation on these matters. The organizers committed to keeping up support for continued dialogue, bringing together relevant stakeholders and fostering co-operation for addressing these matters. As part of a follow-up, some suggested that Brussels should be the site of the next event. Ideally, the next discussion would aim for a resolution on Kosovo of the European Parliament on the issue of Roma.

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**International Roundtable on
Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians of Kosovo:
Challenges and Prospects of Sustainable Integration**

9 February 2009, Prishtina

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