



Reviving Interethnic Political Dialogue in South Serbia

First Roundtable

Bujanovac, Serbia
September 27, 2006

Introduction

On September 27, 2006 the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized a roundtable discussion in Bujanovac on the current situation in South Serbia (the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja) and the participation of ethnic Albanians in Serbia's national political life. The meeting was attended by local political leaders of South Serbia (Albanian, Serb, and Roma), the head of the Serbian government's Coordination Body for South Serbia, several representatives of relevant government ministries and services, and members of international organizations and foreign embassies accredited in Serbia. The Albanian participants represented the complete spectrum of ethnic Albanian political parties from the area; major Serb political parties from the area (with the notable exception of the Serbian Radical Party, whose central authorities did not allow their local head to participate) also took part. A list of participants is attached.

British Ambassador David Gowan provided opening remarks to the meeting, along with Nagip Arifi, the mayor of Presevo, Rasim Ljajic, the head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia, and Livia Plaks, president of PER. The roundtable was chaired by Ms. Plaks and Paul Edwards, first political secretary of the British Embassy in Belgrade.

The agenda included the following items:

- Update on the current interethnic, political, and economic situation in South Serbia. What are the major issues? Is the situation improving or deteriorating? What are the current plans of the Serbian government for development of South Serbia?
- Is there meaningful cooperation between the government of Serbia and South Serbia's ethnic Albanian politicians and officials on finding common solutions and improving the situation in the area? What do the local ethnic Albanian and ethnic Serb politicians expect from the government? What does the government expect from the locals?
- Will it be possible to resolve the current problems of South Serbia without greater participation of ethnic Albanians in Serbia's political life? If not, how to increase such participation? Have the Belgrade politicians done enough to encourage such participation? Do the latest changes in Serbian election legislation lowering the threshold for minorities ensure future ethnic Albanian representation in the Serbian parliament? Would forming the National Council of Albanians in Serbia help to improve the dialogue with Belgrade?

This report summarizes the main points of discussion at the roundtable.

Opening Remarks

In her opening remarks for the roundtable the PER President raised a number of issues for the agenda. She cited the problem of mistrust between South Serbia's ethnic communities, and said that during the sensitive time of negotiations on Kosovo's status it is especially important that the sides communicate and take steps to increase mutual confidence. She raised the question of Belgrade's role, and whether the national government is doing enough to address the problems of South Serbia. She also asked the Albanian participants in the roundtable about their participation in national institutions, through the formation of a National Council of the Albanian Ethnic Minority and through participation in upcoming parliamentary elections on a unified Albanian list. She emphasized PER's history of neutral involvement in the region as a facilitator of dialogue between majority and minority political leaders, and asserted that one goal of the roundtable would be to see if PER could also assist South Serbia's ethnic minorities work out more satisfactory political relations with the country's governing institutions.

The British Ambassador's opening remarks cited the great need for investment in South Serbia. The region, he said, has great economic potential, but many investors are wary of a still troubled region. "If you want others to invest in your communities," he said, "you must first invest in the process of dialogue and peace."

The Head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia devoted a large portion of his opening statement to a description of the recent investment that has been made in South Serbia, both by the Serbian government and by international organizations. He cited increasing investment in recent years, and said that "this region of Serbia is starting a period of greater stability." However, he acknowledged that much still remains to be done to better integrate ethnic Albanian communities. He admitted "mistakes made by the state," in this area, but also stated that "integration is a two-way process," and called on ethnic Albanians to take advantage of all mechanisms for their representation in national decision making bodies. He also cited the expected settlement on Kosovo, and said that the short-term goal is to "preserve stability in view of the status of Kosovo decision." He observed that during recent local elections "nobody questioned the future of Albanians in the state of Serbia," and said "we are depending on the sobriety and realistic attitudes of all political actors" in the upcoming period.

The mayor of Bujanovac made brief opening remarks, expressing enthusiasm for the new PER project but also noting his disappointment that no representatives of the government of Serbia were in attendance.

Grievances of Albanian Leaders

Many Albanian leaders at the roundtable expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack of progress on a number of issues in South Serbia. They made statements such as "in practice, Albanians are second class citizens," and "every day we make the same requests, but seem to only repeat ourselves with no results." They described several concrete issues of concern, including:

- *Inclusion of ethnic Albanians in state institutions.* Several ethnic Albanian participants asserted that not enough has been done to include Albanians in state institutions such as the judiciary, the prosecutor's office, the state health care administration, the police and border guards, and educational institutions. They rejected the argument that, in the case of the judiciary, an insufficient number of Albanians had passed the bar exam. On the contrary, they and an international participant presented numbers of those who have passed the bar but have not been employed in the judiciary. One participant also mentioned the public utilities, of which the government of Serbia is the main owner, and complained that "Albanians are not in the management," in the local boards of these companies.

A representative of the Romani community also addressed this theme, reporting that “not a single police person is Roma.” He cited discrimination against Roma as contributing to their difficult living conditions and high unemployment rate. He asked for better representation of Roma in public institutions, but said “we are very modest—we would be happy to have 3% Roma in institutions.”

The Head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia acknowledged these shortcomings. “We have not achieved very much in the process of integrating the Albanian communities,” he said, and “we need to do more.” He agreed that “the state must ensure prerequisites for greater participation of Albanians” in public institutions, and said, “without this, our efforts will not be successful.”

- *Construction of a new maternity ward hospital.* Several Albanian participants brought up the question of building a new maternity ward hospital in Presevo. “We have the green light, but no progress,” said one.
- *Textbooks and school curricula.* An Albanian leader identified the issue of the school curriculum as another unresolved problem. “The Ministry of Education has approved the use of textbooks from Kosovo,” he said, “but not the curriculum.” Another leader also expressed this concern. “We need this addressed,” he said, “it’s never too late.”
- *Freedom of movement.* An Albanian participant asserted that the Serbian government had promised to open additional border crossings at the Macedonian border, but that this did not happen. “We need these border crossings to ensure freedom of people and goods across the border,” he stated. And, he added, “to avoid the killing of people—I don’t know of an example anywhere else of people being killed for crossing borders. Maybe stopped and questioned, but not killed.” He also noted that the concentration of gendarmerie in the area prevents freedom of movement.
- *Language issues.* One participant asserted that Albanians should have the possibility of having official documents in both Serbian and Albanian. The differences in the Serbian and Albanian alphabets often cause mistakes in important documents such as passports, he said. “So we need documents in two languages.” “This was a right that was enjoyed during communism, but it was taken from us under Milosevic, and we still don’t have it back.” Another participant compared Serbia with Montenegro, where “all minorities have the right to write their names in their own language.” “We don’t have this right in Serbia, and that is discrimination,” he said. A third leader pointed out that “If an Albanian wants to obtain a document from the local administration, he can’t find anyone there who speaks Albanian.”
- *National symbols.* A local Albanian leader mentioned the use of Albanian national symbols, and said that “the national flag of Albanians should not bother anyone—we will put it up during our holidays.”
- *The gendarmerie.* One participant claimed that the South Serbia region “has been militarized again.” “We have red berets, people wearing scarves on their heads, as in the past... Who is reforming them? Who can we trust?” He concluded that “international police should be here, to support both sides.”

A senior official from Belgrade responded to many of these points. He stated that, in the case of the maternity ward hospital, the “standards and requirements for opening a maternity ward have not been met.” However, he added that “I personally believe that a maternity ward should be opened as soon as possible, and we at the Coordinating Body will look for the money for that for next year.”

On the issue of border crossings with Macedonia, he stated that financial constraints have made this impossible at present. He denied that there was a “political game” about this issue.

This participant also claimed that the number of gendarmerie “is being decreased.” Of the police, he said “we have inherited this system from the old regime, and it will take some time to change.”

Questionable Investment from Belgrade

One prominent issue during the discussion was the question of the use of central government funds in South Serbia. Several participants asserted that money had been allocated by central authorities in Belgrade for projects not requested by local leaders. In particular, they reported that funds had been sent from Belgrade for the reconstruction of an Orthodox church and monastery, as well as other projects that South Serbian leaders had not applied for. An ethnic Albanian mayor said that, at a recent meeting of the Coordination Body for South Serbia, Serbian Minister of Finance Mladjan Dinkic “rejected all our proposals, but accepted the reconstruction of a church.” This issue was a source of great frustration and resentment among the ethnic Albanian leaders present.

The Head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia reacted with surprise to these reports. “The news that money has been approved for projects that the local government did not compete for is something I have never heard of,” he said. “It is a scandal if it is true.” He pledged to follow up immediately on these reports with the Ministry of Finance in Belgrade.

The Attitude in Belgrade

All the Albanian leaders at the roundtable spoke in favor of peaceful, political solutions to the interethnic problems of South Serbia. “We have given up arms and turned to political activity,” said one, “we have resolved to solve problems in a political manner.” However, they expressed deep disappointment and a lack of faith in Belgrade. “Trust,” said one leader, “is not fully restored.” “The government is not willing to involve us,” said another, “I don’t know what else we can do.” A third observed that “there is a prevalent feeling not only among Albanians but among all minorities in Serbia that their rights depend on the party in power.” “We see this country as our country, but the Prime Minister does not see us as its citizens.”

Several local Albanian leaders pointed to the insufficient level of government participation in the current roundtable as evidence that Belgrade is not interested in the problems of the South Serbia Albanians. They also argued that the progress that has been made is largely a result of pressure from the international community.

Representatives of Serbian political parties cited a number of external factors to explain the government’s shortcomings in the region. They mentioned the overall poor state of the Serbian economy, and the ongoing stalemate over Kosovo as reasons why more progress has not been made. “I think all of us, the whole region of South Serbia, are a hostage to the resolution of Kosovo’s status,” said one party leader, “We cannot expect positive results until the status of Kosovo is resolved.” This speaker also assigned some blame to the South Serbia Albanians. “I think there is a degree of dishonesty on both sides... The state has made some efforts, but is not prepared to do more. What about Albanians? In my view, most Albanians are not ready to accept the state of Serbia as their own.”

Addressing the issue of Albanian inclusion in state institutions and enterprises, another Serbian party representative cited practical limitations: “You cannot simply fire the Serbs to make room for the Albanians,” he said. “We need to have the best people in the right places; you need skills for every job.”

All sides in this debate, however, affirmed that interethnic relations among the communities living in South Serbia are stable. “Interethnic dialogue has always existed,” said one Albanian mayor. “We did not have interethnic problems, but problems between the government of Serbia and the minorities.”

Albanian Political Participation

A major topic of discussion was the question of Albanian participation in Serbia’s national political life. Two possibilities for this participation were considered: the formation of the National Council of the Albanian Ethnic Minority (a provision in the minority law that Albanians in Serbia have not yet made use of), and participation in upcoming parliamentary elections through a unified Albanian list.

International participants strongly encouraged the Albanian leaders present to take advantage of the opportunity to form the National Council. The participants were cautiously supportive of this suggestion, though they asserted that such a council should not be necessary for them to achieve their demands, and several expressed skepticism that the councils will be able “to change institutions.” One Albanian political leader, however, stated openly that “I think it was a big mistake for Albanians not to form their own council.” He asked for further information from central authorities on how to go about creating the council.

A representative of the Serbian government’s Service for Human and Minority Rights explained some features of the National Councils. She also discussed the Republican Council for National Minorities, which includes representatives of all Serbia’s minority councils as well as government ministers who are involved in addressing problems of minorities. The Council’s chair is the Prime Minister of Serbia. She said that the Republican Council must meet at least twice a year, if two-thirds of the minority council members want to meet, or if the Secretary calls for a meeting. “So it is not true that the Republican Council never meets...and at this meeting minority representatives can ask ministers whatever they want.”

This participant also discussed the anti-discrimination law, which is currently being drafted by the Service for Human and Minority Rights. She invited Albanian leaders to take part in the public discussion of this legislation. “It would be very interesting to have their input,” she said.

Participants were noncommittal on the question of creating a unified list of ethnic Albanian political parties for the upcoming elections. Several international participants pressed them on this issue, pointing out that a united Albanian list could win at least two parliamentary seats, which could be very valuable in Serbia’s highly divided parliament. “If you aren’t trying, you won’t go anywhere,” said one. Ethnic Albanian participants were skeptical, however. An Albanian leader reported that when the Party of Democratic Action offered to form a coalition with DOS, “it was told that winning 40,000 votes in Presevo would mean a loss of 400,000 votes elsewhere in Serbia.”

Despite this hesitancy, however, none of the Albanian leaders at the Bujanovac roundtable excluded the possibility of taking part in upcoming elections through a unified Albanian list, and several said they would consider this suggestion.

Conclusions

South Serbia’s ethnic Albanian leaders are clearly dissatisfied with the implementation of the 2001 Covic plan—particularly its provisions for integration of Albanians in state institutions. They expressed a deep lack of confidence in the goodwill of Belgrade regarding South Serbia. While the possibility of ethnic Albanian participation in Serbian national politics was an important part of the discussion in Bujanovac, local leaders seemed most preoccupied with local problems and their frustration over what they viewed as Belgrade’s inattention to the sometimes small, concrete measures that would improve life in South Serbia.

Though the Head of the Coordination Body for South Serbia was an active participant in the discussion, and vowed to follow up on some of the Albanians' grievances, the local leaders were disappointed with the level of participation from Belgrade in the roundtable, which they interpreted as a sign that South Serbia is a low priority in the capital.

On the positive side, however, the tone of remarks from the Albanian leaders was notably moderate. The statement of one participant, that "we have resolved to solve problems in a political manner," was reflected in the approach of the others. The high level of participation in the roundtable by Albanian leaders, who represented the complete spectrum of Albanian political parties from the area, testified to their willingness to seek solutions through dialogue. They welcomed the PER initiative, and one leader stated that "such a roundtable is a good start for resolving problems in the Presevo Valley."

It was also encouraging that the Albanian leaders demonstrated some readiness to join national institutions through the National Council of the Albanian Ethnic Minority or, possibly, by running in the upcoming parliamentary elections. PER will return to these issues in the next stages of this project.



List of Participants

Nagip Arifi, Mayor of Bujanovac
Stojanca Arsic, Head, Together for Bujanovac Coalition
Martin Brooks, Coordinator for South Serbia, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
Gustavo Delgado, Political Counselor, Embassy of the United States of America in Serbia
Skender Destani, President, Party for Democratic Prosperity
Nenad Djurdjevic, Representative in Serbia, Project on Ethnic Relations
Paul Edwards, First Political Secretary, Embassy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Serbia
Alex Grigor'ev, Director for the Western Balkans, Project on Ethnic Relations
Riza Halimi, President, Party of Democratic Action
Denis Ibisbegovic, Political Specialist, Embassy of the United States of America in Serbia
Enver Idic, Vice President, United Party of Roma, Bujanovac
Dusan Janjic, Coordinator, Forum for Ethnic Relations; Member, Council for Ethnic Accord, Project on Ethnic Relations
Shaip Kamberi, President, Human Rights Council, Bujanovac
Rasim Ljajic, Head, Coordination Body for South Serbia, Government of Serbia
Nenad Manic, President, Presevo Branch, Democratic Party
Novica Manojlovic, Bujanovac Branch, Democratic Party
Ana Marjanovic, International Relations Adviser, Economic Team for Kosovo and Metohija and the South of Serbia, Government of Serbia
Tatjana Matic, Chief of Staff, Office of the Head, Coordination Body for South Serbia, Government of Serbia
Alan Moseley, Program Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations
Jonuz Musliu, President, Movement for Democratic Progress
Ragmi Mustafa, Mayor of Presevo; President, Democratic Party of Albanians
Vukasin Obradovic, Editor-in-Chief, *Vranjske*
Livia Plaks, President, Project on Ethnic Relations
Adnan Salihu, President, Municipal Assembly of Bujanovac
Marija Vujnovic, Assistant Director, Service for Human and Minority Rights, Government of Serbia