

PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

The **Project on Ethnic Relations (PER)** was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts that were to erupt following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. PER conducts programs of high-level intervention and dialogue and serves as a neutral mediator in several major disputes in the region. PER also conducts programs of training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels.

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**PROJECT ON
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R e p o r t

2001-2005



PRISTINA

KOSOVO ROUNDTABLES

PRISTINA 2001-2005

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RELATIONS**



KOSOVO ROUNDTABLES

PRISTINA 2001-2005

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PREFACE

The future of Kosovo has been a matter of grave international concern for more than a decade. The unresolved interethnic dispute between Serbs and Albanians and the struggle between Belgrade and Pristina over whether Kosovo would become independent or remain part of Serbia has been the most intractable problem remaining from the historic breakup of former Yugoslavia, threatening the stability of the entire region.

For more than a decade, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) has played a key background role in efforts to ease ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans between the Albanian populations of that region and their neighbors. As early as 1992, PER arranged a roundtable in New York City where Serb and Kosovo Albanian intellectuals and social scientists discussed their troubled relations. In 1995, PER was one of three cooperating organizations that convened a roundtable in Belgrade bringing together representatives of the Serbian Socialist party and other ruling and opposition parties with Kosovo Albanian political leaders. (The Albanians broke their long-standing boycott of contacts with official Belgrade in order to participate.) PER then continued to work in the background, conducting numerous off-the-record dialogues and informal negotiations. In 1997 it finally succeeded in arranging a landmark meeting in New York City that brought together senior political leaders from Belgrade and Pristina—their last contacts, as it would turn out, before the war and the NATO intervention of 1999.

Following the war in Kosovo, between 2000 and 2005, PER convened five international roundtables on “Albanians and Their Neighbors.” There, decision makers from all the countries of the region as well as from the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, NATO, the Council of Europe, and other key international entities took up critical questions of the day and debated alternatives for the future.

PER followed up these large regional gatherings with country roundtables in Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo to address their specific problems. This report concerns the meetings about Kosovo that took place in Pristina from 2001-2005.

PER has worked with some success to help resolve complex interethnic issues in Macedonia and Montenegro, but its efforts in Kosovo proved to be the most difficult of all, reflecting the very deep ethnic divisions

there, the powerful and opposed nationalist sentiments of Serbs and Albanians, their unwillingness to compromise, and their reluctance to deal with each other directly. This impasse might ultimately lead the international community to consider alternative solutions of its own.

In the meantime, PER's efforts in Kosovo were fruitful in creating at least a platform for dialogue between leaders of the Kosovo Albanian and Serb (and other minority) communities during the critical period before the international community decided to move forward. They even made possible a rare (and, until the beginning of negotiations imposed by the international community, the only) face-to-face dialogue between official Belgrade and Kosovo's Albanian leadership. These unofficial encounters between the antagonists, together with the larger regional meetings mentioned above, provided unique opportunities for high-level contact between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs from Kosovo and Belgrade at a time when almost all official efforts had failed. While they could hardly resolve fundamental differences, the debates and confrontations provided both sides, and the international community, with a sober and informed understanding of the competing perceptions of reality that would influence and shape outcomes in the years ahead. This record of their troubled encounters provides a unique historical record of the debates and struggles during that critical period.

Having been deeply involved in the debates inside Kosovo and in the region, PER hopes that a solution to the status of Kosovo will be found that will finally lead Kosovo, Serbia, and the Balkans to join the family of peaceful and prosperous democracies.

We would like to mention the important role played by President Rugova in all PER's Kosovo roundtables, as he always emphasized that a resolution to the status of Kosovo can only be reached by peaceful means. He will be greatly missed by the international community as well as by the people of Kosovo.

PER is deeply grateful for the support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Council of Europe, the Hewlett Foundation and the Mott Foundation, whose generosity made PER's Kosovo roundtables possible. We also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, where most of the roundtables were held, as well as the U.S. Office in Pristina, which hosted one meeting. I would also like to express special thanks to PER

staff members for their hard work organizing the series, in particular Allen H. Kassof, former PER President, Alex N. Grigor'ev, PER's Director for the Western Balkans and Leon Malazogu, PER's Representative in Pristina.

This report was written by Leon Malazogu and Allen Kassof, PER's president emeritus. It has not been reviewed by the participants, and PER takes full responsibility for its contents. Following PER's usual practice and in order to encourage frank dialogue, roundtable participants are quoted in this text without attribution.

Livia B. Plaks, *President*

Princeton, New Jersey
August 2006

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this report, the spelling of the name “Kosovo” is used (rather than “Kosova,” the spelling preferred by Albanians, or “Kosovo and Metohija” or “Kosmet” preferred by Serbs) because that is the spelling most commonly used in the English-speaking world. For the same reason, Serbian names of places are used, for example, Pristina and not Prishtina. However, the spelling “Kosova” is used in the names of Kosovo Albanian political parties and organizations. The term “Kosovo” is used as an adjective for Kosovo’s inhabitants, whether Albanians, Serbs, Roma, Turks, or others.

“Serb” is used as an ethnic term, whereas “Serbian” is employed when referring to Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

PER’s Kosovo Roundtables took place in Pristina from 2001-2005, and involved small numbers of key decision makers from the Albanian, Serb, and other ethnic communities of Kosovo. The central issues of concern were interethnic relations within Kosovo, and political arrangements that would bring stability to the province and at the same time safeguard the rights of both Kosovo’s majority and minority populations. Several major themes dominated the discussions, including:

- The Albanians’ insistence that only full independence will satisfy their aspirations, and that it is an essential precondition for economic progress and democracy for all of Kosovo’s residents *versus* Belgrade’s position, supported by most Kosovo Serb leaders, that any change in borders would ignore Serbia’s sovereign rights, violate international law, and leave the remnant Serb population in Kosovo defenseless before a hostile Albanian majority that wants them to leave.
- The Albanian claim that all necessary steps are being taken to guarantee the rights of the Serb minority (and others) and to encourage the return of Serbs who fled after the war *versus* the view of Serbs that little or nothing has been done to protect them and that returns have been discouraged.
- The Serbs’ demands for a comprehensive program of political and administrative decentralization that would maximize their autonomy and administrative independence *versus* the Albanian concern that Serb demands pertaining to territory are excessive and would lead to the cantonization or even partition of Kosovo.
- The impatience of both sides with the role of the international administration in Kosovo: the Albanians contending that the development of their own political and economic institutions has been retarded because of the refusal of the international authorities to grant sufficient powers to them, and the Serbs claiming that Serbia’s sovereignty has been eroded by illegitimate transfers of power to Kosovo institutions and that international security forces have failed to protect them from attacks and threats by their Albanian neighbors.
- The disagreements between Belgrade and Pristina, and among and between political leaders in Belgrade and Serb leaders in Kosovo, about whether the Kosovo Serbs should participate in elections in Kosovo and serve in or cooperate with Kosovo institutions *versus* the

entreaties to the Serbs by the Albanians and by the international community that they should participate.

- The reluctance or refusal by Belgrade and Pristina to engage in direct, bilateral dialogue or negotiations. The constant insistence of Belgrade that the Kosovo Serb leaders avoid independent dialogue with Kosovo Albanian politicians.
- The claims and counterclaims of both sides about who has suffered more in their continuing conflict.

The Kosovo Albanian representation in the roundtables typically included the president, the prime minister and the president of the assembly, and presidents of the four major Albanian political parties as well as their deputies. Leaders of different factions of Kosovo Serbs took part in all roundtables. Some roundtables involved the participation of Belgrade officials (a Serbian Deputy Prime Minister took part in one session) as well as leaders of Kosovo's other ethnic communities and NGOs. The representatives of the most important international and diplomatic offices in Kosovo also attended, notably the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), the European Union, UNMIK (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo), the KFOR command (NATO's Kosovo Force), and the U.S. Office in Pristina and other diplomatic missions, as well as officials from the Council of Europe. The meetings were chaired by PER's presidents (Allen H. Kassof, from 2001-2005, and Livia Plaks thereafter). A complete list of participants is appended to this report.

To encourage frank discussion, the roundtables were closed to the press, although there was usually a press conference following each meeting and photos and TV footage were taken at the start of each meeting. The events were widely reported in Kosovo, Belgrade, and in the international media.

It is important to understand that these were not ordinary meetings or discussions—indeed, they took place under heavy police and military security, and the Serb participants had to be escorted by international armed bodyguards as they traveled to and from the venues. Several of the Albanian participants had been leaders of the Kosovo Liberation Army in the armed conflict that culminated in the 1999 war. The sides tended to perceive each other, not without justification, as enemies. It is all the more remarkable, then, that the deeply antagonistic atmosphere of the earliest meetings was gradually replaced by a grudging willingness to listen

to the views of the other side and to engage, within the limits of the possible, in objective and factual, although rarely empathetic, exchanges.

THE FIRST ROUNDTABLE: APRIL 2, 2001

The first roundtable provided participants with an opportunity to evaluate developments since the PER regional roundtable that had taken place in Athens in December 2000. (That event had been the venue for the first face-to-face meeting between Kosovo's President Rugova and the new, post-Milosevic Yugoslav leadership—the first encounter between Serb and Albanian government leaders since the fall of the Milosevic government. At that meeting, a Yugoslav deputy prime minister had delivered a proposal from the new Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica for direct talks between Belgrade and Pristina, but the leadership of UNMIK had immediately discouraged them on the grounds that the time was not yet ripe. The initiative was, accordingly, rejected by Pristina.)

A number of important events were considered: the new U.S. presidency; ongoing ethnic conflict in neighboring Macedonia; and political developments in Serbia and their impact on Kosovo and its internal politics. The meeting also provided an occasion to assess relations between Kosovo Albanians and the non-Albanian communities of Kosovo. Finally, the meeting considered how developments in Kosovo, including the upcoming elections, might affect the wider region.

Major issues taken up at this roundtable included the question of Serb participation in emerging Kosovo provisional institutions of self-government and the problem of returns. Both, it was agreed, would require a level of trust that did not yet exist. It was suggested by some that the participation of Serbs would change the atmosphere for the better and would make it easier for Albanians to move on with building democratic institutions, but that the Serbs needed to understand that their situation was unlikely to improve rapidly and that the return of Serbs should be seen as a process rather than a precondition.

Regional Issues: Macedonia

Much of the discussion concerned interethnic tensions and disturbances in neighboring Macedonia. Albanians asserted that the solution lay in speeding up political and administrative reforms in Macedonia so as to eliminate institutional discrimination toward ethnic Albanians. They said they supported moderate Albanian parties in Macedonia and praised

the Albanian leadership there for sidelining extremists, but noted that this made dialogue even more important and urgent. They thought that constitutional changes in Macedonia were the only way to place Albanians on an equal footing with other Macedonian citizens, whether in a civic or multi-national state.

One Kosovo Albanian leader emphasized that “for the first time the complete spectrum of Albanian leadership was in consensus... that force is not the answer to Albanians’ plight in Macedonia.” But the Albanians insisted that their consensus against violence should be accompanied by support from the international community for a dialogue on the Albanian issue in Macedonia. The local Serb community, on the other hand, blamed the conflict on what they saw as “Greater Albanian” tendencies across the Balkans, and said that Albanian leaders were responsible for the turmoil. They also blamed the international community for favoring secessionist movements and called upon it to encourage integrationist trends.

Representatives of the international community strongly condemned the National Liberation Army insurgency in Macedonia and cautioned the Albanian community in Kosovo against involvement, even though acknowledging the need for reforms and improvements in the position of the Albanian community in Macedonia. They noted that the inter-

national community started from the fact that the government of Macedonia had been democratically elected and had included an ethnic Albanian party in all coalition governments since the country’s independence from Yugoslavia. Some suggested that the turmoil had been imported from Kosovo and warned

The crisis in Macedonia revealed a crisis in the Kosovo leadership, in the Macedonian leadership, and in the international community.

that Kosovo could face dwindling international support if this continued. In response, the Albanian participants were quick to denounce the use of force by all sides, but at the same time insisted that the demands were legitimate.

One international participant added that the turmoil had also been inflamed by the controversial nature of the Yugoslav-Macedonian negotiations on demarcation of the border between the two countries, two thirds of which falls along Kosovo’s southern border. “There are doubts

that Belgrade had the authority to deal with Skopje on the border issues between Kosovo and Macedonia,” and expressed his opinion that “the crisis in Macedonia revealed a crisis in the Kosovo leadership, in the Macedonian leadership, and in the international community.”

THE SECOND ROUNDTABLE: OCTOBER 16, 2001

The second roundtable focused on whether Serbs would participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections of November 2001. All the top level politicians from all communities and political parties attended the meeting.

Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue

Most important, this roundtable was the occasion of the first encounter between Kosovo’s Albanian political leaders and the most senior Belgrade official in charge of Kosovo issues (Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic, the head of the Coordination Center for Kosovo, who was accompanied by several of his staff and government officials). The meeting and the encounter attracted intensive media coverage in both Belgrade and Pristina. This was the first visit of a high-level Belgrade official to Pristina after the Kosovo war. The roundtable was considered by the participants to be an important step in the effort to bridge the communication gap between the Albanian and the Serb leaderships and between Belgrade and Pristina.

The leader of the Belgrade delegation called for a number of what he described as confidence-building measures between the Kosovo Serbs and Albanians and the International Community: a) implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1244; b) respect for human rights; c) cooperation between UNMIK and the FRY government; d) recognition of the unchangeable nature of the status of Kosovo; e) amnesty for Serb prisoners; f) no majoritarian rule in Kosovo; g) assurances of freedom of movement and security for Serbs; and h) return of Serbs to Kosovo. He also proposed to form a joint commission between UNMIK and FRY for the implementation of the conditions mentioned above. The Belgrade official further claimed that Kosovo had to transform its attitude toward Serbia and Yugoslavia. Citing what he said was a lack of improvements in Kosovo, he was adamant that there had to be real results on issues of returns and security before a decision could be made about whether to encourage the Kosovo Serbs to participate in the upcoming election.

A number of Albanian participants expressed their displeasure over his statement, saying that the Belgrade official had given no indication of whether or not the Kosovo Serbs would participate in the elections. They pointed out that, despite his claim that Serbs had a positive leaning toward the elections and that there were no “conditions,” the fact that he

Trust is not built by making decisions against the interests of local Serbs and by isolating them.

had enumerated eight issues seemed to be a way of justifying the non-participation of the Serbs.

A senior Kosovo Albanian leader turned to the issue of trust, criticizing the role of Belgrade. “Trust is not built by making decisions against the interests of local Serbs and by

isolating them. This is even intervention into the internal affairs of the international administration in Kosovo.” He also raised the issue of building confidence. “It is not sensible to have a KFOR soldier next to every Serb. We need to work on integration. I have a feeling that Belgrade is not contributing to integration but to segregation. We do not pretend to build brotherhood and unity, at least peaceful co-existence. But these declarations come at the expense of the Serb community.”

Challenged by the Belgrade representative to say openly that they advocated independence, one of the leaders said that Albanians were committed to a secure, democratic, and tolerant independent Kosovo, integrated into Europe. The Belgrade representative replied: “We don’t want the independence of Kosovo. If you continue saying Kosovo should be independent, there will be no Serbs left, and the international community does not want this to happen. Serbia is now democratic. You didn’t show yet that Kosovo is democratic.” He asked what the Kosovo municipal authorities had done or achieved since last year except as he put it, “changing names of streets.” He concluded: “Our goal is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Kosovo. I will not mention ‘Kosovo and Metohija,’ since I’m a flexible man and I don’t want to get into a dispute.”

Democratic Competition

In response to the charge that nothing had been done in Kosovo, a Kosovo politician insisted that many improvements had been made over the past two years. Although security in certain areas and freedom of movement for Serbs still remained to be improved, it was everyone’s duty to entrust this to the local representatives who would be elected. An

Albanian participant added that Albanians living in the Serb-controlled north also had no freedom of movement.

Other Albanian speakers stressed the successes of the last two years, the local elections, and the full commitment to UNSC Resolution 1244. The establishment of democratic life is not easy, and things could not change overnight, but the good will to do so was there. One Albanian politician disputed the legal or moral right of Belgrade to speak on behalf of Kosovo after all the repressions in the past.

Albanian participants claimed that Kosovo had already passed two tests of democratization. According to a civil society leader, “Kosovo passed the test on treatment of minorities, and on relations with its neighbors.” Kosovo passed an internal test of democracy by drafting and approving a Constitutional Framework that had “one of the most enhanced chapters on minorities anywhere in the region.” In comparison, Macedonian Albanians had to fight for six months to get only language rights. “Here the Serbs got it right away.” He also claimed that Kosovo passed a second external test by taking a correct attitude in two wars that had recently taken place in its neighborhood involving ethnic Albanians (South Serbia and Macedonia). Kosovo did not try to help the Albanians in Serbia and Macedonia and was not involved in these two wars, he said.

A high-level representative of the international administration in Kosovo picked up on this point to stress the regional component as crucial to any solution of the dispute. “There can be no solution if it is not a regional solution,” he said. He discussed the dual responsibility for the integration of minorities, saying that the majority must recognize that minority protection is, and must be, its obligation, while the minority must accept integration and its role as a minority. He added, “It’s clear that no EU country would accept integration into the EU if the borders are not guaranteed, and it’s clear borders will not be changed. So new borders around enclaves are not acceptable, either.”

A longtime Albanian activist for minority rights stated that Belgrade wanted to persuade the world to do what they could not manage to do with their army. If Serbs participate in the elections, they accept Kosovo the way it is. If not, it means that they hope for the return of their privileges and mean to put Albanians back in their subordinate role. “I call upon you to give up any hopes that you will return to Kosovo, for that means that you are preparing bloodshed, because Albanians will not return to Yugoslavia.”

A Serb participant replied that Albanians and Serbs had fought for hundreds of years and that no meetings could solve this problem in the foreseeable future. She criticized the international community for not

Serbs, no less than the Albanians, had been victims of Milosevic's crimes.

having fulfilled its goals, despite her appreciation that the great powers “for the first time intervened and decided to solve the problem of Serbs and Albanians.” She also asserted that Serbs, no less than the Albanians, had been victims of Milosevic’s crimes.

Nevertheless, there was some consensus that the challenge lay in “increasing the pie” and transforming conflicts over practical issues into opportunities for gain for all communities. An international participant remarked that “successful elections at the end of the year [2001] would indeed help improve the image of this part of the world, which is not a favorite for private investment.” This pace of change however, needs to be accelerated. “We want to bring you closer to one another so that you can get closer to European institutions.”

During the final session the chair and the representatives of international missions and institutions pushed for a more specific response from Belgrade on the elections and asked whether, apart from the eight concerns that Belgrade cited, there were some practical promises that would persuade Serbs to vote.

While the meeting predictably produced no clear indications of whether Kosovo Serbs would participate in the elections, it did succeed, as noted in an OSCE report following the meeting, in finally establishing a minimum of direct communication and between senior Belgrade and Kosovo leaders.

THE THIRD ROUNDTABLE: APRIL 23, 2002

As they had at the previous meeting, when they encouraged the Serbs to participate in Kosovo’s parliamentary elections, Kosovo Albanian leaders tried at this meeting to persuade their Serb counterparts to participate in the forthcoming municipal elections of 2002 which, they emphasized, were part of an internationally sponsored democratic process. Moreover, since no one could yet predict the final status of Kosovo, it was crucial to act now to incorporate all communities in a process that would build

democratic institutions. Contrary to the fears of some Serbs, this would not prejudice the outcome of the status question. While Serb participants agreed in principle, they said that they would be persuaded only by more serious confidence-building measures, ranging from increased cooperation and improvements in their security situation to improvements in economic prospects for all communities.

A senior Kosovo Albanian leader asserted that the integration of the non-Serb minorities had been improving steadily but that there were nevertheless great difficulties. Despite the lack of communication between Albanians and Serbs, the international community had helped this process move forward, he said. Albanian participants emphasized that they had agreed to a generous system of ten set-aside seats for the Serbs in the Kosovo Assembly and ten for the other Kosovo minorities.

A senior Albanian politician said that the general elections in Kosovo were critical since they would facilitate the establishment of democratic rule that would produce a legitimate government and leadership of Kosovo. “An elected government is of indispensable importance for the processes ahead. Anticipating that soon we will enter into a difficult phase of economic recovery, financial institutions today will normally ask who is the partner that they should talk to in order to make even a small investment in the collapsed Kosovo economy. For this to be successful, it is important that all citizens of Kosovo participate. The key issue and the key challenge to Kosovo Serbs is to commit themselves to the process—by nonparticipation they are blocking this process.”

Instead of calling upon Serbs to vote, [Albanians] should publicly declare their willingness to have Serbs return and denounce violence against them.

However, a Serb politician expressed worries that even if only some Serbs participated in the elections they would lend legitimacy to the newly formed institutions, which would then move in the direction of independence, thus pressuring more Serbs to leave Kosovo. Thus, he advocated against participating in the elections. Another Serb leader from a northern Kosovo municipality suggested to the Albanians that, instead of calling upon Serbs to vote, they should publicly declare their willingness to have Serbs return and denounce violence against them. Not all Serbs were so optimistic about returns, however. “I don’t have illusions that a great number want to come back here,” added a Serb official.

In calling on Serbs to participate in the elections, Albanians urged them as well to integrate in Kosovo's political life in general. But, although Serb leaders admitted that the present system of separate "parallel institutions" supported by Belgrade as an alternative to integration could breed conflict in the long run, for the time being they served an essential role in enabling coexistence.

***If you do not participate,
then you are out.***

One Serb leader defended the idea of Serb enclaves as a present necessity, although not as a goal in itself, claiming that only by self-organizing had the Serbs been able to assure their survival. "As a self-organized group in northern Mitrovica we can expect survival, while in full integration we could expect to be chased out of Mitrovica, Leposavic and Zubin Potok," one leader said.

The representatives of various international missions and institutions also encouraged the Serbs to vote. Serbs were encouraged to weigh the risks of participation and the risks of non-participation very carefully.

Serb participants were urged to explain to the Kosovo Serb public the harm that could come from the failure to participate. The head of an international organization asked the Serb participants to make a list of gains and losses and said, "I would expect you to tell the people what is at stake, what are the outcomes, what you win and what you lose...If you do not participate, then you are out. You are not in the game any more. You lose international sympathy. The Albanians said they would work together if you join them." As an additional guarantee, he declared that the international community would not leave Kosovo before democracy is established there. Albanian leaders were also encouraged to take responsibility along with Kosovo Serbs for better institutional and physical integration. A participant from KFOR also stressed that, in order to preserve peace, Serbs needed to cooperate both with UNMIK and with local elected officials and KFOR needed to know with whom to deal in order to maintain regular contacts with legitimate representatives.

A western diplomat called for a Kosovo Serb representative to participate in drafting the Legal Framework for Kosovo, an ongoing issue since the time of the first roundtable. "If you are not there, you cannot make your views known." He called upon Serbs to take advantage of the engagement of the international community to start building, together with the Albanians, internationally backed institutions as a precondition to creating

a democratic Kosovo. He recognized their great insecurity, "but I am convinced that not participating contributes to this position further. While the position of Serbs is not enviable, the only way forward is to hear their voice in the internationally sponsored elections and institutions."

Preconditions to Integration

The Serbs reiterated that their concerns over security, freedom of movement and missing persons discouraged their participation. They insisted that the resolution of these problems is a precondition to integration, while Albanian and international participants thought that this had to be a gradual process. While some Serb participants supported the idea of a limited return, others thought that, because of the present security situation, only a massive return to present enclaves would be satisfactory. Albanians opposed this idea on the grounds that this would only exacerbate the problem of enclaves, rather than solve it. Serbs, they said, should return to their original homes and security must be provided there. It is not possible, they said, to provide security for every individual, and Serbs needed to accept the "new reality" in Kosovo. This would reduce tensions in the future and enable Serbs to return anywhere in Kosovo, according to one participant.

A Kosovo Albanian politician replied to the security issue, claiming that one cannot expect KFOR to perform miracles. "We have our own police that includes all minorities. I am convinced that the Kosovo police, if supported by all, will be able to provide security, protect religious buildings, and so on. The upcoming elections will not decide the status of Kosovo, but will help us exercise the law here, and to take responsibilities upon ourselves."

Albanians and Serbs both expressed the hope that, if security on the ground gradually improved, mutual fear might be replaced with mere mistrust. After security, the resolution of the problem of returns was the most frequently mentioned condition for participation. A Serb politician agreed that it was not realistic to expect that Serbs could return before the elections, but he nevertheless asked for some other guarantees that could bring back some confidence. A Serb leader was not optimistic about the returns, saying, "I don't have illusions that a great number want to come back here." Another Serb leader from a northern Kosovo municipality called on the Albanian leaders to allow Serbs to return and vote, and to publicly declare a stop to violence, instead of just calling on Serbs to vote.

Although the Serbs and Albanians could not reach agreement on these questions, they did find some common ground at this meeting in their mutual recognition that each side faced dilemmas and limitations in considering available options. As a Serb leader declared, Albanians rightfully feared Serbia, since Serb authorities had cleansed two thirds of Kosovo, and they thus subjected Serbs to revenge after the war. “There has been a domination of one against another. We never found a formula to satisfy both sides and make them all feel free.”

THE FOURTH ROUNDTABLE: NOVEMBER 15, 2003

The fourth roundtable focused on interethnic relations in Kosovo, the return of displaced persons and the integration of non-Albanians into Kosovo society. The meeting took place just after the Thessaloniki Summit of the European Union, where a failed effort had been made to launch a dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade on technical issues.

The participants agreed that some progress had been made since the last meeting, but disagreed about its extent. The Albanians underlined the achievements of the leadership and cited the numerous expressions of good will and the good intentions by Kosovo Albanian leaders. A representative of an international institution in Kosovo agreed that there had been some progress but said that matters had not moved very far.

Ultimately it is about numbers, and not many Serbs will return.

Despite the lack of satisfactory progress on returns, the roundtable marked a positive shift in the tone of the discussions. In comparison with the earlier roundtables, community and political leaders were

markedly less confrontational, more positive and less personal, and their exchanges more specific and problem-oriented. Leaders on both sides agreed that the issue of returns was a high priority and stressed that they needed to act together in order to send a more powerful message to potential returnees and to encourage the Albanian public to accept Serb returns.

Several problems complicated the discussion of returns. One participant posed the question, “What do we mean by returns? Does a return in order to sell property and then leave again constitute a meaningful return? Should we perhaps talk about sustainable returns?” The chair asked what

level of returns would qualify as “fulfilling” the obligations of the Kosovo leadership. It was remarked that the Kosovo Albanian community sometimes associated returns with fear of falling once more under Belgrade’s rule. However, as an international pointed out, “ultimately it is about numbers, and not many Serbs will return.” Therefore, he said, Albanians have no reason to fear the return of the Serbian state and should freely allow displaced Serbs to return to their original locations as a humane gesture, keeping in mind that most local and international officials doubt that more than 20,000-30,000 people at most would return.

While the chair and several participants sought specific answers, one representative of an international organization in Kosovo declined to set quantitative criteria. Due to the low rate of expected returns, the representative said, the Kosovo community needed to create opportunities for returns and then leave it to the individual decisions of those who want to return. But some Kosovo politicians said that this would give them no objective standard against which to gauge their performance and would leave the judgment entirely to the UN mission. A Serb participant said, however, that numbers were not the issue; for him the problem was simply that those who did want to return could not.

The international representative replied that success would be apparent when there would be no need for security guards in front of houses, no enclaves, and when people with Belgrade license plates could move within Kosovo freely without an escort. She conceded that perceptions do differ from the reality and that the security danger is often exaggerated, but this does not mean that the situation has completely improved. Regarding a quantitative measurement, she said that “to give a figure of what percentage actually want to return will lead us in a wrong direction. There are thousands of people in displacement but the major problem is with those in the camps who want to return now.”

Regarding practical steps to facilitate returns, Kosovo Albanian politicians claimed that there is little further that they can do since they have no control over the police, judiciary or property issues, and since these are key issues for returnees, Kosovo politicians should not be held accountable for not resolving them or dealing with them. The protection of minorities was one of the priorities of the new institutions, which had adopted the “highest possible standards, and sometimes going even beyond these.” They stressed that Kosovo institutions were limited in this respect because most such issues remained under the exclusive competence of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and

UNMIK. “Within the scope of our responsibilities, we try to do as much as possible,” said one official. He stressed that the new government had reserved three posts for Serb politicians: an inter-ministerial coordinator within the Kosovo government, a minister, and a liaison in the office of the prime minister.

The chair countered that, while it was true that the Kosovo leadership lacked the powers of the international community or a full-fledged government, it had nonetheless so far failed to do what it was capable of doing: using its political influence to help persuade the Albanian public to support returns. Because this issue was not a popular one with Kosovo Albanians and because defending minorities does not bring in votes, it was all the more important for the political leadership to act in unison on this issue instead of using it to political advantage.

A representative of Kosovo’s civil society reiterated that local political leaders do not have any real power and that their power was only moral. Even with the new constitutional framework, security matters remain in the hands of the international community. But the international participants downplayed these claims. One diplomat asserted that discouraging extremist actions was not so much a policing duty as a matter of influencing public opinion, and that the only way to fight extremists was to shape public opinion against them. They demanded stronger reactions by Kosovo politicians to attacks on minorities. One Kosovo Albanian leader responded that the Kosovo leaders had done this but that the problem still could not be brought under control without expanded competencies.

A Kosovo leader criticized local Serbs for not using the Kosovo Assembly to address their grievances. “It is surprising that all the issues that you raise here have never been raised at the Assembly, and many of these issues could have been solved by now. I have never received a request or a complaint, verbally or in written form, to inform the institutions of the events; you are obliged to request help, and you can resort to other means if help does not come from us. If you want to help your Kosovo Serbs, do not present political requests, but let’s try to work out these problems within our institutions.”

While all participants acknowledged the desirability of returns, they disagreed about pace and location. A Kosovo leader suggested that, because of the emotional baggage of the situation, returns should take place without fanfare. “This way, the returns would raise less emotional pain by reminding people of the atrocities of the Serb paramilitaries, and would

be less of a problem. I think that by integrating, the Serb community can do a lot for those who come back, so that their return is a human and normal issue. They should return as citizens, in joining families or in other relaxed circumstances, and not to ‘double’ the enclaves.”

The leader of an international security organization agreed both that the return was an individual right but one with a political dimension. This is a political issue and it has to follow a political process; security for returns is very hard to achieve and very hard to maintain; every time we make a step forward, there is a wave of provocation and it makes us go back again. The security of returns is not individual security, but it is the security of the environment and the safety of the overall environment. This is not only a matter of police and military (only 17% of anti-minority offenses are against property, the rest are against individuals). There is a widespread sentiment that the public does not want to accept the returns.

There is a widespread sentiment that the public does not want to accept the returns.

A Kosovo politician complained that the unsatisfactory situation of minorities is not a result of discrimination but of the weakness of Kosovo’s institutions. “A state that cannot guarantee the rights for the majority cannot do this for the minority either. The issue is how to strengthen the Kosovo institutions in general,” he said.

The chair reminded the participants that one thing on which all can agree is that it is to everyone’s advantage to improve the real situation of minorities in Kosovo—Serbs, Roma, and others who are already here in enclaves or elsewhere—and to encourage or to make possible the return of those who wish to return. This would not only have obvious practical, humanitarian benefits for members of the minorities, but would remove one of the most serious obstacles to a rational and fair discussion and resolution of Kosovo’s future. “So long as Kosovo cannot create and sustain even the appearance of a multiethnic society, it is at a serious disadvantage as it tries to make the case for its future. That failure also poisons the political process in Belgrade, where it helps to feed nationalist sentiment and retards the development of democracy.”

Poor living conditions in enclaves were cited as another reason for not returning persons there. Moving Serbs from a camp in Serbia to a camp in Kosovo is not an alternative as long as there are no proper living conditions.

An official of the international community thought that returns were also an opportunity for a breakthrough in the future dialogue between communities. For him, the most important thing was to break down the psychological war between communities. “If Kosovo Albanians want to welcome Kosovo Serbs who want to come back to their previous accommodation and location, probably some municipal presidents should go to the camps in Serbia and speak with the Serbs.”

Not all Serbs saw returns as an immediate priority. “The returns should not be a problem. Some of them do not want to come back anyway, they have sold apartments, etc., but we should give a chance to those who do want to return,” noted one of the Serb participants. Thus, for her, the security of the Serbs presently in Kosovo was a greater priority than the return of those who have left and wish to return.

Even if the political problem of returns could be solved, it was pointed out, institutions in Kosovo, both local and international, were unprepared to cope with large numbers of returnees. A senior figure in the newly formed Kosovo institutions claimed that every municipality had agreed to absorb a certain number of Serbs, so that “we’d go against enclavization.” He added that returns were not only a problem of Serbs, but also of about 200,000 Albanians now in the West.

Albanian participants, on the other hand, acknowledged that as a majority with over 90% of the population, they shared responsibility for integrating Serbs into all institutions. “We should have a better approach: support for Serbs who are integrative, while sidelining the radical part. How can this be done? By eliminating parallel powers,” a regional moderate leader said. Those who want integration should enjoy support.

A Kosovo politician complained about northern Kosovo, from which Albanians had fled and where, he said, UNMIK was not even visible. He stated that Serbs had no reason to fear any returns of Albanians to the north, and that this was not even a priority. Meanwhile, it would be sufficient for UNMIK police and KFOR to establish their rule there. If, however, the north remained practically separate, this would discourage Albanian leaders from supporting returns.

Another leader asked the Serbs to state what their communities need, whether there was something that Kosovo could do for the communities in the worst position, and whether Kosovo could make an offer. A representative of a multinational security organization endorsed the proposal of such an “offer” and supported the idea of a practical “social

contract” that Kosovo could offer its minority citizens. “The task for the Albanians is to stand up and accept their responsibilities. The task for the Serbs is to accept that they are part of the Kosovo political system. There is a necessity to go back to your people and explain to them that this is the reality.”

There was consensus among the Kosovo Albanian leadership on the importance of returns of all displaced persons. A Kosovo Albanian party leader took the meeting as an opportunity to circulate to the participants a draft letter with a message welcoming those IDPs who want to return. *[It was signed several days later by the leaders of all the political parties and institutions, and then made public. It was the first such initiative to come directly from the Kosovo leaders rather than from the international community.]*

There were several other practical outcomes of the roundtable. One of the Albanian party leaders expressed readiness to visit the camps of the displaced not only in, but also outside, Kosovo. Another party leader offered to conduct a discussion with the minorities on what they lack that the majority has to offer, and to jointly seek ways to make improvements possible. “Can Kosovo make an offer to you? We would like to make an offer on, let’s say, economic perspectives and on the rights of members of the communities. I and others are open to gradually developing an offer to members of minority groups that would be useful in the future, and the leaders of these minority groups would be our partners.”

Returns and Status

One of the reasons that the issue of returns was such a hurdle was its perceived relationship with status. As one northern Serb leader said, “returns and independence are mutually exclusive.” On the other hand, an Albanian said that the definition of status would help the returns process. A former war commander said that Serbs were skillfully using the unresolved status issue to further their own ends. However, according to him, the longer that this process goes on, the fewer refugees will return. He blamed the lack of returns on Belgrade. “I have spoken with Serbs in Klina who said that Belgrade had told them not to return.” Another participant also added that giving a signal over the final status of Kosovo would facilitate all other processes. “That is why I see the Thessaloniki Summit as a missed opportunity to show Kosovo its future in Europe and not as an undefined region.”

A Serb participant disagreed that independence would facilitate returns and said that, “If Kosovo moves toward independence before returns,

then no one will ever return.” A diplomat also disagreed with speakers who said that multiethnicity had to await the resolution of the status issue. “I don’t think that the international community, including the United States, is ready to move on status before a tolerant society emerges,” he said.

A Serb leader from southern Kosovo said that Belgrade was a hostage of Kosovo Albanian extremists and that, if Serbs were safe in Kosovo, their situation would not nurture a nationalistic climate in Serbia as it does now. She suggested that for every attack on Serb property Kosovo municipal leaders should repair the damage from local funds (for example rebuilding burned homes out of the municipal budget), and that this would give a clear signal to the local community that they have to pay for the damage that they cause. A participant from one of the other minority communities reacted to the status discussion by saying that big words should be avoided. “The people will accept better relations when they see us working on concrete issues. I am for [working on] small and practical issues, step by step. Let’s talk about good stories such as the Serb who saved the life of an Albanian during the war, etc., and let’s show this to the media.”

A Serb representative said that the main obstacle to returns was Kosovo Albanian politicians. He characterized them as extreme since “they always mention the idea of independence.” This is the only option that they have promised so far, and now they cannot afford to lose votes by backing away from it. He also criticized the Kosovo Albanian political elite, charging that they avoid the issue of returns because they draw their votes primarily from the squatters who have occupied the apartments and homes of Serbs. “These people are numerous and have a heavy role in the next elections. They exercise heavy pressure in order to get for free what does not belong to them.” There are many politicians who are indoctrinated and corrupt, he said. “The Albanian politicians who are sitting here could easily find ways to make the returns possible, but they will not do this out of personal reasons,” he continued. He also criticized the local leadership in Mitrovica for deciding to build a sports center where a camp for the Roma was situated.

The Role of Belgrade

The dialogue often returned to the role of Belgrade, a sensitive issue for Albanian participants. One of the Albanian politicians disputed the legal or moral right of Belgrade to speak on behalf of Kosovo in light of the

repressions in the past. While there was recognition that Belgrade’s stance has changed significantly, the change in Belgrade had been disappointing with respect to the possibilities for Kosovo, an Albanian politician said. A diplomat added that “This is not only reflected in relations with Serbia but even more importantly in its relations with the local Serb community. The signals that are sent to the local Serb community are conflicting. First they send a representative to the constitutional commission and then they withdraw him.”

Kosovo leaders judged that there had been some positive movement after the arrest of Milosevic. However, when it came to Kosovo, Kosovo Albanians strongly believed that Belgrade was orchestrating the crisis of Mitrovica, along with the moves of the Yugoslav Army in the buffer zone. “Because the army is run by former Milosevic senior associates it would continue to pose a threat for all non-Serbs living there so long as it remains unreformed.”

One senior Kosovo official saw a significant change in attitude and readiness to accept Serbs as equal citizens. However, Serbs continue to complain to Belgrade, he said. The issues of status and relations with Belgrade hold normal relations hostage. Some Kosovo Albanian leaders accused Belgrade of intentionally exerting pressure on the displaced persons not to return so as to keep a powerful card in its hands for any upcoming dialogue.

One Serb participant called on both sides to retreat from making maximalist demands. Replying to this call, an Albanian representative asked non-Albanian participants to start feeling as Kosovo citizens and to compromise by not drawing either Tirana or Belgrade into the picture. He called on the Serbs and other participants to map out their own future and cited the constitutional framework that embodies guarantees that Albanians have given, and that would not make Serbs feel inferior. Another said that it was not good to have any decision on Kosovo made in Belgrade, just as it was not good for Kosovo to have decisions made in Tirana. “All of us are afraid to be seen as traitors on the issue of the status of Kosovo, but status is not at stake here in these upcoming elections and will be settled in an international agreement. Meanwhile Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians should be building democratic institutions together since these institutions aim to improve

If you do not commit to this society, we will not succeed.

living conditions in Kosovo. But we cannot talk about security of Serbs if they don't take part in the institutions."

He continued that the Kosovo Serbs need to commit to a democratic Kosovo and to feel closer to Pristina than to Belgrade. He asked the Serb community whether they were prepared to commit to a democratic Kosovo that did not rush into independence, but also did not go back to the 1990s. "If you do not commit to this society, we will not succeed. Deferring the final status, and excluding the return to the past, paves the way to a middle status: a parliament representative of the population breakdown (perhaps with minority overrepresentation), economic progress, and interim rule of law. If you do this, you will have the full support of the international community."

A former Albanian leader said that the future of local Serbs should be decided by Kosovo Serbs and not by Belgrade. He dismissed statements coming from Belgrade as contradictory, confusing and manipulative, in comparison with the more authentic voice of the Kosovo Serbs. "I am afraid that the Belgrade voice is calculative and based on party lines." In case of an election boycott, the greatest losers will be the Kosovo Serbs. "The Belgrade government is manipulating the Serbs here. The final status of Kosovo is not the issue, and boycotting the elections is not boycotting Kosovo independence but boycotting the future and our common life here." He called on Serbs to participate in the elections, as they lose nothing by doing so. "If they do not, it's easy to go to war again."

Responding to the debate over whether Belgrade ought to have any role in the discussion, a Serb politician admitted that Kosovo Serbs had lined up behind Belgrade because they had had no time to build their own elite. "I had no time to build respect in the communities. This is why all are looking to Belgrade." Nevertheless, she said, she was unhappy with the confusing declarations that often come from Belgrade.

One Albanian politician questioned whether Belgrade was even interested in the return of Kosovo Serbs. "My impression is that Belgrade is interested in keeping this issue high on the agenda for a very long time, the same as it did with political prisoners (war hostages)" in order to distract from the real problem. A senior Albanian politician added that this has harmed the image of Kosovo in the international community, but that "most harmed are Serb citizens who are manipulated from Belgrade."

Regarding the idea of talks with Belgrade, Albanian participants rejected it on principle or insisted that talks could take place only on the condition

that Pristina and Belgrade are considered fully equal parties. One international participant commented that Kosovo politicians may feel insecure about dealing directly with their Belgrade counterparts because of long-standing feelings of inferiority and a fear that they would not be able to hold their own.

The chair suggested to the Albanian participants that, in addition to the problem of Albanian-Serb relations within Kosovo, there was another important arena: the political system and its dynamics in Belgrade, and that they had an opportunity to encourage those politicians in Belgrade who are more supportive of the elections, open dialogue, and working with UNMIK, rather than reflexively opposing everything coming from Belgrade. He observed that Belgrade was not a monolithic entity and urged the Kosovo leadership to keep in mind that "there are several Belgrades. Which Belgrade you engage will make a difference."

All Serb participants said they were convinced that, if Kosovo headed toward independence, most Serbs would leave Kosovo. A Kosovo Serb representative claimed that "Serbs would immediately leave and seek to come back with other means, realizing that they have lost Kosovo in an unacceptable manner." She continued that the confusing stance on Serb participation was a result as well of disagreements among various Serbian political factions. While there are moves that can encourage Kosovo Serbs to participate, she thought that the Serbian leadership in Belgrade needed more persuasion to give their approval. We need to improve communication between Kosovo Serb leaders and Belgrade, she said, stressing the leadership role that Belgrade has for the local Serbs.

A Serb from northern Kosovo agreed that, in political terms, any return to the pre-1999 situation is unacceptable, but he also said that Serbs in Kosovo would integrate more willingly if Albanians, in turn, would understand the need for Serbs to "integrate with Yugoslavia," as he put it. A Kosovo leader argued, however, that it was important for the returnees to understand that Kosovo represents a new reality, where the rights of its citizens are guaranteed by law. In this regard, he said, Kosovo needs to be given a clear vision about its status, since Serbia still voices aspirations for return of the Serbian army and special police units.

The Role of the International Community

Several Kosovo Albanian leaders accused Belgrade of deliberately portraying the post-war mission of the UN as a failure in order to justify and preserve the enclaves and to suggest a continuing crisis. Belgrade's

accusations of lack of progress, they said, often targeted the international community. One leader charged that Belgrade was deliberately keeping Kosovo Serbs out of the internationally backed institutions in Kosovo, and also suggested that Serbia's progress toward democracy since the end of the Milosevic regime was not as great as Belgrade claimed, while, in contrast, there had been real improvements in Kosovo. He called on Serbs to invest their trust in the newly created institutions so as to take advantage of these positive changes.

Some participants noted that the international community in Kosovo initially enjoyed an almost mythical image for the Kosovo Albanians, who were grateful to western countries for their intervention in 1999. On the other hand, a vast bureaucratic United Nations Mission was put in place, and this was now seen by the Albanians as an obstacle to their independence.

Although Kosovo Albanians were far from satisfied with the performance of UNMIK, they disagreed with what they claimed was Belgrade's strategy of depicting UNMIK as a failure.

However, Albanians had their share of criticism for UNMIK. What has harmed integration, they said, was that UNMIK's policies concerning minorities were unclear. It was only in 2003 that the UNMIK administration began to specify the division of responsibilities and obligations and the role of the Kosovo inhabitants themselves. Until then, the whole process had been completely in the hands of the UNMIK staff.

One Kosovo Albanian participant criticized UNMIK for its role in the municipal and regional working groups on returns, mostly regarding the undefined role of the majority.

We need to be part of the processes and not implementers of somebody else's strategy.

"If you want not to get something done, create commissions and working groups. We need to be part of the processes and not implementers of somebody else's strategy."

He asserted that locals knew the problems best and should be part of the strategic planning and operationalization of the returns process. He recommended that focus should be placed on improving the rights of the Serbs presently residing in Kosovo, since sustainable returns depend on the successful integration of those who are there currently.

The chair commented on the obligations of Belgrade to improve relations with Kosovo leaders. The failure of Belgrade so far to acknowledge that something very bad had taken place in Kosovo before and during the war was detrimental to reconciliation efforts. According to him, the Kosovo conflict cannot be treated by Belgrade as though it had been an ordinary political dispute to be solved through negotiations. "The fundamental rift is that something so tragic has still gone unacknowledged and unaccounted for." He suggested that a serious and unambiguous acknowledgment by Serbian society of the depth of what had happened in Kosovo would be a great step forward.

THE FIFTH ROUNDTABLE: NOVEMBER 15, 2003

This roundtable, titled "Interethnic Relations in Kosovo: Success Stories from Municipalities," aimed to examine success stories from four Kosovo municipalities as encouraging examples of interethnic relations, and to see what could be learned from these experiences. PER invited officials from the municipalities of Shtërpe/Shtërpçë, Skenderaj/Srbica, Prizren, and Gjilan/Gnjilane, which had differing characteristics. Two were controlled by the largest political party, LDK, one by the second-largest party, PDK, and one by a local Serb party. In three, the main ethnic groups were Albanians and Serbs, while in one there were Albanians, Turks, Bosnjaks, and Roma. There were also variations in how much war damage the respective communities had suffered. Finally, because Kosovo law requires that one of the two deputy mayors in each municipality be from a minority ethnic community, PER was able to invite four mayors and four deputy mayors of contrasting ethnicities.

A participant from PER noted that municipalities where there had been significant progress in interethnic relations have hesitated to publicize their accomplishments, perhaps because many consider that the conflicts of recent years are still going on and leaders fear that the idea of fostering positive relations with an opposing ethnic community might be seen as dealing with the enemy. The aim of PER, he said, was to help correct this situation. Indeed, political and social leaders should understand that the promotion of ethnic accord will earn them credit, and that they stand to gain more from moderation than from displays of radicalism.

The chair opened by asking participants to consider whether they thought reconciliation was still possible or merely reflected wishful thinking by the international community. What lessons were to be

drawn from positive stories of coexistence in some municipalities? How could local government be reformed to promote interethnic amity? Could the central authorities and political leaders help? How does the continuing uncertainty about future status affect interethnic relations within municipalities?

An influential mayor emphasized that the supportive attitudes of local and central leaders, including the prime minister, were essential in encouraging communities to participate actively in the process of returns. The participation of minorities in governmental institutions was a critical first step, and this required the engagement of the minority, sympathy toward the minorities, and not getting bogged down in the past, but looking to the future. "In our municipality, it was crucial to make the first step, that is, to have the majority agree to make an offer to the minority population. In Gjilan, this has resulted in freedom of movement and an active participation by minorities in institutions at the level of 20%, even though the real number of minorities is even lower. This quota was offered to the minorities as a sign that we want them to take responsibility in building a joint society. We have millions of problems, but these are all joint problems. There are still some limitations on their freedom of movement, but the Serbs also need to be more courageous." The mayor claimed that in his municipality they have at least achieved mutual human respect, and that the contribution by the Serbs had been essential. "We would have accomplished nothing without a constructive attitude by the Serbs and they behaved very well before the creation of the 'parallel institutions,' which have harmed the process." However, without better economic prospects, he said, these processes would be very difficult, and they will be further limited by the lack of cooperation from Belgrade.

The mayor of a Serb-dominated municipality in southern Kosovo did not agree that the central government, or the international community, had been of much help in interethnic reconciliation. He claimed that in his municipality they improved relations by focusing on local issues. "In the first meeting of the municipal assembly, I insisted that we deal with local matters. If the status question is tackled at every level, we will be blocked."

The mayor of a municipality that had been ravaged during the war said that there had been some positive accomplishments that were all the more satisfying considering the destruction, poverty, social and economic

problems, and the thousands of war victims. "While problems still persist, focusing on the future has helped us implement several joint projects, for example, reconstruction and an improved water supply. The different ethnic communities worked together, and the contacts have been sustained mainly through the leader of the Local Community Office." He also mentioned the experience of the region of Mitrovica with three Albanian and three Serb mayors who hold regular meetings that focus on problems of the area. They have had some real successes in tackling a number of problems, including water supply. However, echoing the mayor of Gjilan/Gnjilane, he also cited the influence of Belgrade as an obstacle in resolving more serious matters.

The Serb representative from an Albanian-dominated municipality that was nearly destroyed during the war was the local community officer in one of the only two villages inhabited by Serbs in this municipality. He stated that, though it once seemed virtually unimaginable that Serbs and Albanians would even speak with each other, they had nonetheless found channels for dialogue. He cited good cooperation at the top level between the village and the municipality, though he regretted that there was little participation at lower levels, for example in the work of committees. Recently, with the change of KFOR's strategy to use mobile patrols instead of fixed guards, there had been an increase in armed attacks, and two thefts of livestock. Nevertheless, he said he was optimistic that this was a passing phase and that all were giving their best in all the processes where they participated.

The Albanian deputy mayor of a Serb-majority municipality agreed with the mayor that the municipality was a positive case of interethnic integration and that tolerance was on the rise. He did however, mention several persistent problems. Many Serbs who fled from other municipalities to this one were more radical than the original Serb inhabitants. (This problem was easing somewhat as returns proceeded and some Serbs were going back to their original locations.) There were also problems resulting from the persistence of parallel structures in health care and administration, the low level of Albanian participation in most state institutions (health care and tourist facilities), and the slow pace of reconstruction.

Leaders from Pristina and representatives from the international community then discussed what type of guarantees would be needed to improve interethnic relations and how to understand the factors that were responsible for success. The chair noted that, in order to multiply

success stories at the local level, we need to find out more about what was most influential. “Was it the intensity of conflict, the personalities of the mayors, the size of minorities, or something else?”

Tackling decentralization, an Albanian participant criticized the approach of trying to end ethnic problems through reforms and decentralization which, according to him, would only aggravate relations.

We have to get used to the fact that sometimes someone is a majority and another time not.

They would seriously undermine the integration process and would be a step back for all Serb citizens who have already integrated, since the ethnic dimension would be given excessive emphasis. “If we allow the creation of administrative chaos, we will not be able to deal with citizens’ problems.” He cited a Serb participant who said that “we have to get used to the fact that sometimes someone is a majority and another time not.”

An adviser to the president of the Assembly said that, if he had to choose between exercising ethnic or individual rights, he would pick integration. “If decentralization entails dismantling the parallel institutions, if Kosovo is preserved territorially, and if there is a central government in Pristina, then any type of autonomy within these conditions would be acceptable.”

Participants agreed that one of the remaining problems was that displaced persons coming from other municipalities tend to be more radical and can negatively influence local politics. Moreover, there are economic and employment needs that must be tackled not just for the minority but for the whole population. While participants disagreed about the need for the parallel institutions, they agreed that their present form was a problem. Serb participants, however, called for their retention now and, in due course, their integration into overall structures.

Despite PER’s efforts to include representatives of the smaller minorities in the roundtables, some of them expressed resentment over what they considered to be the almost exclusive focus of attention on Serb-Albanian relations.

A Bosnjak representative stated: “I belong to a grouping that tried to get integrated in Kosovo society. The fact that the major conflict runs along Albanian-Serb lines does not mean that the other communities are doing well.” A Turkish representative complained about the fact that Serbs are often treated by the international community as if they were the only

minority around. “Think about others, do not stop at Albanians and Serbs,” he said, and cited the problems of several Turkish communities in different areas. He emphasized support for “building a united Kosovo, Kosovo for all.”

Think about others, do not stop at Albanians and Serbs.

Some participants said that, except for some Romani communities, the situation of interethnic relations was deemed to be significantly improving. However, a Romani leader stressed the need to pay attention to the non-Serb minorities because, unlike Serbs, they do not have the support of any outside state. Speaking on behalf of the RAE communities [*OSCE uses this acronym to refer the Roma community and to the related Ashkali and Egyptian communities*] he complained about the chronic discrimination against the Roma and called for improvements in their education and employment prospects. He expected more from the newly elected municipal governments and also from the international community.

A mayor from a neighboring country, himself a Rom, reported on the situation of the displaced Kosovo Roma in Macedonia. “The status of these people does not differ from most of the Roma there,” he said. Initially, they were reluctant to integrate with the local community. Today, two thousand live with host families and a number of Roma were settled in collective centers. It was also noted that regardless of the conditions in Kosovo, most of these Roma prefer to emigrate to the West rather than return to Kosovo or remain in Macedonia.

The Turkish representative tried to reconcile the Turkish and Kosovo allegiances of his community. “I hear the Turkish anthem and the flag, but that’s something else. I feel first of all as a Kosovar, and within that I’m a Turk.” He stated that the Turkish community does not face any security problems; economic issues pose the greatest challenge. “Turks are entirely integrated,” he said, “but they would prefer that the legal status of minorities be more clearly defined. Since 1981 we have had the right to education in our language, and we do not fear independence [of Kosovo].”

Criticizing UNMIK, a representative of another minority group asked for the return of the Bosnjak community to Kosovo. He called for a “true, honest, and real agreement,” claiming that the return of many people can only be in the interest of Albanians. “If this does not happen, it will be a weakness of Albanian political parties, as well as a stain on the history of the UN administration.”

A representative of the Egyptian community complained of having been marginalized by the international community. Although they won seats in six municipalities and had two deputy mayors, he complained that the Roma usually claim to speak on behalf of all the RAE communities, and that the Egyptians do not wish this since the Roma are just another ethnic community. He also complained that no returns of the members of his community from the diaspora should occur due to the difficult current living conditions in Kosovo.

In response to the other community leaders, a Serb leader declared that the essence of the problem in Kosovo was the relations between Serbs and Albanians. “That is the key to the solutions, too. There are other minorities too, but they tend to choose one of the sides [in Kosovo’s main interethnic dispute].” She specifically mentioned the Rambouillet Accords and how Milosevic had enlisted representatives of minorities on his side. She said that Albanians are now trying to do the same with the non-Serb minorities.

In his conclusion, the chair remarked that this had been one of the most disciplined and productive discussions in the series because participants had been concerned more with substance than rhetoric. The chair also noted that, in this meeting, the participants spoke not only as representatives of their parties or institutions, but also as individuals, and that this encouraged open and relaxed discussions. “The experience of local communities could provide a useful lesson to the central leadership.”

In summarizing their discussion, participants emphasized that the main factors for reaching successful outcomes seem to be effective communication channels, limited war damage, and the quality of local leaders.

THE SIXTH ROUNDTABLE: JUNE 23, 2004

On March 17, 2004 a serious outbreak of interethnic violence resulted in numerous deaths and the destruction of some Serb settlements, historic sites and shrines, creating a new crisis in Kosovo that disrupted contacts between the leaders of the Serb and Albanian communities.

In May 2004, PER had organized, in Lucerne, Switzerland a regional meeting on Albanians and Their Neighbors, at which Serb and Albanian participants from Kosovo encountered one another for the first time since the March events. On June 23, PER arranged a special, off-the-record roundtable for top Serb and Albanian political leaders at the residence

of the head of the U.S. Office in Pristina and hosted by her. The European Union’s envoy in Kosovo also participated.

The purpose of the discussion was to see whether it was possible and desirable for the Albanian leadership to devise a set of political principles that would satisfy the needs of the Serb community and, if so, what these principles would be. Diplomatic representatives hoped that such a “package” would encourage the Serbs to renew their participation in Kosovo institutions and break the deadlock that had deepened after the March events. As the chair put it, the roundtable aimed to see what might be done to find a mutually agreeable way to improve the position of Serbs and the quality of Serb-Albanian relations. Among the issues they discussed were:

- Whether it was possible for the Albanian leaders to reach a consensus among themselves on the contents of such an offer or package, and not to attack one other on this matter.
- The content and nature of such a package.
- The importance of actively involving the Serbs in the creation of such a package of rights and obligations.

Participants discussed the need for better security and the possibility of involving Serb participants in joint working groups on security and decentralization with UNMIK. The Serbs said that one condition was that this process must not lead to the establishment of a Ministry of Interior, but agreed that Serb participation should be discussed in the context of the working group on decentralization and local government reform. The chair added that internal dialogue was more important at this moment than a dialogue with Belgrade. The key was to make sure that existing mechanisms for the rights of communities were implemented.

On a conciliatory note, a Serb leader stated that it was absolutely clear to him how important it is to be in the institutions. “We need full support to come back, first of all from these Albanian leaders here. Full support of Belgrade should be very clear on this. It will be very difficult for us to make this step, but I am aware that walking out of the Assembly does not solve the conflict.” When asked by the chair about what he would want the Kosovo leaders to do, he listed two main points: 1) unconditional support of the UNMIK police to do its job, as well as calling on the population to help in investigations of the crimes, and 2) unconditional support for the process of returns.

Another Serb leader stressed the importance of reconstruction and the need to meet strict deadlines so that schools would be ready for the start of the school year. *[The Prime Minister subsequently declared to the media that the reconstruction of schools and health facilities destroyed during the*

The 17th of March was a tragedy not only for Serbs, but for a democratic Kosovo and for all those Albanians who want democracy.

March events would be completed by the beginning of September, and reiterated his commitment to continue this internal dialogue and to meet more frequently with the senior Serb leaders.]

Another Serb leader called upon the Albanian leaders to declare that the 17th of March was a “tragedy not only for Serbs, but for a democratic Kosovo and for all those Albanians who want democracy, and that democratic institutions without Serbs have no legitimacy.”

The chair said that it would be essential for the Albanian leadership to act in a unified manner that would be inviting and acceptable to the Serbs, rather than attacking or competing with one another about how to deal with the Serbs. “It seems to me that whatever is to be done has to be done jointly. This is not a popular issue, and Albanian leaders who try to reach out to the Serbs take political risks.” Therefore, he continued, Albanian leaders would have to ask themselves whether it was possible for them to act in a consensual way even before tackling the matter of the content of a potential package and finding ways to include the Serbs in its creation. Complex technical issues such as decentralization and police are difficult in any circumstances, let alone in such a polarized community as Kosovo.

The Serb leaders declared that this was a positive initiative, but they still did not affirm their participation in the institutions. The heads of the Serb parliamentary group of “Povratak” expressed the hope that the Albanian leaders would become more engaged, not only in making positive public statements but in on-the-ground efforts.

The head of one of Kosovo’s governing institutions said that he could not be confident that decentralization and local government reform would satisfy the appetites of the Serbs who, he said, had territorial ambitions which no reasonable reform could satisfy. He compared this with the situation in Macedonia, where the Albanian minority had taken a con-

structive position and did not pose unrealistic demands. He thought that Belgrade had ordered the Kosovo Serbs to boycott the institutions, and expressed the hope that this meeting would serve to bring Serbs and Albanian leaders closer. “I am trying to be [a leader] for all, but I am no optimist that things will go easily. Various, confusing signals are coming from all sides.” As for the decentralization plan, “this project will be one draft proposal, which, if there is readiness, can serve as a guideline. If Serbs agree to it, they will have to take obligations upon themselves. So, this can be taken as an offer.” On a closing note, he said “I do not understand how a minority can condition the majority in a democracy. We cannot force feed them, hence, we need greater pressure by the international community.”

Serb leaders again stressed that their three highest priorities in formulating an acceptable package would be decentralization, security, and returns.

A Kosovo Albanian leader responded that what the Serbs were demanding was already being done in part. He claimed that a good deal was being done about decentralization, that there was a working group deliberating on this issue, and that there would be a joint UNMIK-government proposal before the elections; this could become a part of the package. Another senior Kosovo Albanian leader spoke favorably of the prospect of packaging the concessions into a single offer and pointed out that progress was already being made on several issues of concern to the Serbs. Reconstruction is under way, he said. So is local government reform, although it will require more time and in any event should not take place along ethnic lines. Security is also improving, although we have to see how to proceed further, perhaps with a working group, he said.

The Albanian leaders stressed that, if the Serbs expected their needs to be met, they would have to participate in the institutions. One of the leaders called upon the Serbs to participate in the local government group and said that they were free to propose their own model if they wished. A Serb leader responded that they would indeed take part in the local government group, with very few conditions, and that they would also consider participating in the security working group as long as this did not become the starting point for a future Ministry of the Interior.

All participants expressed the need to meet again in a similar forum, and the head of the U.S. Office expressed readiness to provide the venue again. An international diplomat said that he was encouraged by the meeting and would be ready to assist in any follow-up, and called for “an

incremental approach that would achieve tangible results in a short amount of time.”

The fact that this roundtable had taken place at all was considered to be a very important accomplishment, and a brave step for leaders on both sides. These leadership contacts, at the highest level, were the first since the March events. Moreover, the Serbs had decided to participate despite Belgrade’s absence, and were praised for their courage. All of the leaders, both Serb and Albanian, declared that they would continue meeting in order to build interethnic dialogue; and all of them stated that they were committed to creating better conditions for the participation of Serbs in the institutions and to repair the damage of the March events.

[A follow-up to this PER-organized meeting took place on July 14, 2004 at the residence of the U.S. Chief of Mission, where the discussion continued. Following the meetings, both Serb and Albanian media noted that they were not only the first bilateral contacts since March 17, but indeed the most senior meetings since 1999. One newspaper declared that “two Western and eight Kosovo leaders did more in a meeting than the whole international administration in twelve months.”]

THE SEVENTH ROUNDTABLE: APRIL 12, 2005

The seventh Kosovo roundtable, titled “Interethnic Relations in Kosovo: Toward Implementation of Standards,” was a follow-up to several PER events: PER’s regional roundtable on Albanians and Their Neighbors that was held in Lucerne in May 2004, the meeting held in June 2004 at the U.S. office in Pristina, and PER’s regional meeting on Kosovo held in Bucharest in November 2004.

The main goal of the roundtable was to bring together leaders of the Kosovo institutions of provisional self-government and Kosovo political parties with leaders of various political factions of the Kosovo Serb community to discuss the state of interethnic dialogue within Kosovo and progress achieved in implementation of standards, and to start an early review of the Kosovo government’s pilot decentralization projects.

To launch the discussion, a senior Kosovo Albanian participant stated that Kosovo has been performing positively in implementing standards, organizing elections, ensuring Kosovo’s stability, providing for the protection of minorities, and carrying out meaningful decentralization. However, he stressed that the integration of the Serb community into Kosovo’s life, in contrast to successes with the other minority ethnic communities, remains

an open and difficult issue. He reiterated his position that democratic processes would accelerate after the independence of Kosovo.

A politician from an opposition Albanian party cited a number of positive trends, including the work of the new Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, the emergence of a credible opposition in the Kosovo Assembly, and the activity of the Kosovo Protection Corps. He agreed that the standards implementation was to be evaluated positively, but asserted that “it must be stressed that the new government of Kosovo did not take a very active role in this.” He claimed that the Head of the UN administration in Kosovo is failing to build institutions in Kosovo, and especially in building democracy, and said that there were a number of negative trends: the absence of the rule of law, weak governing institutions, an inability to resolve Kosovo’s pressing problems, poor economic development, lack of progress in interethnic relations, and lack of intra-Albanian consensus on the crucial issues of decentralization, the constitution, talks with Belgrade, and the like. He asserted that four issues were of the utmost significance for Kosovo: the implementation of standards, interethnic dialogue, the reform of local government, and Kosovo’s status.

A senior Kosovo Serb leader welcomed an internal Kosovo dialogue as “the beginning of everything,” even though “we do not agree on many issues regarding the future of Kosovo.” “The problem is that the well entrenched positions will not change in the next six months to one year,” he said. Hence, “the only reason why [the Serbs] demand decentralization is security—this is the only issue where [the Serbs’] reasoning differs from the Albanians’; for this reason we need the kind of institutions in which we can integrate.” “Only a political consensus would bring stability,” he said.

Another Serb representative explained that, even though today a number of Serb leaders are considering reentering the Kosovo institutions of the provisional self-government, their previous bad experience of lack of cooperation within those institutions makes this more difficult. The Serbs are wary, he said, especially after many promises regarding meaningful decentralization were never fulfilled.

A member of the Kosovo government responded that a consensus on decentralization was necessary, and not only because the Contact Group has asked for it (even though this new stand contradicts the international community’s demands for a fast-track process). He also blamed Belgrade

for playing a negative role in the ongoing processes. As an example, he took Serbian President Tadic's recent call on the Serbs not to return to Kosovo. This participant accused Belgrade of forcing displaced Kosovo Serbs to integrate as displaced persons in Serbia or Montenegro, which was problematic from the human rights point of view. *[Only days before the PER roundtable this member of the Kosovo government, together with another minister (an ethnic Serb) returned from visiting displaced Serbs in Montenegro and encouraging them to return to Kosovo.]* He also encouraged the Kosovo Serb representatives to return to the government's working group on decentralization, adding that the government has the financial resources to help the Serbs take part in the decentralization process. He did, however, stress that the government cannot sit and wait for the Serbs for much longer. "This is the time for you to participate," he concluded.

A leader of the main Serb list in the Kosovo elections stated that "decentralization should be all inclusive" and should not stop with the five pilot municipalities selected by the Kosovo government. For him the impor-

Decentralization is important for both Serbs and Albanians, but for the Serbs it is an existential issue.

tance of decentralization lies in the fact that it would produce a new Kosovo by the end of 2006. If the new decentralized Kosovo is acceptable to the Serbs, they will, he said, actively take part in the next Kosovo elections. If, however, the current decentralization stops after the five current pilot projects are completed

and the rest drags on until 2008, this would not be acceptable for the Kosovo Serbs. Another Serb leader, offering to be constructive, added that, despite his doubts over the sincerity of the Albanians' call for the integration of the Serbs, he would be willing to be engaged in the discussion.

Underlining the importance of the process to the Serbs, a Kosovo Serb leader said that "decentralization is important for both Serbs and Albanians, but for the Serbs it is an existential issue." Another Serb leader added that decentralization should proceed irrespective of the decision on status. He also called for extending the number of the current pilot projects from five to fifteen.

Some differences within the Kosovo Serb leadership were apparent at the meeting. While some of those who took part in the last Kosovo election

endorsed Serb participation in the current decentralization process, others believed that the decentralization reform should start anew and include as many Serbs as possible. A local Serb leader said that Belgrade should be present in the Kosovo decentralization process. This participant also asked for a "region of Central Kosovo" to be created, as well as the introduction of Serb veto powers in the Kosovo assembly regarding education, security, identity cards, health and social services, and the like.

The call for the inclusion of Belgrade in an intra-Kosovo dialogue was rejected by a senior Kosovo opposition leader. He did, however, suggest that "there is some space for Belgrade because it does have a legitimate right to care for the well-being of the Kosovo Serbs," especially in the fields of education, health, and human rights. (A representative of a Kosovo ruling party agreed that there would be space for Belgrade's advisory role to the Kosovo Serbs when they take part in the institutions.) He also called for continuation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue on technical issues and for a start of the status talks. According to him, three levels of dialogue should be established regarding Kosovo: a) an intra-Kosovo dialogue for resolving Kosovo's needs and for establishing a strategy vis-à-vis Belgrade and the international community; b) a Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, including the issue of decentralization; c) status talks between Pristina and the international community.

He also suggested making a catalogue of issues that could be included in a dialogue with Belgrade. In particular, an inventory of the number of refugees that want to come back to Kosovo and a feasibility study for their return should be made. "We need to sit down with Belgrade and sort out what the mutually accepted questions are for discussion," he said.

This Kosovo Albanian political leader also pointed out the lack of consensus among the Kosovo Serb leaders over the ways of legitimizing their participation in and cooperation with the Kosovo institutions. Lack of such consensus, according to him, harms the political process in Kosovo.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS*

(English alphabetical order)

Participants from Pristina and other municipalities in Kosovo

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Arsim Bajrami, Member, Kosovo Assembly (PDK); Vice President, Democratic Party of Kosova
Mahmut Bakalli, Member, Kosovo Assembly (AAK) (2)
Numan Balic, President, Party of Democratic Action; Minister of Education of Kosovo (2)
Sadudin Berisha, Member, Kosovo Assembly (LDK)
Skender Berisha, Member, Kosovo Assembly (LDK) (2)
Nexhat Daci, President, Kosovo Assembly (3)
Adem Demaci, Chairman, Administrative Board, RTV Kosova; Chairman, Dardania Association (2)
Bujar Dugolli, Head of Parliamentary Group of the Alliance for the Future of Kosova, Kosovo Assembly
Illir Dugolli, Principal Political Adviser to Prime Minister of Kosovo (3)
Halit Ferizi, President, Handikos NGO
Alush Gashi, Head, Parliamentary Group of the Democratic League of Kosova, Kosovo Assembly
Ramadan Gashi, Mayor, Municipality of Skenderaj/Srbica
Lirim Greiçevci, Assistant to the President, Democratic Party of Kosova
Azem Hajdari, Adviser to the Prime Minister of Kosovo
Muhamet Hamiti, Spokesperson of the President of Kosovo
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Lutfi Haziri, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Local Government of Kosovo (3)
Bislim Hoti, Member, Kosovo Assembly (New Democratic Initiative of Kosova)
Skender Hyseni, Principal Political Adviser to the President of Kosovo (6)
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Mark Krasniqi, President, Albanian Christian Democratic Party of Kosova

Dragisa Krstovic, Head of the Coalition Caucus, “Povrtak” Coalition, Kosovo Assembly
Eqrem Kryeziu, Mayor, Municipality of Prizren
Hajredin Kuci, Vice President, Democratic Party of Kosova (2)
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Fatmir Limaj, Vice President, Democratic Party of Kosova
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Ibrahim Rugova, President of Kosovo (7)
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*The number in parentheses indicates the number of PER roundtables the participant attended. Where no number appears, the person took part in one roundtable only. Some participants have changed their titles between 2001-2005. Only the titles at the time of their latest attendance are listed.

INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPANTS

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