



STRENGTHENING INTERETHNIC POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN KOSOVO

Meeting Summary Report

Pristina, October 25-26, 2007

Preface

Kosovo Albanians and Serbs are locked in a complex struggle over the future status of Kosovo. Albanians are unanimous that Kosovo must become independent, while Serbs insist that Serbia's legal sovereignty over Kosovo be preserved. Aware of these irreconcilable positions, the international community has been reluctant to take a decision on Kosovo's status. Instead, additional rounds of negotiations have been sponsored in the hope of narrowing the existing differences. Status talks are due to conclude in December, with no compromise in sight. Albanians have indicated that they will proclaim independence. Serbs support the continuation of talks with a focus on reaching a solution that keeps Kosovo within Serbia's borders. The international community remains divided and ambiguous. With Albanians seeking independence, Serbs opposing it, the international community divided, the prospects for a compromise are bleak. The continuation of the status quo is also untenable.

The unpromising prospect for a compromise between these two irreconcilable status positions, as well as the divisions within the international community, have increased the uncertainty of Kosovo's population when looking towards their future. This in turn has exacerbated tensions and fears among Kosovo communities and has made the efforts of the international and local organizations to build interethnic trust more difficult. Disagreements between Albanians and Serbs on almost every matter and the legacy of ethnic conflict have strengthened the widely-held belief that domination of one community by another is the "only game in town" in Kosovo, rendering efforts to build a multiethnic society futile.

The growing tension between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs is also reflected in the rare face-to-face discussions between them. In an effort to keep the interethnic channels of communication open at this critical juncture and regain the momentum for interethnic cooperation, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) launched a new initiative on strengthening the dialogue between Kosovo's Albanian and Serb leaders.

The objective of the initiative is to focus on concrete issues such as improvement of local administration, security, and decentralization aiming to improve the lives of communities and strengthen interethnic trust. The overall goal of the initiative is to reduce interethnic tensions, encourage consensus on concrete local issues, and ultimately help political elites of both communities to take ownership and responsibility for the future of their constituencies. This initiative is made possible through the generous support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and is conducted in close cooperation with the Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina.

Despite the sensitive nature of its work and of the situation on the ground, PER has managed to retain the trust of leaders of both communities to bring them together for discussions of the most pressing issues. The series of meetings reported here attest to this trust. The two-day meetings, which took place on October 25-26, 2007 in Pristina, were designed to assist the Kosovo Albanian and Serb leaders to develop a strategy for interethnic cooperation on issues of mutual interest and improve interethnic trust needed for the implementation of an eventual status package. Such a plan for post-status period is urgently needed if Kosovo is to successfully implement the status package, especially sections on ethnic minorities. The meeting participants included Kosovo's Albanian government and party leaders, Serb political leaders, and representatives of the international community in Kosovo. The meetings were

chaired by PER Executive Director Alex Grigor'ev and facilitated by Lukas Beglinger, head of the Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina.

In order to encourage frank discussions, it is PER's practice not to attribute remarks to specific participants unless made in opening statements in the presence of media. PER Program Officer Shpetim Gashi is the author of this report, which has not been reviewed by the participants, and for which PER assumes full responsibility.

Intra-Serb Dialogue

On October 25, 2007, PER organized a roundtable of Kosovo Serb political leaders in Pristina for a discussion of issues concerning the Serb community. The meeting was designed to provide senior Serb leaders with an opportunity to jointly consider the main challenges their community is facing and to encourage interethnic cooperation on non-status related issues. Simultaneously, the discussion intended to strengthen the position of the Serb leaders vis-à-vis Kosovo Albanians and Belgrade. Insufficient concrete action by Kosovo institutions to improve the situation the Serb community and Belgrade's pressure on Serb leaders to remain "loyal" to the Serbian government are considered by many to be two major factors for undermining political leverage of the Kosovo Serbs.

The Serb participation in Kosovo's political life and the impact of status talks on interethnic relations were the focal points of the debate. Though Kosovo Serbs were united in regards to Kosovo's final status, they remained divided on participation in the political process. At least three major positions were clearly articulated: Kosovo Serbs should boycott the Kosovo political process; Serbs should be involved in Kosovo's political life but only with Belgrade's support; and Kosovo Serbs should participate in Kosovo's political life with or without Belgrade's consent.

The opening remarks were delivered by PER Executive Director Alex Grigor'ev and Head of the Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina Lukas Beglinger. Grigor'ev noted that this roundtable represented a new PER effort to improve interethnic relations in Kosovo, and that the informality of the discussion should allow participants to explore new ways and approaches to bridge interethnic differences. To stimulate a frank and analytical discussion, he asked participants to give up their political capacities during the meeting and engage in the discussions as independent analysts of Serb-Albanian relations.

Beglinger asserted that the difficulties associated with the building and preserving of multiethnic societies should not discourage communities to build peaceful environments. He observed that interethnic coexistence remains a challenge also for societies with long traditions of multiethnic compositions, and illustrated his point with the recent elections in Switzerland, where a radical anti-immigrant party was expected to win the plurality vote. However, he pointed out, this is not being seen as a threat to the Swiss system, but just as a challenge.

The opening statements of some of the Serb participants articulated a list of issues concerning the Serb community. Security, political representation, relations with Belgrade, and the status process topped the list. The participants argued that progress in these areas is lacking largely because of the Albanians' reluctance to engage in compromise-oriented dialogues. The international community was also blamed for allegedly "openly siding with the Albanians."

It was argued that compromise solutions are the only way to build a viable society in Kosovo. Postponement of the final status decision and replacement of UNMIK with an EU Mission, and the idea of "one state, two systems" were considered as potential compromises.

Discussions also addressed Serb political participation in Kosovo and the role of Belgrade in this process. Arguing in favor of the boycott, a participant contended that Serb engagement in Kosovo's institutions in the past has been "misused and abused" by their Albanian counterparts and the international community. This position was seconded by the majority of participants. The Serbs taking part in elections were criticized. Albanians and the international administration were accused of deliberately using some young

“quiet and compliant” Serbs leaders as a multiethnic décor just for the sake of “fulfilling the international standards of multiethnic institutions.”

A former senior Serb official noted that political participation is useless as long as “problems that produce crisis” are not resolved. Pressed to name what these problems are, he said, “international policies that support Albanians’ quest for independence,” which also undermine Serb’s trust on the international community. “At the beginning, the Serbs saw the international administration as a connecting bridge between the two communities, but the bridge turned out to be rotten when we tried to cross it. Now that we know the bridge is rotten, we won’t try to cross it again.”

Some participants affirmed that Belgrade is not their partner of choice, but rather of convenience. The financial support that Belgrade provides to the Kosovo Serbs is particularly appealing. “As long as it provides financial support to the Serbs, Belgrade will remain their main partner,” stated one participant rather suspicious of Belgrade’s support. Some participants, however, denied that Belgrade’s material support plays a determining role on their decisions. They argued that the reason for the boycott is their inability to deliver what they had promised to their electorate and it was deemed “immoral to ask Serbs for their vote again.” There was agreement among the Serbs that the culprit for their inability to deliver was Albanians’ unwillingness to compromise and the international community’s “unreserved support” for the Albanians. Therefore, Belgrade remained the only partner, the majority of participants agreed.

A former official stated that he has nothing against those who participate in the elections, but he believes that the Serb community is better off “without representatives than with illegitimate representatives.” Another participant stated that Serbs want to be part of the institutions but only when they have a say, and when “they are not outvoted on everything.” She blamed the Kosovo institutions, which she labeled as “illegal organizations that became legal but continue to have an illegal culture,” for violating even those few rights protected by the Kosovo Constitutional Framework.

A leader of a new Serb party, which has decided to participate in the elections, contended that in the past boycott has not brought the Serbs anything but misery. “We do not support the boycott; our objective is to reach compromises.” Other participants were quick to respond and said that they have already tried to do so. In response, the new leader said that this election offers more, and that it is worth trying as there is no “magic solution” to this problem. He appealed to his Serb colleagues to support his party and contribute to create a better situation for the Serb community. The motto of his party “take your own life into your own hands” was not welcomed by many participants. They maintained that the Serb community needs to act as a unified body and in concert with Belgrade.

A senior leader claimed that the decision of some new Serb leaders to engage with the Kosovo institutions is simply based on their personal interests. He also implicated the international community and Albanian politicians in this “conspiracy” to split the Serb community by encouraging these “Serb illegitimate leaders” to engage in the Kosovo politics. Another participant stated that the Serb leaders participating in elections are betraying the Serb interests. His remarks spurred a rather lively debate accompanied with emotional remarks and tension. In support to his remarks, a participant said that Serbs should no longer trust the international community, but should look for new partners, such as Russia. “Only Russia protects Serb interests.”

A participant, who is in favor of taking part in the political process but lacks the power to defy Belgrade, accused Belgrade and some of the Serb representatives present in the meeting of contributing to the confusion of the Serb community. He also questioned the legitimacy of the participants to represent the Serb community in Kosovo. “We are not Serb leaders; leaders take responsibility, they take part in elections, and get elected. We are just a group of Serbs who have wisdom but lack courage.” He also challenged the view that Serbs have tried to work with the Kosovo institutions. “Even when we officially joined the Kosovo parliament, we spent more time outside than inside institutions.”

Speculating on the post-election situation of the Serbs, he said that four years from now the Serb community will be even weaker, especially now that UNMIK is transferring its competencies to the

Albanians. “We should have no illusion that things will get better if we stay out of the game.” He stated that Serbs should have learned by now that their boycott does not put into question the legitimacy of elections in Kosovo. “In 2004, the international community praised Kosovo institutions for organizing free and fair elections. Nobody cared about the Serb boycott.”

Although the discussions were characterized by disagreements among Serb participants over their present and future steps, the Kosovo Serb leaders share their opinions on major issues, and will most likely act as a unified body in close cooperation with Belgrade in the post-status period. The influence of new Serb political parties that have decided to participate in the November elections is not likely to be strong enough to allow them to assume the role of the Serb community representatives in Kosovo’s institutions. Therefore, interethnic dialogue outside Kosovo’s institutions will remain the only channel of communication until full Serb political participation is secured.

The differences among the Serbs themselves attest to the growing need of an intra-Serb dialogue to create a serious Kosovo Serb partner to deal with the Albanians. The cooperation between the two major communities will be crucial for the successful implementation of an eventual status outcome, especially of sections that aim to improve the lives of the Serb community.

Intra-Albanian Dialogue

On October 25, 2007, PER organized a working dinner for senior Kosovo Albanian political party leaders and government representatives to discuss possible steps that Albanians could take to improve interethnic relations in Kosovo. The objective of the meeting was to facilitate the building of an intra-Albanian consensus regarding the implementation of projects that improve the lives of the Serb community.

The impact of the status process and elections on interethnic relations was the focus of discussions. Participants acknowledged that integration of the Serb community remains one of the most challenging issues for Kosovo’s institutions, and that it is hard to implement legislation related to the Serb community without them on board coupled with negative influence by Belgrade. There was agreement that even though the Serbs are boycotting Kosovo institutions, political leaders of both communities should explore and build non-institutional mechanisms of communication to implement projects of mutual interests, and build interethnic trust, with the ultimate objective of bringing the Serbs back into Kosovo’s political process.

The opening remarks were delivered by PER Executive Director Alex Grigor’ev and Head of the Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina Lukas Beglinger. Grigor’ev noted the importance of engagement in the dialogue with the Serb leaders in maintaining the level of civility and in building the foundations for future interethnic relations and a functional Kosovo. Beglinger praised the participants for their engagement in dialogue at this sensitive time and reiterated his country’s commitment to helping Kosovo communities overcome deeply rooted ethnic grievances.

A senior government official asserted that participation of Serbs in the political process would improve interethnic trust. He believed that more Serbs will take part in the November 2007 poll, especially in areas where interethnic tensions have been relatively low, such as Gnjilane, Kamenica, Strpce, and Novo Brdo. He, however, acknowledged that the new Serb political elite will not be able to do much, as it confronts two big challenges: lack of support from both Belgrade and the Kosovo Serb population. This position was supported by the other participants. None of them however mentioned a third challenge most frequently raised by the Serbs and international participants at the previous PER meetings: lack of political will and action by the Kosovo institutions.

An official in the Kosovo administration admitted that Kosovo institutions can and should do more to make the Serbs part of the process, but, he added, Albanians also need a Serb partner. He stated that the new Serb leaders participating in elections will not be able to assume the role of a Serb partner, due to

insufficient support from their community, and it will be particularly difficult for them to withstand Belgrade's pressure. "It is impossible for any Serb leader to survive in Kosovo politically without Belgrade's support." Another official agreed with his remarks, and added that Albanians cannot do more as long as there is no serious Serb partner. "Serb community lacks leadership." A leader of an opposition party said that Serb leaders are "afraid of taking responsibility" for the future of their community.

A senior official said that there is nothing more Albanians can do for the Serbs without aggravating the majority population. Regarding security concerns and freedom of movement for the Serbs, he said the situation has been significantly improved since March 2004 unrest, and the Serb fears are based on misperceptions and unfounded fears. Another government official seconded this point, stating that "Serb fear is unrealistic." He said that people can now freely speak Serbian on the street. At the same time, however, all the participants agreed that "it takes a rumor to start a crisis," which is specifically what the Serbs said to be fearing the most.

The meeting suggests that Albanians agree that Kosovo has yet to build adequate democratic institutions with capacities to protect all communities and respond to unpredicted situations, such as the March 2004 violence. The Serb community's stated fear is based on the fact that Kosovo institutions are weak and do not possess the necessary power and mechanisms to protect them in case the status decision produces a degree of lawlessness in Kosovo.

The meeting indicated that Albanian political leaders have little to no differences in matters related to the Serb community. They agree that they have done enough for the Serbs, and if Serbs want to get more from Albanians, they need to join the political process and produce authentic Kosovo Serb leaders.

Albanian-Serb Dialogue

Following the separate meetings with Serb and Albanian leaders, on October 26, 2007, PER convened a large meeting of senior Kosovo Albanian and Serb political leaders as well as representatives of the international community in Pristina to discuss some of the main issues raised by Serbs and Albanians during PER's separate discussions with them. Inclusion of Serb leaders in the political process, status talks, and the November Kosovo elections and their impact on interethnic relations were the main issues addressed at the roundtable.

Unfortunately, the meeting coincided with the opening of the election campaign in Kosovo. A few Albanian senior leaders, such as the Kosovo President and heads of two main political parties, had to leave the meeting early due to their election campaign commitments. Although the deputy prime minister, heads of all parliamentary groups of Albanian parties, senior leaders of every Albanian political party, and senior representatives of the international community, including the head of UNMIK, were present throughout the discussion, some Serb participants used this early departure to stage a walk out claiming that they are "being ignored by Albanians." Though they agreed with their colleagues that the early departure of Albanian participants was a slight, a number of Serb representatives decided to remain in the meeting.

The opening remarks were delivered by PER Executive Director Alex Grigor'ev, Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu, SRSG Joachim Rucker, and Head of the Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina Lukas Beglinger. Grigor'ev noted that this roundtable represented a new attempt to improve interethnic confidence in Kosovo and that this meeting of Albanians and Serbs sitting together on the first day of the election campaign sends a good message to the Kosovo population and the international observers. He encouraged participants to see the status delay not just as a challenge but also as an opportunity for seeking new ways to improve interethnic relations. .

President Sejdiu thanked PER for its continued support on bridging the gap between these ethnic communities. Acknowledging the importance of Serb participation in the political process, he said "we can move forward only together, and that only together we will be able to build a democratic society." He

pledged to do more to integrate the Serb community into Kosovo's political life, but admitted that these efforts may fail as long as Belgrade's negative interference continues. He encouraged the Serbs to take a more active role in Kosovo's political life, as they, no matter the status outcome, will be the ones living in Kosovo side by side with Albanians.

Justifying the decision to hold elections in the midst of status negotiations, SRSG Rucker stated that "democracy should run its course" regardless of the challenges that may appear in the process. He stated that the Serb boycott constitutes to be a challenge to the process, and invited Serbs to vote, as they will remain in Kosovo regardless of status. "We cannot imagine a Kosovo without Serbs, and we should not imagine such a Kosovo." Rucker also blamed Belgrade for urging the boycott, which, he said, has only "sidelined the Serb community from the political process." He hoped more Serbs would participate this time and that the international administration will do its best to offer everyone the technical possibility to exercise their democratic right to vote.

The head of the Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina, Lukas Beglinger, reconfirmed his country's commitment to help Kosovo communities overcome deeply rooted ethnic grievances. He asserted that Kosovo communities can draw important lessons from the Swiss model of interethnic arrangements, and urged leaders of both communities to engage more seriously in the dialogue. "People of Kosovo have no choice but to seek ways of ensuring coexistence. It will inevitably happen sooner or later, but the sooner it happens, the better for Kosovo."

An Albanian leader asserted that Kosovo Serbs have lost their negotiating power and no longer constitute an impediment to Kosovo's independence. However, he feared that Serbs will be used by Belgrade as a tool to create a "frozen conflict" and a confrontation front against Albanians on Serbia's behalf. Though he supported a quick declaration of independence, he acknowledged that securing its international recognition is "another story." Regardless of status outcome and the Serb response to it, he stated that Kosovo Albanians should support Kosovo Serbs, and listen to their concerns, as Belgrade is "not voicing their concerns," but rather its own.

A government official argued that by boycotting elections Serbs are losing another opportunity to integrate. He presented two approaches available to Serbs: "the easy approach," with gains in the short run but losses in the long run, and "the difficult approach," losses in the short run, but gains in the long run, and asserted that Serbs have chosen the easy approach, and have decided to obey to Belgrade.

An Albanian leader stated that democracy, which Kosovo is successfully building, is the cure to interethnic divisions. "Democracy allows us to keep our differences but respect each other. Democracy will heal relations between communities, but this takes time and we should be patient." A Serb participant rejected the notion that Kosovo is building a genuine democracy, and stated that it can only be built when Serb legitimate leaders take part in it. "Inclusion of illegitimate Serb leaders in the institutions will only exacerbate the interethnic divide." This prompted an Albanian to state that "Albanians cannot decide who represents the Serbs; Serbs make that decision themselves, through elections."

The head of an opposition party stated that status and elections are equally important processes for building a "functioning democratic state, which will benefit all communities." Echoing remarks made by previous speakers, he said that "Kosovo belongs to all" and that Kosovo institutions will put adequate mechanism in place, such as affirmative action, to ensure the inclusion of Serb community in institutions. He urged the Serbs to take part in elections and encouraged leaders of both communities to create a tradition of resolving outstanding issues through legal and legitimate mechanisms.

Serb participation in institutions and the political process were considered key to strengthening trust and cooperation. A senior Albanian leader said that political participation provides an opportunity for the Serbs to be heard, and voice their concerns. "Once in institutions, Albanians can no longer ignore them." He further remarked that the crucial differences, such as status, are impossible to bridge, but that "Albanians and Serbs share the rest."

A Serb participant had a different opinion about the issues of Serb participation in the Kosovo's political life. "Participation is beneficial only if we are capable of delivering to our communities." He said that Albanians are just interested to talk and have coffee with us. "This is not enough. We need people employed in institutions, and we need our roads repaired." There was across the board agreement that implementation of concrete projects would strengthen mutual trust and establish new standards and values of interethnic coexistence in Kosovo.

An Albanian member of Kosovo's Assembly cited lack of will and a poor economic situation as the main culprits for the slow implementation of some concrete projects, such as employment of Serbs in public services. "The reason we can't meet the Serb demands is simply because we lack the resources. We need economic aid." In addition, she said that Serb participation is also required to implement such projects. An international representative agreed that the economy is essential to improving daily life and interethnic relations. But he asserted that improvement of the economy is not possible without the resolution of status, which Serbs prefer to postpone. "No status, no economy."

Addressing the issue of political will, a senior leader of an opposition party said that "will is not enough" to solve the problems. "Adequate legal mechanisms and determined political decision-making is needed. He blamed the Kosovo institutions for lack of commitment to provide incentives and involve the Serbs in the process, and Serbs for their "inability to articulate their demands." The participant did not spare the international community either: "International community installed compliant people in the institutions."

An Albanian analyst agreed that both Albanians and Serbs lack the political will to do more. He recommended that Albanians take into consideration the employment of a larger number of Serbs, and improve security and other related problems, and, in exchange, Serbs "deconstruct their existing parallel structures."

A representative of an opposition party regretted the fact that Kosovo communities still need an international organization to bring them together. He suggested that the Kosovo President should launch a similar initiative on internal dialogue to complement the current local and international efforts. He said that interethnic relations will start to improve with what he labeled "second international intervention," after Kosovo becomes independent. He stated that one of the strongest guarantees in the Ahtisaari package is that it does not "deliver the Serbs to the Kosovo Albanians, but rather to the EU, and other international organizations."

As shown above, the discussions were characterized by disagreements between Albanians and Serbs over major issues, such as Kosovo's political status and participation in elections. They remained entrenched in their diametrically differing positions on the final status: nothing less than independence versus anything less than independence.

Despite these fundamental differences on Kosovo's status, there was consensus that Albanians and Serbs could work together on concrete projects such as security, employment, and education. Both Albanian and Serb participants agreed that more could and should be done to secure political participation of the Serbs, and address their grievances in the institutions. Heads of two largest parliamentary groups in the Kosovo parliament agreed that not enough has been done to assist the Serb members of the Kosovo parliament. Senior Albanian leaders pledged that Kosovo will do more to accommodate the demands of the Serb community after the resolution of status. On the other hand, Serbs affirmed that the Serb community will be more cooperative on non-status issues, but admitted that Belgrade will continue to represent their interests in the status talks.

Conclusion

The three roundtable discussions suggest that the status negotiations have inadvertently exacerbated relations between Albanians and Serbs, and between Serbs and the international community. The statements of Albanian leaders that Kosovo will become independent one way or another, and the

counteracting Serb statements that an eventual proclamation of independence will be met with similar actions have increased the uncertainty of Kosovo's population when looking towards their future.

Perceived as supporting independence for Kosovo, the international community has been gradually losing the little trust it enjoyed from the Serbs. The Serb feeling of alienation toward the international community stems mainly from the public statements of some major western powers in support of Kosovo's supervised independence, as well as from the support of the international administration to transfer its powers to Kosovo institutions.

While the Serb community unanimously opposes Kosovo's independence, it remains divided and confused about political participation in Kosovo's political life. The majority of the Serb leaders, encouraged by Belgrade, have decided to boycott the elections. However, a number of new Serb political parties and civic initiatives have decided to defy Belgrade and take part in the November 2007 poll. They are supported by a significant number of moderate Serb leaders. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged throughout the meetings that the overwhelming majority of the Serbs will respond positively to the call for boycott. As a result, the new leaders will lack the necessary legitimacy and power to negotiate with Albanian leaders on behalf of the Kosovo Serb community.

Belgrade's economic assistance to the Kosovo Serbs is strengthening its trust and credibility among the Serb population. It is also bolstering the position of Kosovo radical leaders at the expense of moderate ones. Serbian President Boris Tadic's agreement to support Prime Minister Kostunica's call on Kosovo Serbs to boycott elections has further undermined the position of Serb moderate leaders.

Although the dialogue did little to narrow the existing differences between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, it provided senior Kosovo Albanian and Serb leaders with an opportunity to jointly consider the significant challenges they face in building a multiethnic and democratic Kosovo. In all three meetings, participants agreed that dialogue remains the best mechanism for resolving problems and for building sustainable peace in Kosovo. Both Albanian and Serb leaders committed to working closely with their communities and urge them to refrain from the use of violence.

List of Participants

English Language Alphabetical Order

Lukas Beglinger, Head of Mission, Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina
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Shpetim Gashi, Program Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations
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Alex Grigor'ev, Executive Director, Project on Ethnic Relations
Pleurat Halili, Associate in Pristina, Project on Ethnic Relations
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Dragisa Krstovic, Member, Serb List for Kosovo and Metohija, Assembly of Kosovo
Leon Malazogu, Representative in Kosovo, Project on Ethnic Relations
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Randjel Nojkic, Member, Serb List for Kosovo and Metohija, Assembly of Kosovo
Slobodan Petrovic, President, Independent Liberal Party
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Momcilo Trajkovic, President, Serb Resistance Movement of Kosovo
Rada Trajkovic, President, Executive Board, Serb National Council of Kosovo and Metohija; Vice President, Christian Democratic Party of Serbia
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