

STRENGTHENING INTERETHNIC POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN KOSOVO

Meeting Report

Pristina, January 31 - February 1, 2008

Introduction

Despite the sensitive nature of its focus and of the delicate environment in which it works, PER continues to retain the trust of Kosovo Albanian and Serb leaders to bring them together for discussions of the most pressing issues. The series of meetings reported here attest to this trust. The meetings covered in this report took place on January 31 – February 1, 2008, in Pristina, and were designed to assist the Kosovo Albanian and Serb leaders in defining issues on which interethnic cooperation is possible regardless of the status outcome. The number of consensual conclusions and recommendations that came out of this dialogue indicates that Kosovo Albanians and Serbs are more serious and realistic about their common future than it is usually reported. The meeting participants included senior officials of Kosovo's institutions, including the president and the prime minister, Kosovo Albanian political party leaders, Serb political leaders representing a wide spectrum of Serb politicians, including those who boycotted the elections, political analysts, and representatives of the international community in Kosovo.

The two-day dialogue sponsored by PER and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs showed that the persisting irreconcilable differences and the additional rounds of negotiations, September to December 2007, provided Kosovo Albanian and Serb political leaders with an opportunity to better prepare themselves and their communities for the apparent status outcome. At PER's roundtables, for the first time, representatives of both communities agreed that efforts to produce a consensual outcome have been exhausted and any new attempts to reach a solution would be futile. Subsequently, they had intensified communication with their own communities encouraging them to remain in Kosovo and refrain from the use of violence. According to various recent polls, the number of Serbs willing to stay in Kosovo regardless of status outcome has been increasing. The overwhelming majority of Albanians also have understood that attacks on the Serbs will only damage their future prospects, and are not expected to respond to eventual provocations that may come from extremist elements.

Although a few Serb participants reiterated their previous arguments against independence based on their interpretation of the UN Resolution 1244 and international law, most of the Serbs conceded that they have no power to stop or delay the process any further, and that Kosovo will declare independence in a matter of weeks. As a result, discussions were inadvertently based on the premise that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and its recognition by major western powers are inevitable. Consequently, the debate focused on how to make the transitional period as smooth as possible for everyone in Kosovo. Cooperation between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs at both the central and local level was considered crucial to a peaceful management of the post-status period. Although it was evident from the discussions that no significant interethnic cooperation on major issues is likely to take place in the immediate aftermath of the status decision, participants came out with a number of practical issues on which interethnic cooperation is feasible.

Managing the status process and implementation of practical projects aimed at improving interethnic trust are the focus of PER's one-year initiative on interethnic dialogue in Kosovo launched last fall. The goal of the initiative is to reduce interethnic tensions, encourage consensus on local issues, and ultimately help political elites of both communities take ownership and responsibility for the future of their communities. 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 and Swiss Regional Peace Building Office in Skopje.

In order to encourage frank discussions, it is PER's practice not to attribute remarks to specific participants, unless made in opening statements or in the presence of media. We have tried to provide an accurate and balanced summary of the proceedings. We ask for the understanding of participants whose remarks may have not been fully captured within the brief compass of this document, for which PER accepts sole responsibility.

Summary of Discussions

On January 31 - February 1, 2008, PER organized a series of meetings of Kosovo Albanian and Serb political leaders: two separate meetings with Serb and Albanian representatives respectively, and one joint meeting with Albanians, Serbs, and international representatives. The discussions were designed to provide senior political leaders with an opportunity to consider the main challenges their communities face and to encourage cooperation in non-status issues. The management of the post-status period and identification of issues on which Albanians and Serbs could begin working together were the focal points of the debate.

During the meeting with Kosovo Serb leaders, the participants suggested a number of practical measures for improving the situation of their community and initiating more productive contacts with leaders of Kosovo's institutions. PER relayed the Serb suggestions to the Kosovo prime minister later in the day during a private meeting with him. On the same day, PER organized a meeting of Kosovo Albanian political leaders to discuss the possible steps that Kosovo's institutions could take to improve interethnic relations and manage the post-status period. .

Following the separate meetings with Serbs and Albanians, PER brought together Kosovo Albanian and Serb political leaders, as well as representatives of the international community, to jointly consider the following issues raised by Serbs and Albanians during PER's separate discussions with them: post-status security; communication between Albanians and Serbs; Serb inclusion in the political process; and the property rights.

The opening remarks were delivered by Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu, Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, PER President Livia Plaks, and Head of Swiss Liaison Office in Pristina Lukas Beglinger.

PER President Livia Plaks welcomed the participants and invited Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu and Prime Minister Hashim Thaci to deliver introductory remarks. President Sejdiu thanked PER for its support in maintaining open channels of communication between Albanians and Serbs and for helping to build consensus for cooperation on issues of mutual interest at this critical juncture for Kosovo. Acknowledging the importance of good interethnic relations, he noted that cooperation between Albanians and Serbs is crucial for the implementation of legislation benefiting the Serb community and for the overall economic and political development of Kosovo. He reiterated that Kosovo's institutions are committed to creating a safe and prosperous environment for all communities. He also encouraged Serb leaders to become more active in Kosovo's political process.

Prime Minister Thaci began his remarks by thanking PER for its commitment to provide forums for direct and sincere communication between leaders of Kosovo's communities. The prime minister stated that his government will make sure that the voice of all communities is heard at all institutional levels and called on the Serb community to not be afraid of the approaching finalization of Kosovo's status, as, according to him, clarifying the future is in the interest of all communities. He announced the establishment of a special office for communities whose mandate will be to address the daily problems affecting non-Albanian communities. He reaffirmed his government's commitment to implementing the Ahtisaari plan in full and assured the Serbs that they will have a strong say in their future. He promised that Serbs will have a direct say on the selection of police chiefs in Serb majority and mixed municipalities; mayors in mixed municipalities will create more jobs for members of the Serb community; he will personally get

involved in creating employment opportunities for members of the Serb community in public enterprises such as Post and Telecommunications of Kosovo, Pristina Airport, various municipal administrations, and the Assembly of Kosovo; and improve access to the media for non-Albanian communities. In conclusion, he invited Serbs to participate more actively in the political process and implement his proposals together. The prime minister's remarks included the Serb recommendations PER relayed to him following its meeting with the Serb leaders.

PER President Livia Plaks affirmed PER's commitment to provide assistance in building a stronger multiethnic society in Kosovo. She stated that the current project aims to strengthen the trust between Kosovo political leaders and help the Serb leadership deliver on promised results, and, if necessary, redefine policies in line with the new realities in Kosovo. She further noted that although the status issue is about to be finalized, the current challenges have yet to be resolved, and many new ones may arise, such as the potential provocations coming from extremist elements of both sides. She encouraged participants to work closely, especially on security issues, and to avoid the escalation of interethnic tension in the face of status outcome. President Plaks emphasized that, in addition to interethnic relations, the state of the economy, relations with neighbors, and issues of refugees and displaced persons remain serious challenges for Kosovo society. However, she said, this is also a time for opportunities, perhaps not yet explored, for improving and strengthening the dynamics of political dialogue in Kosovo. In conclusion, she said that PER believes sharing the future should be a strong enough incentive for all the communities to engage more seriously in a dialogue that aims to improve the lives of Kosovo's all communities.

Head of Swiss Liaison Office Lukas Beglinger thanked the participants on behalf of the Swiss government and stated that his country will continue to help Albanian and Serb communities resolve their differences through dialogue. He praised the participants for their engagement in discussions at this sensitive time, and stated that their presence and interaction demonstrates the importance of maintaining and promoting an open and honest dialogue, particularly during the critical weeks and months ahead. But, he added, words alone are not enough to reestablish mutual trust and cooperation: it is important to obtain visible results by addressing practical issues and concerns such as the need for physical and legal security of all residents in Kosovo. He asserted that the discussion of concrete ideas and proposals is an encouraging indication for the future of Kosovo.

Security is crucial

There was consensus among the Serb participants that KFOR, UNMIK Police, and Kosovo Police do not have the capability to fully control any potential violence aimed at the Serb community. However, they stated that the potential for violence is small and could easily be controlled with increased cooperation among the security bodies, media, and Kosovo Albanian and Serb leaders. Some participants feared that the eventual counteracting steps of the Kosovo Serbs north of the Ibar River in response to Kosovo's declaration of independence might jeopardize the security of the Serbs in the south. To enforce this point, a representative of a Kosovo Albanian opposition party stated that the reaction of Kosovo Albanians to independence largely depends on the reaction of the Serbs in the north. "Extreme Serb reaction will be met with extreme Albanian reaction," he observed. His statement, however, did not reflect the majority Albanian opinion. The prime minister and the president, as well as leaders of Albanian political parties, stated that nothing will happen to the Kosovo Serbs regardless of the reaction of the Serbs in the north. A Serb member of the Kosovo Assembly said that he did not expect any serious violence, but that when visiting his constituencies and confronted with the question of whether Kosovo's institutions can guarantee their lives, he said, "I can not say yes." A leader of a Kosovo Albanian opposition party said that the response to such a question should be: "I myself feel safe and will stay in Kosovo."

In an effort to better prepare the Serb community for the apparent status outcome, a Serb participant said that many Serb leaders are signaling to their community that independence is inevitable, but they should stay in Kosovo. However, he asserted that messages to the Albanian community are even more important. The Albanian politicians should tell their community that it is the majority's responsibility to protect the minority communities, and any violent action will be to the detriment of the future of Kosovo. Strongly supporting this statement, an international representative stated that it is wrong to assume that

the Kosovo Albanians' must react to the Serb reaction in the north. "It's KFOR's responsibility to deal with such reactions." He suggested that the message to the Serbs by all politicians should be: "There will be no reaction, and that nobody is capable of endangering the security situation that we have built in the past few years." An encouraging prediction from the Serb participants was that most of the Serbs are going to stay in Kosovo regardless of the status outcome. "Serbs have lived through the 1999 situation and decided to stay; these Serbs are prepared to withstand any pressure from independence and will remain in Kosovo."

Direct and daily contacts reduce fear

The prolongation of the resolution of Kosovo's status has increased fear and anxiety among the Kosovo communities, especially the Serb community, which fears potential violent actions by Albanians. It was agreed that dialogue is the best available mechanism for reducing fear and frustration at this time, and that it should become a daily occurrence. In this context, visits by the prime minister and president together with local municipal officials and Kosovo Serb leaders to various Serb localities were considered timely and successful. Serb participants asserted that members of the Serb community needed to hear more often from Kosovo's institutions, which should reassure the Serbs about their safety in the post-status period. A new Serb leader remarked that such messages should be repeated daily, if necessary, as they will both decrease the fear of insecurity and reflect the seriousness of the Kosovo government to build a "new Kosovo" for all communities.

A Serb participant stated that dialogue produces suggestions and recommendations about resolving concrete issues and thus accelerates the process of reconciliation. He, however, was aware that the expected unilateral declaration of independence will complicate the matter. Although Serbs have stated that they will not accept a unilateral declaration of Kosovo, their objection should not be seen as a threat to the Albanians, stated the Serb leader. In stark contrast to his previous statements, he was optimistic about the future of Kosovo: "We will all soon join the EU, and we will laugh at today's dialogue." A senior official from a Kosovo Albanian opposition party seconded this opinion and stated that the nature of discussions and level of participation today show that significant progress has already been made in the process of interethnic reconciliation. Although issues of who should apologize first, and conflicting interpretations of the past continue to persist, they were not considered a threat to the future of interethnic coexistence.

In addition to direct meetings with members of the Serb community, media was mentioned as another important mechanism for facilitating interethnic communication. A Serb participant stated that Albanians and Serbs should have access to each other's media as a means of bridging their differences. "We live in two different worlds; we don't hear each other's opinions," he observed. The participant suggested establishing a TV channel in Serbian language at the public Radio Television of Kosovo, or by increasing the current airtime for programs in Serbian language. Serbs have established dozens of local radio and television stations, but they have no Kosovo-wide media outlet, which, according to the participant, prevents the Serb population from knowing what is going on beyond their localities. Addressing a similar point, an Albanian analyst stated that the main problem is not how to convince politicians to send encouraging messages, but rather how to transmit such messages correctly to the other side: "There is no channel of communication to do so. Serbs listen to the Serb media and Albanians listen to the Albanian media. They have no common channel of communication."

Noting the importance of media, the analyst feared that unprofessional handling of the situation by the media may cause panic and consequently refugees. "Panicking, not independence, causes troubles. There was consensus among both Albanian and Serb participants that messages from the media are crucial at this time, and they pledged to work closely with editors of the media outlets in Kosovo. But they feared that the messages that will come from the media in Serbia, through which most of the Kosovo Serb population is informed, may aggravate the situation. However, a Serb participant stated that if the situation remains calm, messages from Belgrade are not likely to have a significant impact on the Kosovo Serbs. "Kosovo Serbs' trust of Serbian media and politicians is just as low as their trust of Albanian media and politicians."

Practical outcomes encourage participation

Serb participation in Kosovo's political life was another focal point of the debate. Though Kosovo Serbs are united in regards to Kosovo's final status, they remain divided on participation in the political process. The majority of the Serb political parties boycotted the November 2007 poll, citing their inability to deliver what they had promised to their constituencies and pressure from Belgrade as the main reasons. There was agreement in PER's October 2007 roundtable among the Serbs that the culprit for their inability to deliver was Albanians' unwillingness to compromise, and Belgrade's pressure to boycott the Kosovo political process. However, a number of new Serb political parties and initiatives defied the Kosovo Serb majority opinion and Belgrade and took part in the elections, in which they filled the ten parliamentary seats reserved for Serbs by the Kosovo Constitutional Framework. Kosovo Serb representatives are also in charge of two ministries in the Kosovo government.

Although they disagreed regarding political participation, there was a consensus that the Serb leaders who took part in the elections, and now are part of the government, need immediate support from Kosovo's institutions and Serb community. Tangible results would help them validate to their constituencies the benefits of political participation and thus strengthening their position within their community.

A Serb participant stated that the new Kosovo government seems to be willing to help the Serbs, and he believed that, "the government is genuine this time." Another participant asserted that even small concrete improvements in Serbs' daily life will encourage Serb participation and strengthen the position of the Serb leaders willing to be involved in the political process. "Improvements will show that the Kosovo government will deliver more when it has a Serb partner." A few participants stated that the Kosovo government's increased support for the Serb community will also help to undermine the credibility of the current Serb parallel structures and discourage the creation of new ones.

Serb participants were encouraged to hear from some Albanian representatives that part of the problem for Serb non-participation is not only in Belgrade but also in Pristina and that Kosovo's institutions will do more to help Serb politicians deliver tangible results to their communities. An Albanian participant remarked that tangible outcomes strengthen interethnic trust and cooperation. "Life is concrete and we should do concrete things." In this vein, the Albanian governmental official made two suggestions: form a group of advisors on minority health issues and appoint a senior Serb advisor to the Ministry of Health of Kosovo.

Securing property rights is urgent

Enforcement of property rights laws was another issue debated at the roundtable. Participants agreed that guaranteeing security for the Serb community is important but not enough to convince them stay in Kosovo. A Serb participant asked what the new Kosovo government can do to solve property issues as, according to him, "property is one of the most important elements to convince Serbs that the Kosovo institutions are committed to protecting them and their property." A Serb leader stated the right to property is important not only for the Serbs but for the Albanians as well. Another Serb leader asserted that by showing its inability to secure the right to property, Kosovo society shows its immaturity and its inability to build a state. "By not being able to protect property rights, the Kosovo society will show the world its inability to implement its own laws, fight organized crime, and ultimately build a state." He added that Kosovo's institutions have failed to ensure property rights so far, and that organized crime groups are benefiting from this lawlessness. The participant, however, acknowledged that what he was hearing from Serb and Albanian leaders was "very encouraging." An Albanian participant responded by stating the reason so much remains to be done in regard to property rights is that the Kosovo institutions need to also deal with property problems that were created also by Serbian administration that ran Kosovo until June of 1999.

An international participant said that the international community expects more from the new Kosovo government. He stated while the laws have been adopted, their enforcement has not been thus far

satisfactory, making it very difficult for the Kosovo Serbs to return. He encouraged a more active role for Kosovo police in taking action. "Law enforcement is key to resolving property issues."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The outcome of this series of meetings was a number of consensual conclusions and recommendations for action by Kosovo Albanians, Kosovo Serbs, and the international community.

- Kosovo Albanians should send clear and strong messages to the Serb community that nothing will happen to them in the post-status period. To be convincing, these messages should be accompanied by concrete action, such as enforcement of property rights laws, and swift punishment of perpetrators of ethnically motivated crimes. Results are more important than messages.
- Political leaders of both communities should encourage their community members to refrain from responding to potential provocations and incidents in the aftermath of the status decision.
- Serb opposition to independence should not be seen as a threat to Kosovo Albanians.
- Serb representatives will leave Kosovo's institutions if their community is attacked in the aftermath of Kosovo's status decision.
- Intensify communication with Serbs at the local level; the prime minister and the president, accompanied by Serb leaders, should make frequent visits to Serb areas and make dialogue a daily forum. Local mayors should also get more involved in implementing government's policies on the ground.
- Kosovo's institutions should help newly elected Serb representatives deliver tangible results to the Serb community with the goal of bolstering support within their community.
- The prime minister should organize frequent meetings with Kosovo Serb leaders of all political parties, including those outside of Kosovo institutions.
- PER sponsored high-level interethnic dialogue should continue: there are few alternatives to it.
- Projects should be conducted in ethnically mixed areas involving members of both communities; cooperation in one area leads to cooperation in another.
- Increase media communication; Albanian and Serb communities need to hear from each other. Currently, Albanians and Serbs consume separate information from differing sources. The problem could be rectified by increasing the airtime in Serbian language or by establishing a second national TV channel for the Serbs within Kosovo's public television.
- The prime minister should organize a meeting with editors-in-chief of major Kosovo media outlets to encourage professional reporting during the transitional period.
- Form an advisory group on public health issues facing the Serb community and appoint a Serb representative to the Ministry of Health. If successful, replicate the example in other ministries.
- Establish an interethnic forum for dialogue and reconciliation.
- Establish the announced governmental office for communities as soon as possible and involve Serbs that are inside and outside Kosovo's institutions.
- Create employment opportunities for Serbs in public enterprises, such as Post and Telecommunications of Kosovo, Pristina Airport, municipal administrations, and Assembly of Kosovo.
- Kosovo Serbs should have direct impact on the selection of police chiefs in their municipalities.

PER believes that the list of conclusions and recommendations that came out of these meetings will be useful for local and international policymakers. PER is encouraged that the office of the prime minister has already begun to implement some of these recommendations: the prime minister was accompanied by Serb representatives in his recent visits to Serb majority areas, is in the process of organizing a meeting with the Serb leaders, and has accelerated efforts to establish the government's office for communities.

List of Participants

English alphabetical order

Haki Abazi, Program Officer, Western Balkans, Rockefeller Brothers Fund (3)*
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Tim Cooper, Advisor to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Kosovo (3)
Sadri Ferati, Minister of Local Government Administration, Government of Kosovo (2)
Alush Gashi, Minister of Health, Government of Kosovo (3)
Shpetim Gashi, Program Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations (1, 2, 3)
Ardian Gjini, Head, Parliamentary Group of the Alliance for the Future of Kosova, Assembly of Kosovo;
Member, Presidency, Alliance for the Future of Kosova (2, 3)
Alex Grigor'ev, Executive Director, Project on Ethnic Relations (1, 2, 3)
Oliver Schmidt-Guzat, Senior Advisor on Minority Rights, Organization for Security and Cooperation in
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Mehmet Hajrizi, Senior Advisor to the President of the Assembly of Kosovo (30)
Pleurat Halili, Associate in Pristina, Project on Ethnic Relations (2, 3)
Lutfi Haziri, Vice President, Democratic League of Kosova; Member, Assembly of Kosovo (2, 3)
Oliver Ivanovic, Member, Presidency, Social Democratic Party (1, 3)
Dragisa Krstovic, Former Member, Assembly of Kosovo (1, 3)
Ibrahim Makolli, Head, Parliamentary Group of the Alliance New Kosova, Assembly of Kosovo; Vice
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Livia Plaks, President, Project on Ethnic Relations (1, 2, 3)
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Srdjan Sentic, Senior Adviser on Returns to the Special Representative of UN Secretary General in
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Gjylnaze Sylja, Member, Alliance for the Future of Kosova; Member, Assembly of Kosovo (3)
Hashim Thaci, Prime Minister, Government of Kosovo (3)
Momcilo Trajkovic, President, Serb Resistance Movement of Kosovo (1, 3)
Dragan Velic, President, Serb National Council of Central Kosovo and Metohija (1)
Tom Yazdgerdi, Chief, Political-Economic Section, U.S. Office in Pristina (3)

**Note: Numbers following names of participants indicate participation in the roundtable of Kosovo Serb leaders (1), the meeting of Kosovo Albanian leaders (2), and the joint roundtable (3).*