

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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R e p o r t

DEC. 13-14, 2002



SKOPJE, MACEDONIA

**THE ROMANI "MAHALAS"
(NEIGHBORHOODS) OF
SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE:
POLITICS, POVERTY AND
ETHNIC UNREST**

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PREFACE

Large Romani “mahalas” (neighborhoods) have existed in Central and Southeastern Europe for centuries. In the post-Communist transition, these neighborhoods experienced uncontrolled growth due to the immigration of a rapidly growing and newly impoverished Romani population. They now resemble typical urban ghettos: overpopulated pockets of poverty and unemployment, dependent on welfare and unable to pay the rising costs for necessary public services.

An outbreak of ethnic violence in the Romani mahala of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in 2002 provided a fitting background for the Skopje meeting. Indeed, PER organizers were concerned at the time that the preconditions for similar outbreaks were then existent in a number of Romani mahalas throughout Southeastern Europe. Were preventive steps not undertaken, they cautioned, similar violence could be expected. Regrettably, such concerns turned out to be well-founded as rioting was later reported in a Romani mahala in Vidin, Bulgaria in March 2003.

Aiming to assess the situation in the Romani mahalas of Southeastern Europe and seeking methods of averting ethnic violence in these neighborhoods, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER), in cooperation with the



From left to right: Andrzeĳ Mirga, Livia Plaks and Nezdet Mustafa.



Nicolae Gheorghe

segregation; self-organization; and related tensions and conflicts. Specific cases for analysis included the mahalas of Plovdiv, Sofia, Belgrade, Nis, and Skopje.

The Skopje meeting gathered state and local authorities, experts and Romani activists from Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia as well as from Kosovo. International institutions and organizations represented included the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Stability Pact for South East Europe, the United States Embassy in Skopje, and the World Bank. The meeting was opened by the U.S. Ambassador to Macedonia, Lawrence Butler. Also in attendance was the President of the National Assembly of Macedonia, Nikola Popovski.

This meeting was funded by a special grant to PER from the U.S. Department of State underlining the United States' concern for the fate of the Roma in Southeastern Europe.

We acknowledge the important contributions of Nezdret Mustafa, the only Romani member of the National Assembly of Macedonia. We would also like to acknowledge the help offered PER by Mirce Tomovski, Coordinator of the International Network for Interethnic Relations in Southeastern Europe.

The report was written by Ilia Iliev of PER Sofia and by Andrzej Mirga, Chair of the PER Romani Advisory Council (PERRAC) and Chair of the Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies of the Council of Europe. The report was edited by PER. The participants in the meeting have not had a chance to review the text, for which PER assumes full responsibility.

Livia B. Plaks, Executive Director, PER

Andrzej Mirga, Chair, PERRAC

Chair, Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies of the Council of Europe

Princeton, New Jersey

May 2003

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

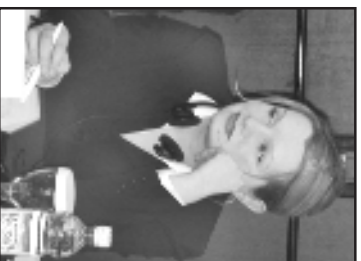
The spelling “Kosovo” is used in this report (rather than “Kosova,” the spelling preferred by Albanians, or “Kosovo and Metohija” or “Kosmet,” preferred by Serbs), because this is the spelling most commonly used in the English-speaking world. For the sake of simplicity, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is referred to as “Macedonia.”



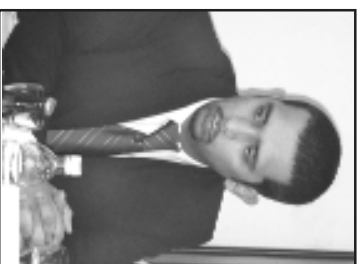
From left to right: Anton Karagjovoz, Pellumb Furtuna and Istref Pellumbi.



Osman Balic



Mirjana Barbulovic



Erdon Isefi

INTRODUCTION

Large Romani “mahalas” (neighborhoods) have existed throughout Central and Southeastern Europe for centuries despite attempts by Communist authorities to unsuccessfully dissolve them. In the post-Communist transition, these neighborhoods experienced uncontrolled growth from the in-migration of a rapidly growing and impoverished Romani population. They now resemble typical urban ghettos: overpopulated pockets of poverty and unemployment, dependent on welfare, and unable to pay the rising costs for public services. Moreover, some of these mahalas – particularly those in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia – have provided asylum for Romani refugees and internally displaced persons after the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, adding a troubling dimension to the already precarious situation there. Urban ghettos have also become a source of Romani migration to many western countries.

There has been a process of gradual withdrawal of all public services and institutions to the outskirts of the mahalas, often as the result of agreements between local Romani residents and municipal authorities. Increasingly isolated and in destitute circumstances, these Romani communities face a future of marginalization and further deterioration. The mahalas have become areas that no municipal workers, much less police, dare to enter. Local municipal authorities, often held hostage by their non-Romani voting constituents, have historically approached mahalas with a sense of resignation and indecision. Even worse, many Romani mahalas have been declared illegal and therefore ineligible for public services and municipal welfare, since their rights to the land were questionable to begin with and their construction occurred in violation of building and planning codes, or at least outside of the urban planning process.

During April of 2002, in the aftermath of Romani rioting in the Stolipinovo mahala of Plovdiv, PER, in cooperation with OSCE/ODIHR, conducted mediation between national and city officials and Romani leaders. PER’s objective has been to raise concern about Romani unrest and its underlying causes. Analyzing the case of Stolipinovo, PER tried to determine why municipal authorities have almost universally abandoned the ghettos, a situation that promises to escalate tensions between the Roma and majority populations, and whether systematic approaches can be devised to deal with mahala issues ranging from illegal housing construction to the provision of basic services to Romani residents who

cannot afford them. PER's effort is aimed also at working out a set of specific recommendations to deal with similar potential crisis situations in other multiethnic urban settings.

The Plovdiv roundtable became a starting point for long-term PER efforts to address issues of local democracy, decentralization, and self-governance in Romani communities. The Plovdiv meeting led to the realization that, at the micro-level, urban Romani mahalas reflect many of the problems and dangers of Romani participation in local communal life. PER has repeatedly stressed that with advances in decentralization, local authorities will need to play a greater role in dealing with the problems of the Romani minority. PER further believes that this has not been sufficiently recognized by either state authorities or Romani activists.

The Plovdiv debate also revealed that local authorities, in failing to execute their obligatory tasks, were largely responsible for the uncontrolled growth within the Romani mahalas. As has been bitterly acknowledged by some Romani participants, the typical municipality frequently ends where the Romani mahala begins. At the same time, community organization is poor to nonexistent within the mahalas. In the largest mahala in Bulgaria, there is only one elected deputy on the municipal council and no channels whatsoever for communication or consultation with local authorities and administration. Thus, Romani mahala-dwellers in Plovdiv, who amount to more than 40,000 persons, are scarcely represented in public and political life. Nor has it been possible for NGOs to step in and fill this gap, despite the efforts of a small number to do so. Additionally, Romani mahala-dwellers are still captives of the past, holding onto and behaving according to preconceptions about the socialist welfare state that clash with the modern realities of a market economy and privatization.

As a follow-up to the Plovdiv roundtable, PER and the OSCE/ODIHR commissioned a study of several Romani mahalas in Bulgaria to learn more about the nature and underlying causes of the problems there. Conducted in three mahalas (Bukovlak, the Pleven region; Levski township; and Stoliipinovo of Plovdiv), the study focused on how Romani dwellers identify and perceive problems, their confidence in local authorities and administration to address them and solve them, and their trust and confidence in their own leaders to pursue and defend Romani interests. (The report of this study is available on the web page

of the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/cprsi>.)

The study revealed several interesting findings. Romani mahala-dwellers have rather minimal expectations for the availability and improvement of public services. They are disillusioned and do not expect much in the future. Surprisingly, they do not consider the illegality of housing construction to be a problem, since the lack of municipal control has benefited those who seek immediate solutions to their housing needs. Most interestingly, the Romani mahala-dwellers believe they have rights as citizens to electricity and other services, and that the state has an obligation to provide and to a large extent to subsidize them.

Unpaid water bills have been a source of tension in the Bukovlak mahala, similar to the issue of electricity that was a factor in local elections in Plovdiv-Stoliipinovo. In Plovdiv, a policy of "votes for debts," that is, a promise to cancel mahala debts to electricity suppliers in exchange for votes, had been implemented by mainstream parties for nearly a decade. In the actual power structure, however, the local energy supplier is under the direct control of the regional administration and an opposition party controls the local municipality. Therefore, the regional governor never felt obligated to honor the not-quite-legal promises of the rival party, and thus the electricity provider cut the supply, touching off the riots there. The fact that the National Electricity Company has been on a track toward privatization also contributed to the governor's decision. In all of these ways, the mahalas have become a pawn in local power politics between the ruling party and the opposition, as well as local and regional administration.

The promises of political leaders to waive the Stoliipinovo mahala residents' obligation to pay electricity bills and the ethnic riots that ensued also reflect the overall social and welfare policy toward the Romani communities. Several important non-Romani factions in Plovdiv – retired citizens, single mothers, and the urban poor – felt outraged by what they perceived as unjust privileges for the Roma, which led to increased animosity toward the Romani community. A nationalist party won 8 percent of the votes in the last local elections, ten times greater than the national average, apparently for this reason, leading to concern that this animosity will provide fertile ground for the emergence of future conflicts. Finally, the study revealed that the Romani community is losing its trust in political leadership in general, and to different types of Romani lead-

ership in particular (political, NGOs, or traditional). It also became apparent that the Roma see their leaders primarily as “intermediaries” between the state and community rather than as community organizers or representatives who are accountable to their constituents.

The Plovdiv roundtable and study prompted PER to organize a debate on Romani urban ghettos throughout Bulgaria. In cooperation with the Bulgarian National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues and the “Shelter for Everyone” Foundation, PER organized a national roundtable in Sofia in November of 2002. Its focus was on legal aspects and policy issues regarding housing in urban Romani mahalas. The debate among the practitioners (relevant ministry experts, representatives of local municipal authorities, and Romani leaders) suggested that basic decisions must be made in legislative and executive offices if the problem of housing in Romani mahalas is to be tackled in a constructive way. From the point of view of Romani activists, regulation of housing and property rights, along with the legalization of entire mahalas, is the preferred starting point for finding appropriate solutions. They believe that governments should adopt national policies toward the Romani mahalas that would revitalize housing projects, subsidize inexpensive social housing, and establish housing standards, including criteria for demolition when necessary and appropriate compensation for residents.

Local authorities point to the fact that no cadastra documentation exists for Romani mahalas. They insist that only after such documentation is created and funded by the state can the newly legal mahalas be incorporated into urban development plans. Bearing in mind that over half of the Romani population in Bulgaria currently live in mahalas, it may be necessary to create a specialized state agency to deal with these issues. There are some positive examples suggesting that local authorities can successfully tackle these problems and make a difference once they have the determination to act, as has occurred in the municipalities of Pazardk and Lom. In general, however, the debate pointed to a need for systematic and legal solutions at the national level to be complemented by determined action at the local level.

The culmination of several smaller roundtables was a two-day regional symposium on Romani mahalas held in Skopje, Macedonia, in December 2002. Skopje was deliberately chosen as the site since it is home to the largest mahala in Southeastern Europe, Suto Orizari. This mahala is a submunicipality within the capital city of Skopje with its own elected

Romani mayor and a municipal council. There are two active Romani parties, and one of its leaders serves as a member of the Macedonian parliament. The mahala is also home to local private Romani media outlets, including television. Thus, it contrasts visibly with the Stolipinovo mahala of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, which has none of these.

For the organizers of the regional symposium in Skopje, these mahalas serve as examples of two very different modes of development. In the case of the Stolipinovo mahala, the community has been deserted by authorities and public services and is poorly organized in social and political terms. Its population is dependent on state welfare, ideologically captive to the socialist past, and, to a large extent, passive. In contrast, the dwellers of the Suto Orizari mahala are self-reliant, well-organized socially and politically, and integrated within the city as a municipality that handles its own affairs and is integrated through Romani party alliances with mainstream parties.

While they differ significantly, the two mahalas still have much in common regarding their overall social and economic situation. Both are experiencing deterioration and face a shortage of funds needed to address these problems. Most importantly, they share a demographic factor of steady growth. This growth is sure to play a role in any future crisis situation in Stolipinovo. In Suto Orizari, such a crisis situation was caused by several thousand Romani refugees from Kosovo who found shelter there, an issue that is still unresolved.

Aiming to assess the situation in Romani mahalas and predict their future development in the region, participants were offered two visions: one of mahalas as a potential source of ethnic violence and unrest, and another of mahalas as viable and vibrant spaces for the social and cultural emancipation of the Romani community. Visible examples of both outcomes exist.

A minor outbreak of ethnic violence in the Romani mahala “Nevo Drom” (New Road) in Vidin, Bulgaria in March 2003 underscores the relevance of the Skopje debate. In this case as well, the accumulated debt

The Skopje meeting was convened out of concern shared by many that, in urban mahalas throughout the region, preconditions exist for the eruption of ethnic unrest or even violence.

within the mahala increased to the point where the regional energy provider decided to cut the supply of electricity from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. everyday. A few men from the mahala gathered and began to throw stones at the energy supplier's local offices, threatening to set them alight. Their leader was arrested and charged with promoting interethnic violence, one of the first instances of an individual being charged under the new anti-discrimination law designed to protect minorities.

The Skopje meeting was convened out of concerns shared by many, that in urban mahalas throughout the region, preconditions exist for the eruption of ethnic unrest or even violence. During the debate it became clear that the growing social and economic deprivation of Romani inhabitants in mahalas, on the one hand, and the increased privatization of public services, on the other, warrant such concern.

ROMANI URBAN MAHALAS: A SOCIAL AND HISTORIC PHENOMENON

Grounds for future conflict were delineated by the U.S. Ambassador to Macedonia in his welcoming address. He pointed to the challenge of competing claims of social and ethnic groups, all of whom face severe poverty and are dependent on state welfare. He acknowledged that a precarious situation in Romani mahalas exists, but that two-thirds of Macedonian households are also dependent on social welfare. In his view, this is the source of potential tensions. He thus recommended an all-inclusive state policy that is community-oriented and responsive to the needs of all groups. He welcomed the fact that Macedonian authorities have started to address the problems of the Romani minority, including their human rights and conditions within the mahalas, but indicated that these issues will ultimately require the efforts and long-term involvement of the government itself if solutions are to be found.

The Romani mahalas are a social and historic phenomenon, originating in the Ottoman laws that has persisted for centuries. From this perspective, the mahalas can be seen as organic units, part of the city's structure, which can be the basis for Romani self-governance. As such, they can be laboratories for self-reliant political behavior and cultural development. From another perspective, however, they can be seen as destitute urban ghettos, a burden to development and a source of violence and unrest that should be dismantled.

The Suto Orizari mahala of Skopje has frequently been highlighted as a positive model for the development of the Romani urban community. The former mayor of Suto Orizari, who serves as the only Romani MP in the Macedonian parliament, underlined the importance of self-governance in the Romani mahala. He suggested that improvements in the quality of life and solutions to everyday problems are the responsibility of Roma themselves and not just of the authorities. Furthermore, he indicated, self-rule has been a source of great inspiration in the areas of Romani language and culture, as the Romani language has become the official language of Suto Orizari self-government.

Improvements in the quality of life and solutions to everyday problems are the responsibility of Roma themselves and not just of the authorities.

Suto Orizari grew out of the earthquake that destroyed Skopje in 1963. Indeed, the quake led to the spontaneous congregation of Roma in one section of the city and to the formation of a Romani neighborhood. Since 1996, Suto Orizari has enjoyed self-governance as an urban administrative unit with its own elected council and mayor. Macedonian state and municipal officials have acknowledged their positive experience with the Suto Orizari self-governing body, and they promise that Suto Orizari will remain a self-governed unit within the Skopje municipality when the new law on decentralization is adopted.

Other participants presented a contrasting picture of Romani mahalas. A Romani leader from Serbia pointed out that around 60 percent of Roma there traditionally live in mahalas. In his view, the tradition of Romani self-organization and leadership has vanished, and what has remained is the chaos of Romani organizations and self-appointed leaders. Marginality, criminality, and low self-esteem, coupled with a culture of poverty, leave no hope for Romani emancipation there, he said. From his point of view, the preservation of the Romani language and culture is the only positive aspect of the Romani mahalas. He suggests therefore that Romani mahalas be dismantled, especially since many of them are illegal and cannot qualify for public services. According to this participant, one should not be blinded by the Suto Orizari example, which is an exception to the rule.

The Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE underscored the need to distinguish among various types of mahalas. Some are historic and well-developed showpieces of self-governance, while others are illegal and resemble ghettos. The reality is more complex and divergent than these two examples would suggest. He also stressed the need for discussion of crime in mahalas. While Romani deviants may be only a minority, they often represent the community's public face to the outside world.

In his view there has been a certain amount of inconsistency within the Romani movement regarding long-term aims or visions for Romani development. In the 1990s, the Romani movement argued for a comprehensive approach in policy toward the Romani community. But some have suggested that it is time for a new policy that is more focused and prioritized. Roma need to define new entry points for such policies, and these may well be within the local community, using the mahalas as the appropriate unit for implementation of self-governance, decentralization, and local financing and taxation.

The dire conditions in which many Roma live in the mahalas does not represent their own choice, pointed out another Romani participant. The blame must be shouldered by the non-Romani side, which has practiced discrimination, he said. While it may be customary among non-Roma to blame the Roma themselves for their living conditions, redirecting the blame requires us to focus on the relations between Romani mahala-dwellers and the surrounding majority. What factors have led to the situation of Roma in urban mahalas and to the increased tensions?

THE UNRESOLVED ILLEGALITY OF MAHALAS

Both the Romani participants and representatives of state and local authorities shared similar views in this regard: at the core of the problems of Romani mahalas are unresolved issues regarding their legal status and housing construction. During the Communist era, both full employment of Roma and the affordability of subsidized public services helped to preserve the status quo. Since the transition toward a market economy and privatization, however, Roma have been confronted with a painful and profound change. Due to the dramatic rise in levels of unemployment, Romani households are suddenly heavily dependent on social welfare. This has in turn led to the cutting-off of many public services.

The 2001 study on "Roma Neighborhoods: Assessment of Housing Conditions and Potential Housing Problems" conducted by the Romani Baht Foundation (in Sofia, Bulgaria) and commissioned by the World Bank, provides an apt illustration of this problem. The study described in particular the situation in the Fakultera mahala in Sofia. The Fakultera mahala grew in an unregulated and spontaneous way, such that over 80 percent of households were flimsy and semi-solid constructions of one or two stories with no zoning permits. A major problem was the issue of legal ownership of land and construction. Between 1996 and 2002, as many as 1,797 complaints and inquiries about the legitimate ownership of land and buildings were filed with the Romani Baht Foundation on behalf of Romani dwellers of the Fakultera mahala.

The Fakultera mahala case aptly depicts the situation of many other Romani urban ghettos in Bulgaria as well as in the region in general. In the former Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito, recalled another Romani participant from Kumanovo, Macedonia, the Romani mahalas were hidden so as not to reveal the misery and poverty to the outside world. Now they have been declared illegal, and since Romani dwellers have no legal title to their houses or land, he pointed out, local authorities are free to cut off their services.

The mayor of Suto Orizari reported that his neighborhood shares this problem. Out of 36,000 Romani inhabitants, 24,000 live in slums with unhygienic conditions. Most of the construction in Suto Orizari occurred outside the framework of zoning plans, and up to 35 percent was completely illegal.

A municipal expert from Belgrade reported a slightly different situation in the Serbian capital. Instead of compact, densely populated Romani districts such as those described above, there are some 137 relatively small settlements in Belgrade in which the Roma constitute a majority. These settlements are not typical Romani mahalas in that most of them have ethnically mixed populations. They are relatively poor, but those inhabited exclusively by Roma are not among the poorest. According to the official statistics, there are some 36,700 Roma in Belgrade, two-thirds of which live in houses lacking basic facilities. Most of these dwellings are illegal; some are built on private or municipal land. The current law generally protects landowners, and there have been a number of lawful evictions of Romani dwellers.

More generally, in Serbia there are entire Romani mahalas, let alone individual dwellings, with dubious legal status, asserted a Romani participant from Serbia. He mentioned that the government commissioned a special report on the Romani mahala in Nis in the 1970s. The conclusions were that the mahala should be dismantled and its inhabitants should be displaced. Similar reports and projects have been appearing with alarming regularity for several decades. They create a mood of uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety, which does little to encourage long-term planning and investment in a settlement's infrastructure or household improvement.

The safety and quality of buildings built outside existing standards represent yet another legal complication. Participants from Bulgaria claimed that legalizing the existing buildings should be a priority in order to motivate owners to make improvements or long-term investments. The legalization of the houses would also allow their inhabitants to receive an official address, which in turn would facilitate their relations with authorities and service-providers.

UNFINISHED INTEGRATION: INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Despite state programs recently adopted in the region to integrate the Romani minority, many Romani participants express frustration at government policies. Their hopes and expectations for meaningful integration have given way to a growing sense of isolation, marginalization, and segregation. This poses a pertinent question as to whether and to what extent the Romani ethnic community is seen as an integral and integrated part of the municipal structure. Some Romani participants have claimed that there was greater integration during Communism. The treatment of the Romani mahalas, they noted, especially those declared illegal, are evidence of this tendency. Even in neighborhoods with only minor problems concerning the illegality of housing construction, the quality of infrastructure and provision of public services has been far below the standard even of slums.

The severe lack of funding is a major obstacle to any solution, pointed out one participant. Legalization of the mahalas and regulation of land ownership is a necessary first step, but these steps require funding and many local authorities are not ready to take on such an expense. Another priority is to improve the living conditions of existing neighborhoods,

guaranteeing at the very least, that each household has access to running water and a sewage system. The most disadvantaged, who live in destitute and illegal sites, should be relocated to more suitable locations, advised some participants, with access to schools, hospitals, public transportation, electricity and running water. The shortage of municipal social housing, however, limits the possibility of placing Romani families there.

Notwithstanding this shortage, providing Romani families with municipal housing may not work in any case, commented a participant. In Belgrade, he noted, under the special municipal program, 100 apartments were distributed among Romani families. Six months later, the families sold the flats in order to move back to their former neighborhoods. Their preference for living with other Roma, despite all the disadvantages, is a factor that authorities must take into account when designing programs and policies.

The Stolipinovo mahala case referred to by several participants demonstrates a far more complex situation. As one Romani leader asserted, since 1963 virtually nothing has been invested to maintain or improve the infrastructure. Around 10,000 Roma live in collective blocks built by the Communists. The blocks have been left to deteriorate, and the entire mahala is without access to public utilities.

The impact of the unresolved legality of the mahalas on infrastructure and provision of services is well illustrated by the Stolipinovo riot case. Indeed, a number of households there were unable to acquire the device that monitors electricity consumption because the whole dwelling was built illegally, either on private land or in violation of official building codes. This meant that those households were denied access to the urban infrastructure – not only to the electricity network, but also to the water supply, sewage, telephone lines, and so forth. Unable to install the official monitoring devices, the residents established illegal shortcuts to the main electricity cables. Many soon followed suit, removing their monitoring devices as well, while still others simply refused to pay their bills. This practice was tolerated and in fact encouraged by local political parties, which then competed with promises to cancel all debts in exchange for votes. But the energy provider stopped honoring the not-quite-legal promises and cut the supply, setting off the riots. Similar accumulation of debt for unpaid services has affected many mahalas in the region, and at some point this must be addressed in a serious way by local and state authorities.

A Romani leader from Kosovo pointed to other mahala problems related to war damages both in infrastructure and in housing. While the government in Kosovo has specific programs for reconstruction, he noted that they apply only to families who return to Kosovo. There are many Romani families who prefer to stay abroad and refuse to return to their homes, either because their houses were destroyed during the war or they fear discrimination or violence. He argued that conditions are in fact safe for their return, and that attention should be paid to the positive developments that have occurred in terms of minority-majority cooperation and the establishment of minority representation on municipal councils and in the Kosovo Assembly. A similarly positive picture was presented by the city official from Prizren, even though many Romani participants disagreed with these statements.

THE ROLE OF STATE AND MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES VIS-À-VIS ROMANI MAHALAS

Adherents of one perspective argued that it is the state's duty to guarantee a level of maintenance of infrastructure in the Romani settlements equal to that in non-Romani settlements. They argued that one of the main tasks of the Romani nongovernmental organizations and politicians is to lobby for a coherent state policy in this regard.

Other participants, however, claimed that maintaining local infrastructure, public service supplies, or housing falls under the jurisdiction of local or municipal authorities. Since Romani urban mahalas are administrative parts of local municipalities, they should be part of communal policies.

The Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE underlined that many Roma confuse public services with rights to which they are entitled and which are guaranteed by the welfare state. The Romani discourse has long been dominated by the quest for outside responsibility for their situation, he said, but rarely raises the issue of Romani responsibility in this regard. He further pointed out that the decentralization of state powers and strengthening of local self-governance is the direction in which most states have evolved, and the issues of Romani mahalas should be properly addressed within that context.

Similarly, a Serbian participant argued that the philosophy of the Serbian state has changed in the last two years, after the collapse of the

regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Instead of distributing fixed amounts of payments and goods in a paternalistic system, it is shifting toward a new set of principles that guarantees equality of opportunity by providing each citizen with the chance to earn his own living and to defend his rights.

A Bulgarian expert pointed out that in many municipalities there is no cooperation between the local Romani community and authorities, so it is sometimes easier for Romani representatives to cooperate with regional or state authorities. In his view, the state might step in to influence the local authorities' indecision or lack of will, but in the long run, it will be up to local politicians to address and deal with the problems of Romani mahalas.

This speaker underscored also that decentralization, especially of a fiscal nature, might be disadvantageous to the larger Romani mahalas. Since the local municipal budget would depend on the transfer of revenues collected from local taxation, the poorest mahalas, in which most inhabitants are unemployed and on welfare, will contribute nothing. This will then negatively impact those mahalas that might wish to become autonomous municipalities. Such outcomes should be taken into account and discussed by Romani activists who encourage self-governance within mahalas, he noted.

The current mayor of Suto Orizari acknowledged that such a danger exists. Only 7 to 10 percent of the expenses of the municipality of Suto Orizari could be covered with the revenues from local taxes and collections. That is why its leaders are lobbying for instituting a special grace period of three to five years during which the newly created municipalities under the post-Ohrid decentralization process will be guaranteed privileged treatment from the state, with larger subsidies and support. As of now, 40 percent of his budget comes from fees from personal taxation, trade, usage of land, and communal services, with the government subsidizing the rest. He lacks funds for working out an economic strategy, for training self-government units and ongoing staff training,

for experts, field study facilitators, and for preparing applications to attract foreign funds. He has also learned a bitter lesson of communal politics, he said: the Roma blame first the local authorities, who in this case, happen to be Roma themselves.

There was consensus among some participants that decentralization will bring advantages to the Roma. Whether the Romani leadership should strive to achieve better integration of Romani mahalas within existing municipal units or opt for autonomous and self-governed units was less clear to those debating the issue. Several Romani participants were in favor of the latter, largely because of aspirations for self-determination that such autonomy might help to realize. As the Romani MP from Macedonia argued, this is a historic opportunity for the Roma. From this perspective, Suro Orizari represents a model for future autonomous Romani municipalities. Most importantly, an exercise in self-governance would help turn local Romani politicians into mainstream politicians who can gradually enter the national political stage.

Others, mainly non-Romani participants, warned that establishing self-governing municipalities strictly on the basis of ethnicity will perpetuate ethnic divisions and prevent integration. Any dispute or difference that arises will immediately acquire an ethnic dimension. Furthermore, they added, fiscal decentralization would render municipal affairs exclusively dependent on local revenues, with the state responsible only for welfare payments. This in turn would make solving unemployment and poverty issues within mahalas virtually impossible. Dissociating mahalas from large urban municipalities, they argued, would therefore be counterproductive.

Representatives of municipal authorities from Macedonia and Serbia as well as some experts from Bulgaria favored the inclusion of Romani representatives within municipal councils or the creation of advisory bodies to serve local authorities. Such committees, they noted, were currently being established in Serbia.

Both Romani participants as well as government representatives envisaged a critical role for the government in mitigating the problems of the mahalas. All agreed that state authorities need to adopt a clear and coherent policy toward the Romani mahalas, especially since the complexity and depth of the problems make government involvement inevitable. The governments will need to make budgetary provisions for problems ranging from legal (the status of mahalas and households) and

social issues (poverty and unemployment, services and infrastructure) to financial (burden on municipal budgets) and political concerns (mobilizing political forces to tackle the issues seriously).

The Romani MP from Macedonia called for a government fund, established with the support of foreign donors and international institutions, aimed specifically at implementing concrete improvements in Romani mahalas. Several such projects sponsored by international institutions are already underway in mahalas in the region, but many feel that it is still the responsibility of the state to guarantee decent living conditions for its citizens.

As decentralization advances, the role of local municipal authorities will grow and they will have to address the dire conditions in which the inhabitants of Romani mahalas live. But what should be the role of the Roma themselves?

ROMANI PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL POLITICS

There are both positive and negative examples of Romani participation in local politics, since some mahalas are better organized and represented in local structures than others. In general, however, Roma have been underrepresented in elective office and local administration despite the fact that the population is large enough to warrant greater representation. For this reason, mainstream politicians tend to visit Romani mahalas on the eve of the elections, and do not show up again until the next time elections are held.

While there is consensus regarding the need to increase the Romani presence in these bodies, participants added, there has been a notable lack of potential candidates in mahala communities to fill such roles. A slogan used by the mayor of Suro Orizari — “More diplomats than visas” — aptly reflects that need. Roundtable participants differed in their opinions as to the best way to realize this objective: is it better to follow the “ethnic” path, through Romani political organizations, or the “civic” or “integrated” path, via mainstream parties? There are also differences of opinion regarding the role of the Romani civil sector or NGOs with respect to the role of political parties or organizations.

An exemplary case exists in Suro Orizari, where the elected Romani mayor and council work in partnership with Skopje municipal authorities and the national government. The neighborhood is strongly

supported by the Romani MP currently serving in the Macedonian parliament who comes from that community, and who is also a Romani party leader and former mayor of Suto Orizari. In addition, two members of the Skopje municipal council represent the Romani community.

A community that has no channels of communication or cooperation with local authorities might resort to less desirable ways of making their opinions heard.

In Bulgaria, as has been reported, there are more than 300 Romani local municipal officials. In Lom, as in a few other places, the proportion of Romani office-holders has reached 20 percent. There are, however, other examples too: in the mahalas of Stolipinovo, of Omer, and of Sheker (in the Plovdiv municipality), there is only one municipal official representing some 40,000 mahala inhabitants. Such a situation might lead to a dangerous outcome, noted one participant. As a Bulgarian expert explained, a community that has no channels of communication or cooperation with local authorities might resort to less desirable ways of making their opinions heard, as they did in the riots in Stolipinovo. This case underscores the importance of having Romani participation in local politics through normal channels. Local authorities should be aware of the risks, and they should therefore work to facilitate the inclusion of Romani representatives in local elected bodies. At the same time, Roma have to organize themselves to take on the challenges of becoming active and responsible partners in local politics.

The contrasting examples of Suto Orizari and Stolipinovo reveal yet another characteristic of some Romani mahalas. A strong political sector in Suto Orizari has played a constructive role in accordance with widely accepted rules of democracy, with two existing parties competing regularly for Romani votes.

In the Stolipinovo mahala the situation is entirely different. The lack of experienced politicians coupled with a weak civil sector has led to erratic and uncoordinated conduct among competing Romani organizations. In the aftermath of the riots, an agreement was reached between an ad hoc coalition of Romani NGOs and local political forces and adminis-

trators to provide a temporary reprieve of the crisis situation. This agreement was signed on April 16, 2002.

Several Bulgarian participants, both Romani and non-Romani, were skeptical, however, as to whether the agreement would truly be implemented. Indeed, without any real leverage, Roma in the mahala lack the means to ensure that this agreement is put into effect.

A Nis municipal official from Serbia concurred as to the need for Romani representatives in local politics. Stressing her dedication to keeping local power structures open to Roma, she noted that in fact, eight Romani representatives have seats on the Nis municipal council, including the current Vice-President of the Municipal Executive Board. She expressed concern, however, that the Roma have been largely silent instead of voicing their concerns and exerting public pressure on local authorities. She encouraged Roma to use the legal means available to them to defend and pursue their own interests, including joining the mainstream parties.

In light of their own successful example, the Romani participants from Macedonia strongly supported the view that Roma need to have their own political representatives in public bodies, including the parliament and other branches of the government. As the Romani MP argued, they should not consider it sufficient to have multiple small NGOs engaging in human rights activities or distributing foreign aid, but should instead coalesce around identifiable Romani political parties and seek direct participation in decision-making and implementation. In his view, Roma in Macedonia are now ready to insist on representation in the state administration and government.

As one of the NGO leaders suggested, Roma should seek to have their own representatives within mainstream parties. The support of a mainstream party could in turn help Romani representatives to achieve a stronger negotiating position or exert additional pressure needed to get things done.

In contrast, the Bulgarian participants were more cautious in discussing the potential benefits of a Romani political party. Though they conceded that they might have been affected by the banning of ethnic parties in Bulgaria under Communism, they saw no obvious advantage in forming such parties. Rather, they argued, such parties would only serve to isolate the Romani community even further, and in the long run

could lead to serious interethnic discord. To be sure, their chances of becoming significant political players were already rather limited, they noted, due to the lack of qualified individuals.

The assessment of the performance of existing Romani elected representatives remained ambiguous. According to another Bulgarian participant, Romani politicians remain strangers in the world of Bulgarian politics, and the Romani MPs within the mainstream parties play very minor roles. They are obliged to tow the party line and actually have very little to do with the elaboration of policy. They have little or no communication with their colleagues from the parliament, and they do not participate actively in the bargaining processes that are a hallmark of Bulgarian politics. This situation leads to disappointment among Romani MPs as well as their constituents, so they are rarely elected a second time. Indeed, only two Romani MPs currently serve in the Bulgarian Parliament. The situation of the Roma on the municipal councils, noted participants, is quite similar.

There was consensus among participants that elected Romani representatives should be reasonably well-educated with solid political skills, so that they can participate on an equal basis with their fellow politicians and hold similar positions in state or local administration. Of course, ordinary Romani citizens also need a degree of education in their everyday transactions with the administration, since they need to be able to understand and defend their rights. The Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE argued that Romani politicians should pay attention to this issue as well.

THE ROMANI CIVIC SECTOR

A participant pointed out that the Romani civil sector, including its many NGOs, has boomed in the last decade in the region. Foreign aid from both private and international organizations to build up and strengthen civil society has contributed greatly to this development. Many Romani NGOs are primarily dependent for their existence on the ability of local leaders to secure financial support for projects. Since most of this funding comes from external and predominantly foreign donor sources rather than from the community itself, they are also not accountable to the community.

According to one participant, however, in many instances the Romani NGO sector provides the only intermediary structure filling the vacu-

um caused by the lack of Romani representation in elected bodies. Can Romani NGOs become significant actors in local politics and contribute to solving mahala problems, and can they truly represent the community's interests? The flow of foreign and state aid and of services to the community was among the most debated and controversial topics at the roundtable.

The record of Romani civil society in addressing and dealing with Romani issues has been ambiguous. A number of Romani participants lamented the growth of a so-called “Gypsy industry” that misuses resources intended for the Romani community. Others, including the government officials present, pointed to the lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the Romani civil sector, claiming that precious resources are squandered and diverted to the benefit of its leaders. Still others underscored the fact that the state has not done enough to deal with Romani issues, or has done so with a particular bias. Indeed, with the Romani community left largely on its own, the civil sector has had to take on the tasks of service provider, advocacy agent, and caretaker.

NGOs cannot replace the state's primary function of serving its citizens. In order for state institutions to become truly involved in problem-solving in the mahalas, the Romani community must have legitimate representatives.

Many participants strenuously objected to the roles currently being undertaken by local NGOs. They insisted that NGOs cannot, and must not, try to replace the state's primary function of serving its citizens. Indeed, in order for state institutions to become truly involved in problem-solving in the mahalas, they said, the Romani community must have legitimate representatives. As a Romani member of the Kosovo Assembly stressed, a Romani nongovernmental organization comprised of an internal leader, his wife, and a few of his closest relatives, cannot enjoy the same authority and legitimacy in discussing Romani problems with mainstream politicians or state institutions as can democratically elected representatives. If the Roma want to be taken seriously, noted a Romani politician from Macedonia, they need to learn to play by the rules.

The Romani representatives from Serbia and Bulgaria agreed that nongovernmental organizations cannot supplant state or local authority

institutions. As a Serbian Romani leader framed it, a problem-solving approach that relies on several small uncoordinated projects, sponsored by different donors and pursuing different objectives, is doomed to failure. Moreover, he noted, many Romani organizations have lost trust and credibility within Romani communities, and their priority must be to regain that trust. What is needed, he argued, is a concrete policy, negotiated with credible Romani political leaders and implemented by authorities in partnership with Roma, including a return of public services to Romani mahalas. According to this participant, the primary tasks of nongovernmental organizations are well-defined, and NGOs should not try to supplant the critical role of political parties or elected representatives.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, several participants commended the contributions of Romani NGOs, including: raising awareness, exerting pressure on state and local authorities, lobbying, engaging in civic education and community organizing, fostering the development of Romani media, and other activities. Indeed, NGOs have played a vital role, they said, in improving the infrastructure of mahalas and carrying out activities in the areas of education and health. One therefore cannot totally minimize their role, noted these participants, since they have been providing services and performing tasks that no Romani parties, state or local authorities can accomplish.

There was agreement among participants that NGOs should engage more actively in community life, encouraging the development of civil society among the Romani population. Local NGO projects are frequently marked by a lack of sustainability, said participants; their actions are often sporadic and uncoordinated, and follow too closely the priorities of different donor organizations. NGOs, they advised, should work on creating more order in existing programs rather than trying to perform roles reserved for political parties. There is therefore an urgent need to construct a better balance and coordination of activities among elected representatives and nongovernmental organizations.

THE FUTURE OF ROMANI MAHALAS

Should the Romani mahalas continue their existence as compact settlements inhabited by ethnically homogeneous populations? In the debate about the future of the Romani mahalas, the prevailing opinion among participants was against efforts to dismantle them, especially since there

are not any viable alternatives. This is particularly true for large Romani mahalas, thought not necessarily for small illegal settlements placed on private property. Yet, as participants noted, highlighting examples from Serbia, authorities seem to be determined to dismantle mahalas either by legal eviction or by replacement. For settlements elsewhere, the only solution is a massive effort at improving living conditions and working toward their full integration within the social fabric of the community at-large. The challenge, however, is enormous; and without concerted action by the state coupled with help from foreign donors, it will be virtually impossible to break the vicious cycle of illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty that exists within these ghettos.

Most of the participants view the existing mahalas as isolated and segregated communities whose inhabitants suffer under immeasurable squalor. For this reason, they oppose the formation of new mahalas, even as they disapprove of dissolving or desegregating existing large Romani mahalas. Participants were, however, in favor of acting to keep existing mahalas from sliding into further poverty and despair. Thus, for instance, some advocated desegregating specific public services, such as schools.

The Vidin project in Bulgaria, sponsored by the Open Society Institute Romani participation program, and implemented also in Sofia, Sliven and Kjustendil, was raised by certain participants as a possible model. Its basic premise is to bus Romani pupils to schools outside of the mahala so that they could receive a higher quality of education. While some participants considered the Vidin project a worthwhile attempt to deal with the low-quality education provided in Romani ghettos, others urged improvements of the school facilities and quality of education within the mahala as a more sustainable strategy. The mayor of Suro Orizari asserted that education has been his priority, while announcing plans to open a high school in the mahala in the near future.

A representative of the Council of Europe offered a different perspective, based on an overview of the situation in other European countries (including Spain and Greece). She suggested that the mahalas represent a unique microcosm and should be considered an important part of European cultural heritage. The Council of Europe, she said, therefore opposes any attempts to destroy mahalas regardless of the legal status of the settlement and the dwellings. She went on to say that Romani mahalas are not necessarily nor exclusively characterized by poverty, while

conceding that poverty rates are certainly higher inside the settlements than outside. Citing examples from elsewhere in Europe, she asserted that the achievement of tangible improvements within Romani mahalas is a matter of policy or strategy, and not strictly of available resources.

Several Romani participants offered yet another perspective on mahalas linked to the Roma's aspirations to self-determination. Both compact and large Romani settlements, they said, offer a space in which inhabitants can experience self-governance, autonomy, and self-determination.

The Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE recalled his meetings in Macedonia with both state authorities and Roma in the aftermath of the Albanian crisis. He **offer a space in which inhabitants can experience self-governance, autonomy, and self-determination.** Ohrid Framework Agreement

caused concern among Macedonian authorities, who worried that the Roma would attempt to act as the Albanians did. Indeed, he warned participants that once Romani leaders begin to cite the self-determination principle, the majority might perceive this as an effort to incite Romani nationalism. To avoid such dangerous misinterpretations, he suggested viewing “self-determination” as a realization of the mahalas’ greater autonomy and self-governance in the context of decentralization. Mahalas therefore should no longer be associated with segregation and poverty but with empowerment and a desire to integrate the community into the mainstream. He encouraged efforts to move in this direction and to exploit to the utmost all potential opportunities for the attainment of self-governance and autonomy in existing mahalas.

The Romani MP from Macedonia asserted that examples of such Romani self-determination already exist and are focused on engaging Roma in mainstream politics in order to attain their objectives. To this end, he cautioned that Roma must act within the existing powers and laws, not outside of them.

Romani communities and their representatives must decide whether their best option for greater well-being lies in seeking more integration, on the one hand, or more self-governance, on the other. While the state has often failed to fulfill its obligations toward the Roma, argued a

Romani leader from Serbia, it is equally true that the Roma have their own deficiencies and also need to be held responsible for their lot in life.

CONCLUSIONS

There was consensus at the Skopje meeting regarding the following:

- The potential for eruption of a conflict or crisis situation in Romani mahalas in the region is high. This is due to a number of pending and unresolved issues of significant scope.
- A number of factors of both a subjective and historical nature underlie the existing situation. The Roma tend to view the state as still welfare-oriented, maintaining that as citizens, they have rights to receive public services cost-free. From a historical perspective, the growth of mahalas has been spontaneous and unregulated, prompting concerns regarding the legal status of the settlements and the housing constructed within them. Additionally, there are social, financial, and political issues related to poverty, unemployment, lack of services, and infrastructure. Most importantly, the authorities appear to lack both the will and the resources necessary to address these issues.
- The interplay of these factors, coupled with state reforms introducing a market-oriented approach and increased privatization, has led to a dangerous situation in which mahalas are likely to become high-risk communities, marginalized and segregated, populated by an underclass who are totally dependent on welfare and have no hope for the future.
- Romani mahalas as residentially segregated municipal or urban units cannot be dissolved. However, their continued existence poses a challenge both to state and local authorities and to Romani residents: how can the mahalas be integrated within the fabric of the municipality and how can their inhabitants enjoy better living conditions? Concerted action is needed in order to prevent any escalation of the tensions that already exist.
- In many countries within the region, the Romani community is highly urbanized and concentrated in compact neighborhoods or mahalas. This provides further justification for addressing these issues.

- The Roma are disproportionately underrepresented in elective office and local administration, which leads to a lack of channels for communication and cooperation with local authorities. This marginalization increases the risk that, in a crisis situation, residents will be more likely to turn to violence as a way to vent their concerns.

The following set of recommendations was suggested as a means to address Romani mahala issues:

- There is an urgent need to resolve issues pertaining to the legality of some mahalas and of the housing construction within them.
- In order to regulate housing and property rights and resolve issues of legality, it will be necessary to create cadastra files that include these settlements in urban development and zoning plans. Since many local authorities cannot provide the funding necessary for these steps, participants suggest the creation of a special state fund as well as a specialized state agency to oversee the process.
- Governments should adopt a national policy toward Romani mahalas that would address ways of revitalizing housing or subsidizing cheap public housing. This policy should also include the development of criteria for deciding when inadequate housing should be demolished as well as the appropriate level of compensation. Systematic and legal solutions at the national level should be complemented with determined action at the local level.
- Improvement of living conditions in existing neighborhoods remains a priority. Minimum requirements for services such as access to running water and a sewage system should be established so that local authorities can then provide these services to mahala inhabitants. Those living in destitute conditions and on illegal sites should be relocated and given access to schools, hospitals, public transport, electricity, and running water.
- Withdrawing public utilities, institutions, and services from mahalas is dangerous and unhelpful, creating ghetto-like conditions. Local authorities must exercise their responsibilities in these neighborhoods just as in any other neighborhoods. To a great extent, the accumulated unpaid debt for public utilities in some mahalas is the result of inaction and political maneuvers on the part of local authorities. In any case, holding the whole mahala “collectively responsible” for these debts is inappropriate.

- Romani mahalas should be under the control of municipal authorities, and the process of decentralization should clarify their role in addressing and solving mahala issues. At the same time, however, the complexity and direness of the situation in many mahalas make government engagement inevitable, including budgetary provisions for a coherent nation-wide policy implemented at the local level. For this reason, participants suggest the establishment of a fund that would match resources from governments and foreign donors and support improvements within the mahalas.

- Romani mahala-dwellers need to be consulted and represented in elected bodies and local administration. Local authorities should encourage and facilitate the incorporation of Romani representation into local structures. On the other hand, Roma have the obligation to organize themselves to take up the challenge of becoming active and responsible partners in local politics. Large Romani mahalas clearly provide a sufficient demographic base for attaining a stronger representation in elected bodies.

- Romani mahalas with stronger representation in elected local structures, and especially with elected Romani self-governing bodies, have already proven themselves better able to cope than those with weak representation or no representation at all. Such representation has played a constructive role within the mahala community and has allowed members to serve as legitimate and credible partners for local authorities.

- The lack of well-educated and qualified Roma for these roles has been another obstacle in gaining stronger mahala representation. Therefore, the Romani community should make it a priority to acquire “more diplomas than visas” in the words of the mayor of Suto Orizari.

- Romani NGOs cannot supplant the state and its institutions in their obligation to serve citizens. The authorities need partners, but these need to be elected representatives or members of Romani political organizations. While the role of NGOs should not be minimized, since they provide important services and tasks that otherwise would not be offered, they still should avoid taking on functions reserved for political parties or elected representatives.

- Existing mahalas in many cases resemble isolated and segregated ghettos. It is incumbent on local and state authorities to prevent any additional Romani communities from sliding further into such conditions.

- Both compact and large Romani settlements might offer opportunities for acquiring experience in self-governance, autonomy, and self-determination. Mahalas successful at navigating the process of decentralization might well make great strides in empowering and integrating the Romani community into the mainstream, thereby encouraging them to assume greater responsibility for shaping their own fate.

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