

## 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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Individuals and institutions wishing to receive PER publications should write to:

**PROJECT ON  
ETHNIC  
RELATIONS** 

15 Chambers Street  
Princeton, New Jersey 08542-3707, USA  
Telephone: (609) 683-5666  
Fax: (609) 683-5888  
E-mail: [per@per-usa.org](mailto:per@per-usa.org)  
PER Web Site: [www.per-usa.org](http://www.per-usa.org)

R e p o r t

OCT. 13-14, 2000



SKOPJE, MACEDONIA

**STATE POLICIES TOWARD  
THE ROMA IN MACEDONIA**

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## PREFACE

Of all the problems that have affected Central and Southeastern Europe, that of relations between Romani communities and the majority populations has been among the most widespread and persistent. Macedonia, which is the focus of this report, has made great progress, showing tolerance toward its minority communities, including the Roma, and generosity toward both ethnic Albanian and Romani refugees from the conflict in Kosovo. Among the Macedonian government's main domestic tasks at present is that of formulating a comprehensive policy toward its Romani community. In addition, the status of Romani refugees must be addressed by international players as well as by the governments of Macedonia and its neighbors.

Macedonia, which is seeking membership in the European Union, will have to fulfill the long list of prerequisites demanded of all candidate countries, including the development of comprehensive state policy toward the Roma, a requirement that is part of "Agenda 2000" of the European Union. ("Agenda 2000" sets forth the process of reform and enlargement of the EU.) Whether Romani representatives have real decision-making power with respect to the situation of their own communities will also be considered in EU accession. Indeed, if the Macedonian application for admission is to succeed, policies must be developed on the basis of a partnership between the government and the Romani community.

In order to discuss these topics and to encourage a Roma-government partnership, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized a meeting in Skopje, Macedonia, on October 13 and 14, 2000.



**From left to right: Arben Xhaferi, Adzer Imetoska, Verka Mucunska, Bajram Amdi and Jusuf Sulejman.**

PER has been working closely with governments and Romani communities in Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary to help formulate policies toward the Roma as part of the efforts of these states to gain EU accession. Their experiences are relevant for Macedonia today. At the same time, in some respects Macedonia can also serve as an example for others, because the Roma there have always enjoyed a degree of recognition and have had parliamentary representation. The meeting offered an opportunity to share lessons and experiences.

We gratefully acknowledge the important contributions of Mirce Tomovski, Coordinator of the International Network for Interethnic Relations in Southeastern Europe, who helped to prepare the meeting and was a participant.

Professor Steven Burg of Brandeis University wrote this report. The participants in the meeting have not had the opportunity to review the text, for which PER assumes full responsibility.

**Allen H. Kassof**, *President*  
**Livia B. Plaks**, *Executive Director*  
Princeton, New Jersey  
March 2001

## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

For the sake of simplicity, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or the Republic of Macedonia is referred to as “Macedonia.”

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 that is the spelling most commonly used in the English-speaking world.



**From left to right: Nedzet Mustafa, Ashmet Elezovski and Martin Demirovski.**



**From left to right: Georgi Spasov, Bedredin Ibraimi, Allen Kassof, Livia Plaks, Andrzej Mirga and Kiro Gligorov.**



**From left to right: Ramiz Berisha, Tahir Goro and Dilbera Kamberovska.**

## COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The meeting began with a discussion of different approaches to Romani issues, contrasting those adopted by the international community with those adopted by some of the governments of Central and East European countries.

One Romani participant directly involved in European efforts to address these issues described the international approach to the Roma question as essentially a “human rights” approach. Attention to the problems of the Roma has been stimulated by evidence of the violation, including deadly violation, of the rights of the Roma. The international approach calls for governments to take effective measures to combat racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, and to ensure full equality of opportunity for the Roma. He pointed out that calls for such action have been repeated in numerous international statements, especially in connection with the wave of refugees and asylum-seekers in recent years and in connection with the war in Kosovo.

However, he noted, the approach of host governments to the Romani issue has been quite varied. Initially, government policies toward the Roma were dominated by the notion of “social problems;” both those faced by the Roma, and those “caused” by them. “Social” usually implied

***The problems of the Roma require more comprehensive policies, including elements of affirmative action.***

“non-ethnic” or “non-national.” In the view of this participant, the social approach was based on the belief that the Roma were the victims of discrimination or persecution not because of their ethnicity. Further, the social approach allowed states to downgrade the issue of human rights violations and to

blame the Roma themselves for their marginal social positions and the problems they encountered. “Social” also implied “not political.” Consequently, until the mid-1990s, governments did little to address the problems of the Roma and their continuing social and economic decline.

Granting “minority rights” to the Roma, however, did not bring about hoped-for changes. Even when governments recognized national minorities and supported their rights to use their languages, to establish their own schools, and to publish materials in their own languages, the Roma benefited the least from such policies. This approach failed to establish

suitable frameworks for addressing and solving other problems that faced the Romani communities. Beginning in the mid-1990s, some governments realized that the complex problems faced by the Romani communities could not be addressed under either the general “social” or “minority” approaches, which in any event were being challenged by international organizations and by Romani NGOs. By now the problems of the Roma have come increasingly to be understood as human rights—and therefore political—issues.

The problems of the Roma require more comprehensive policies, including elements of affirmative action. In Slovakia, the government recognized that human rights issues were involved, and in 1996 established the post of Commissioner for Citizens with Special Needs. In 1998, under pressure from the Romani community, this post was replaced with a Commission for the Solution of the Problems of Roma in Slovakia, headed by a Rom, and a new, long-term strategy was developed. This strategy is presently in the second stage of implementation.

In the Czech Republic, the law on citizenship, which made it difficult for the Roma to affirm their Czech citizenship after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, triggered serious public debate. This was followed by growing tensions arising from skinhead attacks on the Roma, and the highly publicized migration of some Roma to Western countries. As a result, the government was pressed to initiate policies to address the issue of the Roma. An inter-ministerial governmental commission was established in 1997, leading to the adoption of a number of measures. In 1999, the Ombudsman for human rights in the Czech Republic issued a further report on the Roma, which in April 1999 was adopted as the basis for comprehensive government policies.

Perhaps the most successful efforts have taken place in Hungary, based on the law on national minorities that was adopted by Parliament in 1993. That law acknowledges the Roma as a national minority equal in status to other recognized minorities and provides minorities with a system of self-government at the local and national levels. Elected bodies exercise collective rights in the fields of culture and education. In 1995, the Hungarian government declared Romani issues to be a matter of urgent concern, and the government’s 1996 report on conditions among the Roma provided the background for a parliamentary debate in spring 1997 that led to the adoption of a package of medium-term governmental measures. An inter-ministerial committee on the Roma has been

charged with developing a long-term strategy. The Hungarian experience suggests that a model for addressing Romani issues should include the following steps:

1. Adoption of a bill affirming the rights of national minorities
2. Securing representation of the Roma in social and political life at all levels
3. Government commitment to act upon identified issues
4. Detailed assessment of the situation, carried out with the participation of the Roma
5. Debate in Parliament as a means of securing public support and legitimacy
6. Building up medium-term policies with participation of the Roma
7. Implementation of policies in close consultation with Romani institutions

The experiences of other states confirm that the keys to success are acceptance of the Roma as equal partners at each stage of the process, and the creation of specific government bodies charged with overseeing the issue.

International efforts to establish norms in this area, and to create pressures to adhere to them, have been reflected in a number of recent acts. The EU's Agenda 2000 and its political criteria for accession are themselves important sources of pressure. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Protection of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the activities of groups of experts on implementation of the Convention are additional sources of pressure on governments to address Romani issues. The Council of Europe's Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) issues annual country-by-country reports analyzing racism and intolerance in member states. The April 2000 report by the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities reviewed social issues, including Romani issues, from the perspective of discrimination and the lack of human rights, and included an analysis of the situation in Macedonia. The OSCE is likely to seek implementation of the recommendations of the High Commissioner. And, last but not least, the recently enacted EU Directive 2000/43/EC, which implements "the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin," represents an important means to affect the status of Roma in member and candidate states.

## INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN MACEDONIA

Interethnic relations in Macedonia, as in the wider Balkan region, are a politically sensitive issue. Discussions of the status and treatment of the Roma in Macedonia led several participants to raise questions about the nature of the Macedonian state and the challenge of maintaining its democratic character. One government official participating in the meeting candidly pointed out that some people in his country question whether it is advantageous or disadvantageous for Macedonia to be a multiethnic state. It is an advantage, he argued, if all groups are treated equally and if there is participation by all groups in policy-making. To do otherwise, he acknowledged, would be dangerous not just for Macedonia, but for any multinational country, and could become an international issue. In his view, ethnic relations had improved when the present government came to power, as it created "a good basis for institutional representation and participation of all ethnic groups in both the political and economic aspects of society and for improvements in the social and economic conditions of all groups."

One Macedonian academic, responding to these comments, reminded the group of Macedonia's unique ethnic history. In contrast to the techniques used by ethnic groups in the nineteenth century to form national states, ranging from assimilation to expulsion to genocide, the Macedonian approach was one in which the state was established through what he characterized as a policy of integration without assimilation, through tolerance. The Macedonian language, he said, integrates society as a whole, permitting communication between local communities. At the same time, ethnic identity and distinctiveness on the local level involves the use of each group's mother tongue in self-government and local communication, thereby guarding against cultural assimilation. This dichotomy, in the view of this Macedonian academic, is what makes Macedonia a successful example of multiethnic democracy. Such a democracy can function only when ethnic rights are de-territorialized. In contrast, recognition of collective rights would lead to the establishment of parallel institutions, and in turn to the territorialization of identity and then to secession, disintegration, and the destruction of the state.

Following these comments, a senior former Macedonian official warned that in Macedonia today, greater weight is being placed on the collective in defining identity, and that this is reflected in the present political situation. "There are some problems in certain ethnic communities in

Macedonia,” he observed, “arising out of the fact that in one way or another the rights of individuals, of the citizen as subject, have been pushed into the background. In a state that truly fosters democratic consciousness, the individual is the carrier of the sovereign rights of the state, regardless of whether he is an Albanian, Macedonian, Turk, Vlach, Rom, Serb, or has some other ethnic identity. Of course, emphasis on the individual should not preclude the ability of individuals to act collectively in areas essential to their identity. In this respect, much remains to be done.” He argued that there is a need to establish conditions of equality between groups, of full participation, in which each individual, no matter of what ethnic group, feels free to express his individual opinions and interests. In his view, this problem is most pronounced with respect to the Roma.

## **CURRENT STATUS OF THE ROMA IN MACEDONIA**

Participants engaged in an extensive discussion of the current status of Macedonia’s Roma with respect to human rights, their problems, and the role of the government in solving those problems. The leader of a political party in Macedonia expressed the view that since independence, the Roma have become full-fledged citizens, able to express themselves and their identity through the same institutions and means as others. He

pointed out that they have their own media, use their own language, have their own political parties, and participate in other parties. In his view, they make use of institutional opportunities to defend their own interests and identity. The creation of political parties for the Roma has been good for Macedonia, as a

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means to express through the exercise of political influence the need for improvement in the social welfare, educational conditions, human rights, and political rights of the Romani community. Nonetheless, he conceded, “one issue that cannot be avoided is the fact that the Romani community is in the worst condition of any group in Macedonia in terms of the condition of their settlements, unemployment data, educational achievement data, and political influence. Much more needs to be done.”

A Romani political leader reinforced and expanded upon this view. In his view, the actual situation of the Roma is really very “raw.” He argued that education in the Romani language in the ghettoized settlements of the Roma, formally “optional,” in fact does not exist. The government is obligated to provide resources to translate books into the Romani language, but does not. He argued that for education in grades 1-7 there is only one textbook, one reader, and one grammar book in Romanes. Because of this, he observed, “it is not surprising that Romani children become bored with education and uninterested in educational advancement.” He called upon the international community to make funds available to Roma-controlled institutions to support social development. He called for funding for additional textbooks and for admissions at all educational levels without entrance examinations, including university admission without exams or quotas and with full scholarships. But he pointed out that education alone would not solve the social problems of the Roma. The failure to ensure social and economic opportunities to educated Roma—some Roma today who are university graduates are nonetheless unemployed—serves as a disincentive for younger Roma to pursue education.

This participant called for improvement in a number of other areas as well. He called for an end to ghettoization and suggested that when apartments are distributed by the state, there should be no deposit required, so that young Romani couples can qualify. “If we want to achieve integration in society,” he reasoned, “there must be integration in housing.” He compared conditions in Romani ghettos to those in poor, third world countries, and called for factories to be built in Romani settlements so as to create opportunities for employment. He also called for expanded employment of Roma in government administration, proportionate to their status as the third largest group in Macedonia. And he called for greater representation of the Roma in Parliament by guaranteeing them seats.

Acknowledging that it would be very difficult to make any progress without additional resources, this participant called for international funding for these improvements. The international community, he argued, “has a moral responsibility to provide assistance to the Roma because of the genocide committed against us” in the Second World War.

A local Romani political leader supported some of these complaints. He reported that the number of Romani children in the country’s



schools, especially at the university level, is disproportionately small. He suggested that a university department for Romani language education should be established, as the development of language and culture is the foundation for social progress. And he reported that the Skopje Romani community has demanded the establishment of a class to be conducted in Romanes at each grade level. Criticizing the Macedonian government for paying inadequate attention to the education of the Roma and providing an insufficient level of support for Romani culture, he agreed that international

**Poverty alone does not explain the disproportionately poor educational performance of the Roma.**

attention to this issue is necessary.

This participant also suggested that the Roma suffer from a number of interrelated social problems. Employment rates among the Roma are the lowest of all groups in Macedonia.

But the Roma, he insisted, demand work, not social welfare. Public health and the quality of health care among the Roma is inadequate. This is, he pointed out, a problem intensified by unemployment. Substandard housing is a problem, as is community infrastructure (including sanitary facilities and water supplies). Life expectancy among the Roma is lower than that of the rest of the population. These problems, he suggested, are the result not only of the low levels of education among the Roma but of discrimination against them.

A vigorous debate over the causes of social problems among the Roma was prompted by the statements of a Ministry of Education official concerning the Roma's educational problems. The ministry representative suggested that the high dropout rate of Romani students after the fifth grade is due to the economic and social situation of the students, parents' low educational levels and negative attitude toward school, and the lack of pre-school preparation. This participant argued that, while optional instruction in the Romani language has been available since 1996, enrollment in these courses has been declining. He explained this paradox by suggesting that Romani parents are not interested in securing Romani-language education for their children and that students cannot handle the extra work. In short, the educational problems of Romani students are due to objective social characteristics of the Roma, not to discrimination or lack of government effort.

Not surprisingly, several Romani participants begged to differ. One declared that this interpretation was "not consistent with reality." He went

on to argue, "It is not that students' performance is affected by parents' economic and social situation. Poor performance of the Roma in school is due to two factors: poor preparation for schooling, and a lack of resources dedicated by the state to their education." He called for instruction in the Macedonian language to be made available as part of pre-school education and for greater resources to be devoted to supporting instructors who can teach Romani children in their own language. "It is not just the Roma who are poor," he pointed out. "Poverty alone does not explain the disproportionately poor educational performance of the Roma."

Another Romani participant pointed out other deterrents to educational success. In preschool settings, Romani children are met with stereotyping and are called "Tsigan" ("Gypsy") by the other children. Another participant observed that "some teachers discourage Romani pupils from seeking education. They discourage the social ambitions of the Roma by suggesting that opportunities for Roma are limited to a few stereotypical occupations." This participant also noted that in grades 1-4 there is no provision for repeating a grade if performance is poor. Students who are disadvantaged by language and other factors fall progressively behind until they reach 5th grade, cannot handle the work, and then drop out. This participant called for the provision of additional, remedial work in grades 1-4. Yet another participant defended the capabilities of Romani students, noting that their knowledge of multiple languages and cultures suggested "great intellectual abilities." The fact that even Roma who achieve education are unemployed suggested the existence of discrimination to this participant. There was widespread agreement that education was a critically important issue for the community.

The Ministry of Education representative pointed out that pre-schools do not fall under the jurisdiction of his ministry, but under that of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. The representative said that one year of pre-school education is free of charge and available to all children, but at the same time suggested that low enrollment of Roma in the pre-schools could be attributed to the fact that parents cannot afford to pay—an issue that also belongs under the purview of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy.

One participant explained the apparent lack of interest on the part of the government in terms of the larger dynamic of ethnic politics in Macedonia: "The lack of interest in this meeting on the part of some in the government is understandable. We in Macedonia believe we are a democratic state with relaxed interethnic relations and that we have a

continuous dialogue. But, if we consider the Roma, we see that dialogue exists only between the government and the Albanians. The issue is how to establish such a dialogue with respect to the Roma.” A member of PER noted that the process of addressing the Romani question has looked the same elsewhere: “The process here in Macedonia looks very much like the processes that have unfolded elsewhere. In Macedonia,

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discussion has taken place mainly between the government and the Albanian community because the government has not yet recognized that the Romani issue is a political issue. But it will.”

On the second day of the meeting, a representative of the Ministry for Labor and Social Policy joined the discussions. He criticized the failure

of Macedonia’s social welfare policies to address the problems of the Roma. The ministry representative candidly acknowledged the inadequate levels of social welfare support in general and the great difficulties that Roma have in securing even such inadequate support. Although the ministry makes no distinctions among ethnic groups in the distribution of benefits, he argued, the Roma often have difficulty producing the documentation necessary to receive benefits. While there have been demands for state apartments to be allocated to Romani families, the ministry representative pointed out that none of these apartments have been allocated based on social-welfare considerations.

The Labor Ministry representative’s candid remarks were met with “satisfaction and respect” by one Romani official. But another bitterly criticized the lack of social welfare. A Romani participant with extensive European experience pointed out that at least some of the expectations and demands of the Romani participants may be inappropriate. “In the modern era the welfare role of states is in decline,” he noted, “and there is greater emphasis on decentralization. This said, Macedonia is still a centralized state, and much of this discussion is focused on expanding the role of state-financed welfare.”

Several participants suggested that the general status of the Roma in Macedonia presented a contradictory picture. As one Macedonian Romani political activist put it, “Roma have in principle a satisfactory

level of rights. But in practical terms, their rights are not actually realized.” Another Romani human rights activist suggested, “Some basic human rights have not been developed here. Roma are marginalized and do not enjoy declared rights in practice.... There is a tradition of discrimination against Roma in Macedonia.” Romani participants tended to view the problems of their community as political. But there was some skepticism about whether it would be possible to establish the kind of partnership between the Roma and the government that was suggested at this meeting.

## **STEPS TOWARD PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE ROMA AND THE GOVERNMENT**

In the view of some participants, the larger context of ethnic politics and the structure of Macedonian political institutions represent obstacles to establishing a balanced relationship between the government and the Roma. A Macedonian participant argued, “In Macedonia we cannot create institutions in which ethnic groups are partners to the government. This would result in parallelism.” He pointed out that political parties are developed on the basis of ethnicity and that crossover between constituencies is rare. Decision-making authority in Macedonia is centralized; local authorities have few real powers. But it is the local authorities that must deal with the problems of the Roma. In his view, “there is a real lack of skill on the part of local authorities” when it comes to using central institutions to address the issues of the Roma.

Later this participant expanded his comments: “What would be the components of a successful state policy?” he asked. “Political will, the establishment of a representative state organization, and the acceptance of the Roma as partners. Formally there is political will, but in practical terms it does

***There is a risk that the multiethnic model will turn into a bi-ethnic or bi-national model, leaving out the Roma and other minorities.***

not operate. In Macedonia, only those ethnic groups that are in government have any power. There is a process of ethnicization taking place in Macedonia, in which the two main groups, the Macedonians and the Albanians, dominate. Thus there is a risk that the multieth-

nic model will turn into a bi-ethnic or bi-national model, leaving out the Roma and other minorities.”

A local Romani political leader was more optimistic, however. “The problems of the Roma are political,” he acknowledged. “Problems of education, social problems, and the like do have political significance.” But, he said, “We will find a way to sit down with government representatives and find solutions to our problems.” He proposed that a “Council

***Fulfillment of EU conditions requires the Macedonian government to respond to the needs and demands of the Roma.***

for Resolution of the Needs and Problems of the Roma in Macedonia” be established, comprising representatives of Romani NGOs, Romani MPs and members of the parliamentary Council for Interethnic Relations, the mayor of Skopje’s Romani settlement (a municipality called Suto Orizari),

and representatives of the relevant government ministries. Several participants greeted this proposal with enthusiasm. Such a body would be similar to organs established in other European countries that are attempting to address their own Romani issues. One participant directly familiar with those efforts noted that the establishment of such a body could be a constructive step.

The importance of establishing an institutional mechanism through which Macedonia’s Romani community could participate directly in the formulation of state policies intended to address the problems of this community was underscored by participants representing European multilateral institutions and organizations. These participants also emphasized opportunities for Romani organizations to represent their interests directly before international organizations.

A representative of the Council of Europe observed that the Council seeks to encourage dialogue between governments and their minorities and to convince state authorities to adopt comprehensive policies concerning minorities, particularly the Roma. Macedonia has ratified the Framework Convention on the Protection of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and has submitted a report to the Council, which will be studied by an independent committee of experts.

Another participant pointed out that the Council of Europe has a specialist group on the Roma but that there is no Macedonian representa-

tive included in this group. This participant urged the Romani community to demand the appointment of a Macedonian representative, and pointed out that this would not require any additional resources from the government, since the Council facilitates the participation of national representatives. The Council representative noted that this committee of experts can receive information from NGOs, including representatives of minorities, which have the right to communicate their concerns to the Council’s directorate for human rights. He also reported that the Council of Europe and the OSCE are in the final stages of adopting a joint project that was to begin work in early 2001. The project aims at encouraging government policies to facilitate the effective participation of Roma in policy-making processes. It will support the establishment of institutional tools for the elaboration and implementation of policies for the Roma and encourage Romani representatives and government officials to sit at the same table. The Council is encouraging the Macedonian government to establish the kind of interministerial committee or office for national minorities that exists in some other countries, and to take advantage of their very useful experience.

A representative of the European Commission pointed out that Macedonia is in the last stage of negotiating an association agreement with the EU. Fulfillment of EU conditions requires the Macedonian government to respond to the needs and demands of the Roma. When a Romani participant queried the EU representative as to just how open the EU is to influence by Romani political parties, the representative noted, “When it comes to the implementation of policy and reaching agreements with governments, the proper role of parties is in national parliaments and the Parliament of Europe. The Commission will tend to deal with ministerial representatives.” These comments made it clear to participants that the Roma must secure influence over their own government in order to influence international institutions.

Subsequent discussion focused on the question of Romani participation in the Macedonian policy-making process. One participant lamented, “We are like a psychological support group of people complaining and sharing their complaints, but no one is listening. We are unable to reach decision-makers. I would ask why are there no Roma among decision-makers in the Macedonian government? Why are there no Roma in the ministries of labor, social welfare, health, internal affairs, foreign affairs, and so on? We should not demand too much of international players. We should ask Macedonian governments, former and present, ‘Why?’ I

believe the Macedonian government does not have a sympathetic ear for the Roma. It cares only about its coalition partners. We need to secure real power. Up to now, Roma have been paid to vote with a bit of money and a small amount of flour, and then, after votes are delivered, they are forgotten.”

A local Romani elected official followed up on these comments by suggesting a political strategy to increase Romani influence in Macedonia. “Political consolidation of the Roma is necessary to have power and impact on politics and policies,” he argued. “Romani NGOs must see political organizations as the only practical means by which to solve the problems of the Roma. National power, reasonableness, and knowledge of Romanes must be aimed at consolidation of the Romani political parties.” He, too, acknowledged that “division of the Roma into many parties allows others to buy votes for some oil or flour or even 100 Deutschemarks.” As a result, Romani votes help elect MPs of other parties, but these MPs ignore Romani interests once elected. “A single Romani party,” he emphasized, “would represent the third largest group in the country. Concentrating political efforts at the local level would offer a reasonable chance of increasing power, because Roma are the second largest group in eastern Macedonia and can play a greater role in municipal councils there.... Government ministries are unresponsive to the social problems of the Roma. We don’t have a political party that is concerned with the existential problems of the Romani people, no one that has the government’s attention. Consolidation in a single political party is the only way to achieve radical change in the social conditions of the Roma.”

## REFUGEE ISSUES

The final session of the meeting focused on the fate of Romani refugees from Kosovo presently in Macedonia. Government representatives put the number of Romani refugees from Kosovo still living in refugee camps in Macedonia at 2,200. But a UNHCR representative reported that his organization was assisting 6,000 Romani refugees from Kosovo in Macedonia (out of a total of 9,000 refugees being supported by the UNHCR in Macedonia). The standard of living of these refugees, he suggested, was better than that of the Roma in the worst Macedonian settlements but still not good. It has proven difficult to resettle and integrate the Kosovar Roma in Macedonia. According to one Romani refugee par-

ticipant, the Romani refugees from Kosovo are looked down upon by Macedonian Roma and are not accepted as “Kosovars” by the Albanians. One Macedonian Romani participant called directly for the return of Roma to Kosovo, declaring, “There are no reasons to cry here.” In contrast to this view, however, the majority of Kosovar Romani refugees have expressed the wish to obtain asylum in a third country, citing poor and dangerous conditions that exist for them in both Kosovo and Macedonia. Indeed, several of the Romani refugees from Kosovo who had attempted to return to their homes had to flee once again to Macedonia because of threats to their lives.

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While it is not easy for Romani refugees to stay in Macedonia, it is also difficult to go elsewhere. According to a Macedonian government representative, a refugee must renew permission to remain in Macedonia every three months. Those without valid permits to stay are subject to police action. Yet, at the same time, a Macedonian Rom pointed out, no third country will accept Kosovar Romani refugees who require social assistance—and he contrasted this unwelcoming stance with the more generous treatment of Albanian refugees from Kosovo. “Everything was available to Albanian refugees,” he declared, “but nothing is available to the Roma.” This situation leaves the Romani refugees in Macedonia with little choice but to seek to return to Kosovo. Indeed, another refugee participant stated the case for return in existential terms: “It is neither our wish nor desire to return,” he declared, “it is our need. To stay here is to stay without any perspective for us.” Nonetheless, all of the Romani refugees from Kosovo cited the extreme danger of returning to Kosovo in the foreseeable future.

## CONCLUSIONS

Further steps will be needed to persuade the Macedonian government to engage the country’s Romani constituencies. As PER reports on this meeting and discusses it in the international arena, the issue will be brought to the attention of Macedonian policy-makers. Meanwhile, members of the Romani community must place a high priority on

organizing themselves for dialogue with their government. A number of concrete suggestions for action emerged in the course of these discussions, including the proposal by Romani participants to undertake efforts to consolidate and strengthen Romani political organizations as a prelude to developing a partnership with the Macedonian government.

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

### Participants from Macedonia

- Bajram Amdi**, President, Gypsy Union of Macedonia; Member of Parliament
- Bajram Berat**, Member, Parliamentary Council for Interethnic Relations
- Boge Cadinovski**, Assistant Minister, Ministry for Labor and Social Policy; Director, Department for Refugees
- Ramije Cara**, Secretary, Municipality of Tetovo
- Enise Demirova**, Representative, Cerenja-Stip
- Martin Demirovski**, Representative in Macedonia, European Roma Rights Center
- Ashmet Elezovski**, Coordinator, Romani Community Center DROM, Kumanovo
- Kiro Gligorov**, former President of Macedonia
- Bedredin Ibraimi**, Minister for Labor and Social Policy
- Imer Imeri**, President, Party for Democratic Prosperity
- Adzer Imetoska**, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Education
- Gjorgje Ivanov**, Professor, Law Department, University of Skopje
- Ahmet Jasrevski**, President, Romani Community Center DROM, Kumanovo
- Mabera Kamberi**, Member, Board of Directors, Open Society Institute Macedonia
- Dilbera Kamberovska**, President, Romani Women's Association of Macedonia
- Feat Kamberovski**, President, Romani Rights Forum ARKA, Kumanovo
- Tihomir Karanfilov**, Romani International Center in Macedonia
- Mirjana Maleska**, Researcher, Institute for Political and Social Studies
- Verka Mucunska**, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Education
- Nedzet Mustafa**, Mayor, Municipality of Suto Orizari, Skopje
- Jamin Nuredini**, Mayor, Gostivar
- Senaj Osmanov**, President, Association for Human Rights Protection of Roma, Shtip
- Ramiz Osmanovski**, Project Coordinator, Romani Community Center DROM, Kumanovo
- Branislav Petrovski**, President, Association Romano Ilo
- Muarem Ramus**, Romani International Center in Macedonia
- Gordana Risteska**, Commentator, *Nova Makedonija*

**Emin Rustemi**, Representative, Association Sonce, Tetovo  
**Nadire Selman**, President, “Esmā” Association for Romani Women  
**Georgi Spasov**, Secretary General, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; former Minister of Justice  
**Blagica Stojanova**, Adviser, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy  
**Jusuf Sulejman**, Secretary General, Party for Total Emancipation of Roma in Macedonia  
**Branko Tirckovski**, Journalist, *Utrinski Vesnik*  
**Mirce Tomovski**, Coordinator, International Network on Ethnic Relations in Southeastern Europe; Editor-in-Chief, *Puls*  
**Meda Veljanovska**, TV Suto Orizari  
**David Veskov**, Assistant to the Chairman, Foreign Relations Committee, Parliament of Macedonia  
**Arben Xhaferi**, President, Democratic Party of Albanians

#### **Romani Refugees from Kosovo**

**Baskim Berisha**  
**Esad Berisha**  
**Ramiz Berisha**  
**Tahir Goro**  
**Sakiri Musli**  
**Djuliseh Muslija**  
**Musli Shaqiri**

#### **International Participants**

**Steven Burg**, Professor, Brandeis University (USA)  
**Alex Grigor’ev**, Program Officer, Project on Ethnic Relations (USA)  
**Michael Guet**, Program Manager, Migration and Roma/Gypsies Division, Council of Europe  
**Allen Kassof**, President, Project on Ethnic Relations (USA)  
**Tanja Lubbers**, Field Coordinator, Pax Christi  
**Andrzej Mirga**, Chairman, PER Romani Advisory Council; Co-Chair, Council of Europe Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies  
**Lindsay Moran**, Political Officer, Embassy of USA in Macedonia  
**Agostino Mulas**, Senior Program Coordinator, UNHCR  
**Livia Plaks**, Executive Director, Project on Ethnic Relations (USA)  
**Yolanda Robinson**, Political Officer, Embassy of USA in Macedonia  
**Nafi Saracini**, Program Officer, European Commission Representation in Macedonia

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