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## Montenegro Chronicle 4 – Social distance in Montenegro

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Constitution, as the supreme legal act, defines Montenegro as a state of all its citizens, where members of different ethnic and religious groups have the same rights and obligations and where the citizen is the bearer of sovereignty, not one or multiple nations. According to the last census (year 2011) there are the most Montenegrins in Montenegro (44.98%), next, the most numerous is the Serbian community to follow (28.73%), then 8.65 percent of Bosniaks, 4.91 percent of Albanians and 3.31 percent of Muslims. In the past ten years, major incidents based on ethnic differences have not been reported, i.e. there has been no organized and systematic violence against an ethnic group. Nevertheless, there are major issues burdening the relations among ethnic groups in Montenegro. The issue of the status of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro strains relations between Serbs and Montenegrins, also too much controversy about the language and its name, representatives of the Muslim community often point out that they are exposed to assimilation by Bosniak leaders, the position and status of Roma population...

Above mentioned identity questions often receive central place in the Montenegrin political discourse, suppressing other social issues like economy, health, education and social policy to the margins. The nature of interethnic relations in a society can largely be seen through research on ethnic distance, which is a form of social distance when referent groups of the ethnic community are in question. In November last year, the non-governmental organization CEDEM from Podgorica conducted a survey and an analysis of ethnic distance. This research was conducted on a sample of 790 respondents and is one in a series of researches that have been done on this topic in year 2004 and 2007. The elements based on which the ethnic gap in Montenegro was studied are the following: to have him/her live in my country, in my neighborhood, to have him/her as an associate at work, to have him/her as my superior at work, to have him/her be a teacher to my children, to hang out with him/her, to have him/her hold a leadership position in my country, to have him/her be related to me through family bonds, to be related to him/her through my own marriage or my children's marriage.

An improvement of interethnic relations in the past few years is noticeable, which is encouraging considering the current economic situation as well as the growth of ethnic intolerance in the region. Citizens of Montenegro are displaying a slightly greater willingness to coexist with others and progress in the field of acceptance of diversity. And so it is up to some escalation, whose cause is seemingly trite. An obvious example is a football match between Albania and Serbia in Belgrade, where a guided drone (helicopter on guidance) brought a flag depicting Great Albania which caused chaos in the stadium and a series of incidents in at least four neighboring countries, especially in ethnically mixed communities.

When we talk about co-existence in the same country, research has shown that the minimum level of ethnic distance is towards Montenegrins and that only 2 percent of respondents would prefer not to have them as fellow citizens. As for other ethnic groups, the level of ethnic distance significantly increases, 6.5 percent of respondents do not want to live in the same country with Serbs, 12.5 percent with Muslims/Bosniaks, 18.7 with Albanians, and even every fifth respondent would not like to live in the same country with Croats.

"We constantly need to work on "raising awareness" among citizens that we are all "of flesh and blood" and that we are just by chance divided into ethnical and religious corpuses. It is necessary to uncover the truth about misdeeds during the war in this region which were committed by representatives of any national community, but not in order to use those truths for daily political purposes but for the purpose of demonstrating what kind of



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consequences can be caused by unnecessary lack of understanding and by affiliation of one to this or that ethnic group”, said Sabrija Vulić, president of Council of Muslim people of Montenegro in an interview.

Unfortunately, the need of assimilation seems to be one of the essential components of the current functioning of “leaders” of national minorities. This is confirmed by the President of the Council of Muslims. “The position of Muslims in the past decade and a half, or more precisely since 2001, is very poor and the Muslim community is under constant pressure and desire for assimilation, primarily, by the Bosniak minority. The Council of Muslims in Montenegro tries to organize events that promote the culture of the Muslim people of Montenegro by minor funds received from the state, and also by individual activities and collective involvement, the Council works on preventing further assimilation of Muslims”, says Vulić.

However, the biggest problem evident in the daily functioning of the community, and the analysis only confirmed it, is that the greatest degree of ethnic distance is manifested towards the Roma population. Expressed in figures in the survey it amounts to 22.5 percent, which indicates that the RAE are not sufficiently integrated into the Montenegrin society. Despite some attempts through existing programs of the Government, international organizations and some non-governmental organizations, the relationship of members of other communities towards the Roma minority has not changed much and it is largely conditioned by prejudices and stereotypes. According to the coordinator of the Center for Roma Initiatives, Fani Delija, particularly concerning is the treatment of Roma if one bears in mind that they were previously not participants in any national, religious or territorial conflict in Montenegro. She believes that the Roma minority, in comparison to other groups, is still in a subordinate position, and that prejudice, and thus the ethnic gap, will not decrease until conditions that anyone is able to communicate with Roma on an equal basis are created.

According to CEDEM’s results, 31.5 percent of respondents would not like to have their neighbor be a member of the Roma community, which presents the highest degree of ethnic distance. As with the previous element, the ethnic gap is the smallest towards Montenegrins (2.4 per cent) and Serbs (8 percent), towards Muslims / Bosniaks it is 15.4 percent, whereas towards Albanians and Croats it is about 24 percent. Research showed that there is still an aversion among citizens towards the idea to share their housing environment with the RAE, which is one of the reasons why most Roma live exclusively in the environment of their compatriots. In Montenegro, there are several bigger Roma settlements such as Konik, Vrela Ribnička, Roma settlement in Berane, where reside mainly Roma immigrants from Kosovo and Metohija, and these settlements do not meet many of the conditions for normal and decent housing. Also, a large number of Roma refugees from Kosovo and Metohija still do not have identity documents of Montenegro which prevents them from fully exercising their citizen rights. The current status prevents Roma to fit better into the Montenegrin society and thus create conditions for reduction of ethnic distance; on the contrary, they remain living on the margins of the society. As a positive example of housing of RAE worth emphasizing is “Local housing study of the Roma and Egyptian population”, adopted by the municipality of Herceg Novi. The study provides insight into the living conditions of the RAE population in the municipality of Herceg Novi, it also portrays their needs and in what ways they can be fulfilled. One of the main objectives of the study is to allow better inclusion of the RAE population in the community so there would be no social and spatial exclusion. “It is a prejudice that Roma want to live exclusively in Roma settlements and thereby avoid a greater degree of integration into the Montenegrin society. It is necessary to find mechanisms that will allow them to coexist with other citizens, and one of the main prerequisites for this is eradication of prejudices and stereotypes towards the Roma” said Samir Jaha from the organization “Young Roma”.

Despite periodical incidents, the very research of CEDEM, and most respondents from national councils and civil society organizations agree that there is some progress and that the Montenegrin society is more tolerant than it was the case 10 years ago. Despite this, there is much more that can be improved when it comes to inter-ethnic relations. “It is necessary to build financial and human resource capacities of institutions dealing with the position and policy of minority ethnic communities. Also, larger investments in areas where mostly members of minority peoples live are needed,” pointed out Kemal Zoronjić, the Bosniak member of the council in Montenegro. When it

comes to the Minority Fund, this institution ought to be more open to initiatives that promote inter-ethnic cooperation and thus contribute to the reduction of ethnic distance. So far, on several occasions significant attention has been devoted to work results and distribution of support for projects of this foundation in the media. Unfortunately, the director and representatives of this Fund, established by the state, rarely have a comment regarding this matter, and so it was this time.

[1] <http://www.cdm.me/drustvo/crna-gora/etnicka-distanca-najizrozenija-prema-romima>