

**INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
IN SERBIA
THE ROLE OF ITALIAN
ORGANIZATIONS**

Centre for Non Violent Resitance

Progetto di ricerca

La Cooperazione italiana per la democrazia e la legalità
nei Balcani occidentali

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PREMESSA

Il presente è il terzo di una serie di 3 *working papers* (28, 29 e 30) realizzati dal CeSPI nell'ambito del progetto di ricerca **'La Cooperazione italiana per la democrazia e la legalità nei Balcani occidentali'**, co-finanziato dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Direzione generale cooperazione allo sviluppo. La ricerca studia l'evoluzione recente della cooperazione italiana a sostegno dei processi di democratizzazione in **Serbia** e **Albania**, attraverso l'approfondimento di alcuni studi di caso. Sulla base dell'analisi svolta, essa intende delineare scenari di sviluppo ed elaborare specifiche raccomandazioni di *policy* per la cooperazione italiana nel contesto balcanico. In generale, la ricerca si pone come obiettivo quello di aumentare l'efficacia della cooperazione italiana a sostegno dei processi di democratizzazione nei Balcani occidentali.

Per la realizzazione della ricerca si è adottata una metodologia di studio di tipo qualitativo e multi-situata, attraverso la definizione di un quadro teorico di riferimento e di una metodologia di analisi *ad hoc*, l'analisi di studi di caso, la realizzazione di interviste strutturate a testimoni privilegiati, la realizzazione di missioni in loco ed il confronto con visioni locali.

Il *working paper* n. 30 presenta una riflessione sul contributo della cooperazione italiana al processo democratico in Serbia. Essa offre un quadro di riferimento del paese, definendo alcune delle coordinate principali entro cui si inseriscono le azioni italiane a supporto della democrazia. Inoltre, presenta un approfondimento sul tema delle relazioni tra le minoranze etniche, uno dei temi più rilevanti e dibattuti nell'ambito della politica Serba.

Il lavoro è stato elaborato dai ricercatori del **Center for Non Violent Resistance**, una organizzazione non governativa con sede a Belgrado, da anni impegnata in attività di analisi, di *advocay* e di sensibilizzazione sui temi della democrazia e, in particolare, dei conflitti etnici nell'area balcanica.

INTRODUCTION

The research conducted by the Center for Non Violent Resistance (CNR) and CeSPI in Serbia had an aim of determining the role and impact of the international involvement in the processes of democratization and rule of law, with particular focus on the engagement of the Italian organizations. With that respect, our main goal was not only to assess past and present activities of different international stakeholders, including Italian organizations present in Serbia, but also to assess the current needs of the Serbian society and propose future initiatives for the benefit of all interested sides.

Assessing the role of international involvement in general and of Italian cooperation in particular, represents the best possible approach after more than six years of active international presence in Serbia. Namely, the international activities in Serbia can be divided in three main periods:

- Emergency period from the beginning of nineties until democratic changes in 2000, when most of the activities were focused on delivering aid, emergency assistance and assistance for opposition political forces.
- Consolidation period, that started after 2000 and lasted until 2004, mainly characterized by development initiatives, institution building, promotion of rule of law and building sustainable democracy in the Serbian society.
- Stabilization period started in early 2004 and came after a recognized need to engage deeper in the sphere of economy and social welfare.

After many years of specific strategies and projects implementation, it is worth taking some time in order to analyze the impact of the international engagement on one side and the level of achieved development of the Serbian society on the other. This approach enables focusing on the most important issues and creating strategies that correspond with the new reality.

Following this approach, CeSPI and CNR decided to examine the contribution of Italian cooperation in the field of democratization and rule of law in Serbia, focusing, in particular on the past few years. For the purposes of this study, several activities have been conducted, including interviews with selected organizations, their beneficiaries and content analysis. The initial list of interviews presented by CeSPI has later been broadened with an aim to find more information relevant for creating better insight of the level of Italian engagement in Serbia. The task started being more complicated than expected, as it turned out that activities of Italian organizations in Serbia are not easy to systematize, which is a proof of necessity to conduct thorough analysis followed by recommendations of their work.

The analysis presented in this paper starts with a general overview, through examining the Italian cooperation, then shifting attention towards the local context and ending with the findings and possible recommendations for the future activities.

1. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SERBIA

Since the breakdown of former Yugoslavia, the international presence in the region passed through different stages – from ending the war and maintaining peace and building sustainable democratic societies to facilitating inclusion of the entire region into Euro Atlantic integration as a prerequisite for the long lasting stability. The political climate in Serbia during nineties laid down terms of international involvement, focusing almost exclusively on contributing to political struggle against the regime. In that respect, performance of the various actors in Serbia (political parties, civil society, etc.) was mostly oriented toward bringing about democratic changes, while it was less focused on social and economic development. The main characteristic of the first period, usually recognized as an emergency one, was achieving a high level of homogenization of different social actors and individuals around only one interest of changing the regime. Such an approach, even though very much needed at that time, brought about difficulties after the regime changed that led to the lack of strategy, vision and redefinition of the role and the impact of different international and local actors in Serbia. Only after 2000, both international community and local organizations began to consider the change in approach in order to accommodate the most urgent needs that correspond to newly created reality. Fuzzy words such as ‘democratization’, ‘rule of law’, ‘transparency’, ‘sustainability’ and others, suddenly became unavoidable ‘mantra’ in all implemented initiatives. Often, the substance was missing or the projects were determined by the donors’ preference.

The focus of international presence after the 2000 was threefold: i) support to institution building both on the national and on the local level, ii) support to capacity building of the civil society sector, and iii) social and economic development.

The first area of engagement was motivated by the legacy of weak and inefficient institutions, lack of professional and motivated cadre and destroyed social fabric on all levels. The second area of intervention was focused on civil society development with the main aim of strengthening initiatives that contribute to promotion of democratic values in all layers of the society.

Furthermore, accountability of the government was perceived as one of the most important goals, therefore the civil society had been encouraged to perform the role of a ‘watchdog’ and a monitor of the major processes in the country. Last but not the least, social and economic development emerged as the most important topic for international cooperation due to existence of numerous vulnerable groups that needed immediate attention.

The main characteristics of the international engagement in Serbia in the past two years can be summed up as follows:

- Evident decrease of international interest in the Balkan region, also affecting Serbia, and resulting in the withdrawal of the majority of international organizations, followed by allocation of funds towards different crisis areas.
- Shift in strategy – employing expertise and resources towards institution building and democratization of the country, mainly seen through assisting different governmental levels in improving services to the citizens and ensuring better performance with a goal to build up all inclusive and democratic society.
- Socio-economic aid – implementation of initiatives targeting different marginalized and vulnerable groups with an aim to over-bridge the most urgent problems in the society, such as high rate of unemployment, poverty and uneven economic development.

- Consensus building – initiatives aimed at reaching political consensus in defining priority topics and vision of the future of Serbia, with the main focus on inclusion of minority communities in the mainstream social and political processes;
- Maintaining multiethnic and multicultural characteristics of the society by providing possibility of nurturing religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of the Serbian society.

During the research, several additional priorities that are not fully recognized as such by the international organizations arose and can be listed as follows:

- Struggle to overcome high level of social and political dissatisfaction of citizens that brings about apathy, distrust in institutions and in overall democratic processes leading to low turn out on the elections.
- Lack of support to youth initiatives, which results unable to foster the creation of the new social and political elite as the most important prerequisite of future social change and value orientation.
- The need to redefine and reshape the international presence and the role of international organizations from donor – beneficiary to more partnership oriented one, with the aim of reaching balance between the main interests of different international stakeholders on one side and local needs and priorities on the other.
- The need to continue with efforts in building up strong civil society that will influence strategic orientation of the country, monitor pace of reforms and provide fresh ideas necessary for further modernization of the country.
- The need to focus more on the issues of organized crime, corruption, terrorism and regional security, aiming at providing incentives for regional cross border cooperation in regards to these topics.

Although the international presence and activity brought about significant improvements in the Serbian society, there are still areas which need to be covered more both by international and local engagement. Even more, the synergy between those two actors is of crucial importance and should be encouraged. The future initiatives should be based on partnerships and should follow local priorities both in planning and in implementation phase.

2. ITALIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SERBIA - POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS

When considering the effects of Italian engagement in Serbia there are few facts that immediately come into consideration. First, we have to acknowledge a successful and long lasting presence of Italian investments and donations in Serbia. Secondly, according to available data, the Italian cooperation in Serbia represents the second biggest donor after the United States, covering both private sector and social and political sphere. Evidently, Western Balkans represented challenging area for engagement of Italian expertise and financial means with an aim to strategically embed Italy and to assist Serbia in its transition towards consolidated democratic society. In that respect there is an encouraging belief that the Italian donors will continue their activities in Serbia. However, unlike other countries that decided to concentrate their investments only in certain areas

(e.g. Denmark in human rights, USA in democratization etc.) thus becoming quite visible to the general public as countries “specialized” in certain sectors, Italy never used its capabilities to do something remotely similar. One of our interlocutors stressed the fact that Italy could do more in order to promote its expertise in various areas ranging from law enforcement – with the emphasis on anti-mafia experience, decentralized cooperation, towards self-employment in agriculture etc., but according to him unfortunately no one is seriously considering such an option. As a result, Italy is engaged actively in numerous initiatives but without major effects, better yet without being recognized as a country with significant contributions in Serbia.

At the beginning, the Italian cooperation was mainly focused on initiatives and projects targeting democratization of the country, while nowadays the priority area seems to be oriented more toward economic development and money investment attempting to secure favourable position of the Italian companies in the Serbian market. The rationale behind this approach is that Serbia is far from being institutionally underdeveloped country, which in turn shifts attention of the Italian engagement towards fulfillment of the Serbian socio economic requirements. However, “passive approach or attempt to activate narrowly defined economic factors could slow down and even stop wider development processes, which would result in ambiguous expansion. Therefore, the adequate approach suggests combination of economic, cultural and social elements by transforming them in complementary chain of factors that comprise balanced development”¹

The Italian engagement in Serbia is hard to systematize, since there are many actors and initiatives that are not very well coordinated, which represents an obstacle in trying to assess the overall impact of the Italian presence. Such a conclusion was made after conducting series of interviews with members of different Italian entities, from representatives of the Embassy and the Cooperazione Italiana - as the main interlocutor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - to representatives of the regions, Italian NGOs operating in Serbia, and local NGOs beneficiaries of the Italian cooperation.

With regards to the Italian presence in Serbia, the research shows several main actors:

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Embassy and the Cooperazione Italiana - the priorities of these actors are set biannually and follow the official political agenda of Italy. The legal framework is set in the Law 49 and Law 84, the first one aiming to supporting mostly activities of Italian NGO's in Serbia, while the second one provides room for other actors to use available funds. It seems that the procedure of project evaluation and approval of funds is extremely complicated and slow, which as a result misses the momentum and makes the whole intervention lagging behind the needs of the day. Furthermore, as one of the interviewee stated “the problem is that Balkan region is no more among the priorities of the Italian official agenda”, which leads to decreasing financial means to civil society cooperation. According to numerous interlocutors, one of the main problems in developing the project, applying for the project/grant and obtaining the grant, lie in the complicated, time consuming, ill organized bureaucratic procedures. It has been said that from the moment in which an applicant sends the project proposal until the project is approved (which may take a year or two) the original project proposal becomes obsolete or certainly outdated.
- Italian Regions and Cities – the main characteristic of these actors is high level of autonomy in international cooperation and independent financial sources, which result in their direct cooperation with different entities in Serbia. As far as we grasped, the Regions also determine their own field of work, without having the obligation of consulting with the central government, and plan their aid accordingly;
- Civil society actors, including NGOs and trade unions – the main area of intervention is in the field of social care and welfare, local development, including enhancing the performance of

¹ *Report on Human development in Serbia 2005*, UNDP, p 7, translation by the authors.

local institutions and supporting initiatives of local NGOs, creating partnerships between different cities from Italy and Serbia, and working with vulnerable groups (elderly people, displaced and refugees, children, etc.)

Taking the perspective of an outsider, the Italian cooperation in Serbia seems to be a “system without a system”. Namely, during the research period and especially the interview phase, we have heard many controversial insights regarding the Italian scope of activities and have witnessed lack of knowledge and information about the activities of the other Italian organizations. Representatives of the Embassy and the Cooperazione Italiana just recently concluded the data base of Italian organizations and their projects in Serbia, but have also stressed that different Regions do not necessarily inform them about their involvement, which makes it harder to systematize the overall input and impact of the Italian cooperation. During the field research none of the interviewees stated that they have regular, or as a matter of fact any formal exchange of information with and among the other Italian organizations present in Serbia (except their own private contacts). Thus, there is a concern that this kind of uncoordinated work in certain cases might lead to duplication of projects and funds.

Such an approach to the international cooperation is probably a consequence of the fact that Italy represents one of the most decentralized countries where the cities and regions are very autonomous and create networks based on perceived interests and values. One of the interlocutors mentioned a phenomenon that Italian NGOs are much better interconnected and have better collaboration in Italy than in the countries of intervention, where they might perceive each other as competitors. Last but not the least, bearing in mind that Serbia is not an example of decentralized system, it is hard to follow and fully grasp the Italian model of cooperation.

The research revealed the following **main findings** of the Italian cooperation in Serbia:

- Strong presence of various Italian actors, but low level of public presence;
- Low level of coordination amongst different Italian actors / organizations;
- Lack of systematized initiatives;
- Stronger focus on economic development;
- Strong focus on the local level and on fostering local initiatives;
- Strong social component, i.e. working with vulnerable groups, redundant workers from former industrialized areas, IDPs, refugees, children, etc.
- Strengthening the role of trade unions and attempting to build up consensus over labour rights and labour legislation;

2.1. Added Value – the Italian role

In terms of contributions of the Italian involvement in Serbia and the projects implemented so far, added value can be seen in the following most important areas:

- **Decentralized cooperation** – promoted by active involvement of different regions (Toscana, Trentino Alto Adige, Emilia Romagna, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lombardia, Basilicata, etc.) gave a positive incentive for initiating and implementing programs on the local level, with the special emphasis on creating direct partnerships between the Italian and Serbian local actors. Such an engagement continues to emphasize the importance of decentralization and its effectiveness in democratization of the Serbian society since it uses the “bottom – up” approach, which proved to be the most appreciated by the beneficiaries.
- Italian organizations traditionally focus on the improvement of the **socio-economic situation** in Serbia rather than institutional building and democratization. In other words, the Italian

approach goes beyond the humanitarian and relief projects but advocates the strategy by which lowering ethnic tensions in certain municipalities can be successfully achieved through overall improvement of the economic and private enterprise environment.

- **Trade unions as counterparts** – seen in a number of successfully implemented projects regarding labour rights and trade unions. Through these projects local municipalities, trade unions and trade union members managed to create new contacts and in certain cases engage in direct cooperation. On the other hand certain projects dealt with additional education of redundant workers, re-qualification of workers, etc. Important accent has been given to combating unemployment and fostering of entrepreneurship in the traditionally industrial municipalities that have been affected by transitional downsizing of the workforce such as Nis, Kragujevac and Cacak.
- **Creating partnership relations** among cities in Serbia through different projects such as City-to-City initiative. This initiative, according to the statement of one representative of UNOPS in Serbia, aims at “reinforcing dialogue and cooperation between central government and local government by using the instrument of “planning in partnership” in defining project objectives and activities”. This approach encourages the private sector and civil society to take part in the planning phase of the interventions, “thereby increasing their capacity to respond to development needs and to encourage the trigger of interactive processes between the public administration and the various parts of the socio-economic reality”.
- **Providing expertise** for local actors in various areas by organizing training courses and study trips both in Italy and in the region. This activity enables beneficiaries to learn new skills, techniques, methods, obtain know how, which can be of crucial importance for their work in Serbia. Consequently, travelling outside of the country brings about change in the dominant perception and leads to adoption of so called European values.

3. LOCAL CONTEXT: A FOCUS ON ETHNIC MINORITIES

As stated in the introduction, one of the main purposes of the research conducted in Serbia was to assess the overall level of democratization achieved since the October 2000 events and to determine whether Serbia is on the good track towards becoming a fully consolidated society, one that can find its place in the European community. The efforts of international community have been sketched in the previous chapters and now it is time to shift attention towards depicting local context. Bearing in mind that democratization and human rights respect represent an extremely wide area, the authors of this article have decided to focus only on one specific notion – ethnic relations – since we believe that this particular phenomenon is of crucial importance for Serbia.

For the purposes of this research local context was assessed through interviews conducted with different stake holders as well as through the organization of a focus group in Belgrade that gathered officials, representatives of NGOs, representatives of Italian cooperation in Serbia and other relevant actors². Both interviews and focus group had an aim to determine current political and social atmosphere in the country, local insights regarding international efforts, specifically focusing attention towards Italian cooperation as well as to sketch out future activities and priorities. In that respect, findings gathered from interviews and focus group are incorporated in this chapter of the article. The methodology chosen gave us the opportunity to organize fruitful and open discussion and to deepen the knowledge on the issues of our specific interest.

² The list of focus group members is included in Appendix 1.

According to all available data, research conducted, and most of all, knowledge about the current political and social situation in the country, the hypothesis is self evident - the goal of achieving consolidated, democratic society has not been fully implemented yet, even though grand efforts have been engaged and certain level of breakthrough has been so far accomplished. Furthermore, the society is still facing number of hurdles, including the dissolution of the State Union, Kosovo future status talks ongoing, the Hague tribunal cooperation, internal political divisions, increasing level of radicalization of the country, high level of apathy, low living conditions and last but not least overall poverty. Furthermore, one of the priorities of the country certainly lies in the attempt to create fully inclusive society and the state where all the citizens would feel equal, with their cultural and religious diversities maintained. At the end, the task to build up a prosperous society remains and it can be achieved only when the above mentioned preconditions are fully met.

A recognized fact valid for the majority of the contemporary societies entails that the future of different societies depends upon how that specific society decides to interact with multiple environments. Even more, we can say that this statement is valid for each society, since modern times brought about many different environments followed by more and more subtle needs. In that respect, sustainable society can be achieved only to the extent to which, being a human community, it commits to the preservation of human rights and dignity. Emphasis on the human rights protection and equality treatment of different communities has been strongly put forward and represents a modern requirement in every democratic society. In that respect, Serbia, as a post conflict society is still struggling to find its own operational mechanisms for protection and improvement of human rights of all of its citizens.³

Serbia represents a multiethnic, multicultural and multi confessional society, where 17% of the overall population belongs to members of different ethnic groups. The country is well known to have the largest number of national minorities in the region of South East Europe, which gives evidence about country's ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, but also speaks about the necessity to actively engage in building of trust and increasing knowledge between different communities⁴. The largest ethnic groups besides the Serbs that compose 83% of the population, are Hungarians, Albanians and Bosniaks (4%, 0,8%, 1,8% respectively). The several most visible characteristics that compose ethnic mosaic of Serbia can be summed up as follows:

- Geographical disposition – the majority of ethnic communities are concentrated in areas that are bordering with the neighboring countries.
- High level of distrust and ethnic distance, which is a direct result of conflicts and wars that followed dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.
- Legacy of ethno nationalism, which was promoted by the political elites in the former Yugoslav republics, especially in Serbia, whose consequences will be hard to overcome in foreseeable future.

During the period of Milosevic's regime, national minorities have felt threatened and often endangered. It is rather obvious to claim that members of different ethnic groups did not perceive Serbia as their own country and were deeply dissatisfied with their status. In particular, this period brought about increase of ethnic tensions, large ethnic distance and resulted in the creation of a

³ "Gender and Minority Overview in Serbia 2005" Report for the year 2005 made by Cooperazione Italiana and Forum for Ethnic Relations available at: www.fer.org.yu.

⁴ Report deals with Serbia without focusing on the provinces of Kosovo and Metohija nor Vojvodina since the project of COOPI was developed only on the territory of East Serbia (Knjaževac, Zajecar, Pirot, Dimitrovgrad, Bosilegrad, Kladovo) and Southwest Serbia (Novi Pazar, Raška, Prijepolje, Priboj) available at: www.fer.org.yu.

sharp division between majority (Serbs) and minorities (including all ethnic minorities living in Serbia). The democratic changes in the year 2000 made an end to aggressive nationalistic approach in dealing with national minorities and the new authorities proclaimed improving of ethnic relations as one of their main priorities. In that respect, many positive steps have been made and a record of progress can be seen both at the institutional level and in the implementation phase. In the past five years, relevant authorities have focused their attention towards creating operational and institutional framework that would accommodate national minorities' most important needs. On the institutional level, several crucial laws and regulations have been passed, including laws and procedures passed in the field of minority protection, laws and procedures passed in the area of inclusion of marginalized groups including women, laws and procedures aimed at stimulating greater participation of citizens into social and political life etc.

However, several dilemmas are burdening the process of achieving satisfactory level of minority protection and their inclusion into social and political life. The most important task lies in finding operational mechanism to help *other*, i.e. those who do not belong to the majority to feel like inseparable and equal part of the society. This mission is in the core of modern liberal political tradition, which puts the *citizen* into the centre of attention, portraying him/her as the subject and object of universal moral values, rights and obligations, therefore stripped of any religious, cultural or any other collective inclinations and preferences. The principle of equality, praised in all Western societies insists on equal rights to all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, religion, race, sex, etc. The diverse and complex society such as Serbia, which is additionally burdened with the recent history of grave ethnic conflicts and hatred, face an extremely difficult challenge of finding the best possible policies for building trust relations, protection of the *other(s)* and developing instruments and mechanisms that will enable different groups to guard their own specificities while being equal citizens of the country.

Ethnic tensions can be successfully resolved only if the solid legal framework with effective mechanisms for implementation is set, with additional precondition of greater support coming from the civil society organizations and other important actors willing to contribute to this process. In the past six years, the Serbian authorities have focused greater attention towards adopting laws that would enhance the level of minority protection and would meet standards of developed countries. In that respect, a noteworthy progress has been made. The legal structure is made up of the following main acts:

- Serbia and Montenegro Charter of Human and Minority Rights and Civic Freedoms.
- Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities that was adopted on the State Union level but practically applicable for the territory of Serbia since Montenegro was pursuing its own minority policy.
- Other laws and regulations relevant for the protection of minority rights.

As stated above, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities was adopted on the State Union level, but, by the decision of the Serbian Constitutional Court this act has been incorporated into Serbian legal system and represents one of the foundations of the Serbian minority policy. The law assures cultural rights of minorities and introduces their cultural autonomy. The law guarantees collective rights. Some of the representatives of ethnic minorities state that this is not good solution, since emphasis on the collective rights will necessarily lead to loosing their individual rights.⁵

⁵ Human Development Report, UNDP, p 46, Belgrade, 2005

Moreover, one of the most important new instruments is introduction of the National Minority Councils, who have been given authority to secure and improve effective participation of national minorities in decision making process. The Law stipulates that every national minority can establish its own National Minority Councils for the purpose of protecting their own rights and interests and so far almost all national communities have used this right including the Hungarians, the Croats, the Romanians, the Bosnians, the Albanians etc. The Councils have the competence to decide about the use of language, introduction of education on minority language, maintaining media on minority languages and nurturing of their cultural and traditional specificities.

Moreover, the minority protection issues are well developed in comparison to the past, and several key laws have been adopted in the Serbian Parliament, with an aim to further improve situation in this field and provide special rights to national minorities i.e. including education laws, the law on the Official Use of Languages and Alphabets, The Broadcasting Law, Deputy Election Law, the Textbook and Other Teaching Aids Law, Deputy Election Law, The Identity Card Law, The Criminal Code Law, The Local Self Government Law, etc.

According to the OSCE assessment, significant progress has been made to create a legislative framework for the protection of minority rights which reflects European and international standards⁶. Legal and institutional frameworks as well as the new approach towards the issues of ethnic minority protection have been changed in order to correspond better to the Serbian reality. Positive effects of such a shift can be seen in practice. The level of inter ethnic conflicts is decreasing, while there are evidence of slow but steady increase in the level of engagement of national minorities into political and social life of the country.

However, the situation is far from being stable and the process is yet to be finished. Many dilemmas still remain open, showing that oversights made in the past need to be changed in the near future. Firstly, the current Election Law sets the threshold of 5% for entering the parliament, which represents mission impossible for national minorities and which resulted in absence of their representatives in the Serbian Assembly. This evident flaw has been changed with the new provision that sets the so called natural census for national minorities to enter the Parliament. Nonetheless, this provision will be used only when the new elections will be called, until when the national minorities will remain without political representation in the Parliament. Secondly, the Law on National Minorities postulates that 10.000 signatures are needed in order to constitute the National Minority Councils, which discriminates the so called small minorities and brings about new division between big and small national minorities. According to the statements of officials from the Ministry for Human and Minorities Rights, this provision will be changed in the near future.

The dissolution of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro once again opened the question of effective protection of national minorities. According to the opinion of one of the participants of the Belgrade focus group, there is a legal chaos in the area of minority protection, and the main task of the newly formed Republic of Serbia is to finalize legal framework that will be effective and operational. The most important task remains to be introduction of, as many as possible, affirmative measures that will enable full integration of national minorities into the mainstream political and social processes. One of the attempts to fulfill this task has been made in 2004, when the Serbian Government formed the Ethnic Minorities Council, with an aim to enhance and protect interests of national minorities.⁷ However, the legal confusion is burdening these processes, and this is especially evident after the dissolution of the State Union. In the past three years, the State Union

⁶ OSCE, *Annual Report 2005*.

⁷ *Human Development Report*, UNDP, p 47.

has formed the Ministry for Human Rights and Minorities, which was in charge of dealing with the most important issues relevant to the minority protection and implementation of the international and domestic legislation, with an aim to develop a new minority policy for Serbia. The Serbian Government decided that such a Ministry is not needed and has shifted issues of minority protection to the three existing Republican Ministries (Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Local Self Government and Ministry of Culture). Furthermore, the Human and Minority Rights Agency has been formed with an aim to foresee implementation of the law(s) in the area of human and minority rights, projecting the new policies in this field and taking care of the harmonization of local legislation with the international legal framework. So far, no one has given any reasonable explanation why Serbia does not need the Ministry for minority rights. At the same time, Montenegro who is a multiethnic society too, has established a Ministry long ago thus demonstrating a commitment to effectively deal with the minority issues.

On the other hand, the dominant opinion of the members of national minorities is that the legal and institutional framework in Serbia has been significantly improved, even though a series of new laws and regulations still need to be passed. However, the biggest obstacle lies not in the legislative framework but in the implementation phase. Many good solutions remain only letters in the paper. We will briefly present one example. The Law on Local Self Government envisaged the creation of the Councils for Inter Ethnic Relations on the municipal level, as a tool to improve interethnic relations especially in the areas with ethnically mixed population. According to this Law, every municipality has the possibility to form the above mentioned Council and this provision should be incorporated into municipality Statutes. Nevertheless, in practice, this institution still has not gained importance it deserves. Many of the municipalities have passed the decision to establish the Councils, but most often they exist only on paper or their work is still in the early stage and results are yet to be expected.

As one of the participants of the focus group stressed, the most visible problems is that Laws that are passed without consultation, usually even without conducting an assessment studies that would determine priorities of the national minorities. Furthermore, the pattern of importing laws that were drafted somewhere else, for another case, which do not correspond with the Serbian reality at all, has been marked as one of the characteristic of international involvement in this field. The dominant opinion of the ethnic relations' experts mentioned also during the seminar stresses the importance of building institutions for the effective ethnic conflict management and necessity to adopt a detailed and precise strategy for the implementation of minority policy, which is at present missing. Moreover, one of the participants expressed great concern regarding the tendency of decreasing the institutional level of minority protection, adding that it is usually a signal that a society is led by the nationalists. The other problem, according to the same participant, lies in the incapable national minority leadership, whose only interest lies in struggling over political influence. In his opinion, ethnic relations in Serbia became subject of a daily political and public trade. Moreover, another participant also stressed the fact that the national minority leaders tend to exploit their status and are often rejecting cooperation with the others – both minorities and majority - and keep on insisting on the territorial autonomy for their respective group. In this respect, we noticed a lack of good will to engage in a dialogue with the central authorities aiming at resolving long term status relations between 'minority and majority'.

At the end of this part, several key characteristics of ethnic minority relations can be summed up as follows:

- A greater engagement of national minorities at the local level and central level;
- No consensus or dialogue between the national minorities on the strategy for the joint action in enforcing issues on the official agenda;
- “Small” vs. “big” minorities;

- Divisions within national minorities and their respective political and intellectual elite, that are reflected also within the National Minority Councils;
- Dissatisfaction with the level of legal implementation and the overall status of the national minorities.

The second topic on the focus group agenda was designed around the influence and support of the international community regarding the democratization process, specifically focusing on ethnic relations. The overall aim was to determine what has been done so far and to find out the best possible methods for dealing with this topic in the future. Moreover, we attempted to find out whether international community perceives ethnic relations as one of the key issues or they have shifted their attention. The strongest emphasis was given to the efforts of Italian cooperation and Italian organizations operating in Serbia, since this was a starting point of the research. Additionally, focus group served to determine level of achieved cooperation between Serbian and Italian actors, to find out best practices, shortcomings that should be overcome and to set the common ground for the future initiatives.

Participants of the focus group almost unanimously stressed that international community shows a lack of interest towards the area of ethnic relations, thus making their own priority list that includes other topics. This seems to be especially true for the Italian cooperation and Italian organizations. According to the expressed opinion of one of the Italian representatives, the strongest interest of Italy lies in the area of economy, which is followed by allocation of funds and energy mostly towards such projects. Moreover, strong message has been sent – ethnic minorities and ethnic relations for sure are not the priority in Serbia. Italy is very much aware of the fact that ethnic relations represent very important aspect for the stabilization of a country, but, according to their assessment Serbia does not need assistance in this field, since many positive actions have already been implemented. Therefore, ethnic relations are Italy's concern only in Kosovo, where ethnic tensions still represent one of the greatest obstacles for the democratization of the province.

As far as cooperation with the Italian organizations is concerned, we have noticed a certain degree of dissatisfaction on the part of local experts and NGO activists, mainly along the same lines as those pointed out in the previous chapters of the paper. During the Milosevic period Italy was one of the major contributors of the Serbian civil society and Italy became a unique regional centre, gathering young intellectuals and leaders and providing them with opportunity to gain new skills and knowledge. An Italian representative agreed that Italy is extremely good in emergency phase, but not so skilful in planning the following ones.

One of the major recognized problems is that Italian organizations usually want to accomplish great many goals with one single project, which is often not possible in Serbia. Italy has a full bucket of nice ideas, good initiatives, but without measurable institutional and economic effects. As a consequence, local beneficiaries get discouraged and disappointed and often express reluctance to continue cooperation with Italian organizations. Another problem, according to the opinion of the focus group members, is that there is no clear standard in working with Italian organizations. Goals and objectives change quite often, mostly without consultation with local partners. Furthermore, participants have stressed that they see Italy active only in the economic sphere, but have also expressed dissatisfaction with the level of that cooperation. As one of the participants said “either Italy is not truly interested to invest in Serbia or it is not willing to listen to the locals”. One of the participants stressed that the economic cooperation with Italy should be a priority, since there is a recognized tendency of Italian business to shift their companies from border areas in Romania to Serbia that is not EU member. Consequently, Serbia on the other hand needs to develop a precise and detailed strategy to attract investments and Italy should show in practice its willingness to invest in Serbia. However, the same participant stressed that so far there is no institutional cooperation with Italy. For example, Italian Embassy in Belgrade, even though Italy is one of the

founding members of EU, did not show interest to help Committee for EU integration in the Serbian parliament.

A problem underlined several times during the focus group, but also during previous research, is the lack of on homogeneous project proposal procedure and long decision process, which cause problems for local NGOs, since they do not know which form or approach should be used to apply for funds. Participants stressed that it is much easier to cooperate with states that have developed a system – there is a procedure and local actors are required to follow precise instructions.

The overall conclusion of the research conducted is that it is necessary to continue cooperating with the Italian organizations since there are many perceived joint interests and goals that will be easier fulfilled in partnership. In that respect, the authors of this article believe that Italian organizations working in Serbia should consider **establishing a Coordination office in Serbia**, with an aim to gather all relevant information, establish strategic plans, set up priorities based also on local needs and engage in successful and fruitful cooperation. Secondly, we stress that the role of Italy in the future should be to position itself as a **regional mediator** since it has great capacity in lobbying and has strong and friendly relations with all countries in the Western Balkans. At the end, Italy can significantly contribute in further democratization of the Serbian society, especially in reform of the judiciary system and its struggle attempt to fight organized crime, including trafficking of human beings on the regional level.