

Evaluation of ECMI's Kosovo/a Civil Society Project Pristina, Kosovo, 5-8 October 2003

The following evaluation was conducted in accordance with terms of reference furnished by the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI).

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Prof Tom Gallagher holds a Chair in Peace and Conflict Studies at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. He is an expert on the problems of governance in South-East-Europe and has published several books on the response of major states and international bodies towards crises in the region from 1991 onwards. In 2001 he helped draw up a Conflict Prevention Strategy for the Western Balkans commissioned by the British Prime Minister's Office.

Relationship of evaluators to ECMI:

Dr Caplan conducted two earlier reviews of the project: one solicited by ECMI for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy on the basis of a meeting of the Standing Technical Working Group (STWG) held in July 2001 in Flensburg, Germany, and another on the basis of two meetings of the STWG held in December 2002 in Pristina as part of ECMI's annual review process. The evaluator is also a member of the International Editorial Board of the *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, which is published by ECMI. Professor Gallagher has been an invited speaker at several conferences organized by the ECMI.

Background:

ECMI's Kosovo/a Civil Society Project was launched at the end of 2000 against a backdrop of chronic inter-ethnic tension and in anticipation of UNMIK's establishment of Provisional Institutions for Self-Government (PISG) in 2001. ECMI's project was meant to be a policy-orientated forum for Kosovo civil society with the three-fold goal of 1) empowering civil society to engage more actively in the policy-making process, both international and domestic; 2) increasing the accountability, transparency, and responsiveness of UNMIK (and later the PISG) to local constituents; and 3) promoting inter-ethnic and inter-party dialogue and cooperation in relation to the public policy-making process.

Since the time of the project's launch, inter-ethnic tensions have eased across Kosovo, despite sporadic attacks directed mainly at vulnerable minority members. As a result, deliberation about policy issues is being conducted increasingly on the basis of interest and need rather than solely or even principally on the basis of ethnic considerations. At the same time, Kosovo's demographic profile, with the youngest population in Europe and a large shift in population from the countryside to Pristina and several other large urban centres, is focussing public attention increasingly on the provision of essential services and on the need to secure energy and water resources

for a population that continues to grow owing to the return of refugees and a slowing, but still high, birth-rate.

Meanwhile, there has been a lack of coordination between UNMIK and the PISG and also between the Assembly elected in 2001 and many of the ministries. This has not enhanced the process of establishing autonomous self-government for Kosovo. Nor has it made it any easier for meaningful dialogue to get under way between Belgrade and Pristina over the future status of Kosovo and with respect to practical governance issues that can only be resolved by dialogue and greater understanding between the two entities.

Against this backdrop, the aims and activities of ECMI's Kosovo/a Civil Society Project continue to be highly relevant.

Evaluators' activities:

The evaluators were briefed on the current status of the project by the resident ECMI director and two local staff on 4 and 5 October. The evaluators observed one plenary session of the STWG (now called the 'Civic Forum'), on 6 October, and one meeting of the Expert Group on Economic Development and Labour, on 8 October, both held in Pristina. In addition, the evaluators interviewed five members of the Civic Forum to discuss their perceptions of the project as well as Kosovar and international participants who are not members of the Civic Forum but who were present at the meeting and are familiar with the work of the project.

Observations:

a) The activities that we observed correspond to the project aims and activities as set out in the original project outline and indicate that ECMI has succeeded in establishing a unique and valuable civil society forum. Both the Civic Forum and the Expert Group meetings were well attended (including significant minority member participation) and both were characterized by active, focussed, and constructive discussion—the first on the topic of reform of local self-government legislation, the second on the topic of customs. One evaluator (Caplan), who has been observing the work of the project since its inception, was struck by the steady progress that has been made towards 'Kosovarization' of the project: in contrast to just 10 months ago, the meetings were led entirely by Kosovar members of the Civic Forum and Expert Group—evidence of the local capacity that the project has helped to build. The evaluators were also impressed by the fact that debate about policy issues was not hampered by ethnic competition, although ethnic considerations, reasonably enough, were not entirely absent from discussion either. Indeed, as our interviews with participants confirmed, there has been a positive evolution of dynamics within the group, with minority participants, and Serbs in particular, now more integrated.

b) The widening scope of activities that the Kosovo/a Civil Society Project is responsible for provides a strong indication that the funding grant has been spent in accordance with the original project budget. (One possibly telling fact noted by the evaluators was that the per diem available to the members of the Civic Forum for their full-attendance at meetings has been cut in half but this has not adversely affected turnout.)

c) The level of funding available appears adequate for the project to maintain its activities at current levels, although a lot of time appears to be spent by the project director (perhaps unavoidably so) in ensuring that funding does not dry up over the medium term. For the project to sustain its momentum, however, it will need to raise its profile and widen its activities. There are plans to form expert groups to shadow all nine ministries currently in existence. Thought is also being given to how best to pursue 'outreach' work into the wider society. This could take different forms, including holding local forums to survey opinion on important policy issues, liaising more closely with the municipalities, and perhaps even launching regional pilot schemes around issues such as energy provision, where best practice can be secured by pooling regional resources. The project is also in an excellent position to nurture and encourage consumer awareness so that public opinion focuses on the provision and quality of services provided by the administration and major utilities rather than on issues of high politics that can often appear to be non-negotiable ones.

Obviously if the Civic Forum is to expand its remit in some of these ways, funding will have to match the added responsibilities. Long-term financial support would probably also have to be secured in order to enable the ECMI Pristina office to devote full attention to these added responsibilities.

d) The Civic Forum is helping to overcome normal tensions between parties, NGOs, and state organs by providing a constructive arena for policy debate and formulation: open forums, closed working group sessions, and occasional seminars associated with ECMI's School of Politics (the latter with the support of the Council of Europe).

ECMI has negotiated skilfully with political parties to try and ensure that they send representatives of reasonably high quality to the Civic Forum. Our observations suggest that some of the participants may be leading political players in the time ahead, so this consensual experience may well be invaluable in shaping their approach to political engagement and decision-making.

The Civic Forum is near to achieving local ownership. The Memorandum of Cooperation agreed in 2002 establishes the goals of the Civic Forum and how the body is to be conducted. The Rules of Procedure have been carefully devised and against such a background the Civic Forum has evolved without suffering any internal strain or conflict worthy of comment. The strong local input can only strengthen the credibility of many of its recommendations.

e) There is abundant evidence that the project is contributing greatly to the routine of cross-party and NGO-Assembly cooperation in Kosovo. Within the Expert Groups, as noted above, civil servants, NGO members, and elected representatives have become accustomed to expressing themselves in non-partisan ways. Relationship-building and the discovery of common approaches to major policy issues is bound to prove of value in dealing realistically with a range of policy challenges, some of them very daunting ones.

Perhaps one of the most creative roles of the Civic Forum project is to explore and debate issues that are of pressing concern to ordinary citizens. Foremost among these are the provision of services, acute problems with the public infrastructure, and economic initiatives capable of widening the employment base. One Civic Forum

member, a doctor and a member of Pristina's Assembly, expressed the need to build on these efforts and 'encourage people to raise their voices so that when we deal with issues, we can expect citizens' support'. The nature of the Civic Forum's membership means that it is likely that some local concerns and needs are being channelled into central ministries and an Assembly often viewed as being preoccupied with 'high politics'. With additional funding and logistical support, there is considerable potential for the Civic Forum to increase its outreach work at the level of ordinary society, given the reputation it has already acquired for bringing a practical approach to issues of public provision.

f) Our concerns about the project are minor and very few. We have already mentioned the need to establish a secure funding base. It seems to us that the costs associated with the project are low and the return on investment actually and potentially high. A second concern is the impact of the Civic Forum on the public policy-making process. ECMI should be encouraged to explore ways in which this impact can be enhanced: perhaps through greater use of the local media, for instance through publication of periodic opinion pieces in the leading newspapers (*Zeri, Koha Ditore*) by Civic Forum members discussing issues and recommendations that have been explored recently within the Civic Forum. Another suggestion would be to conduct some of the Civic Forums in municipalities outside of Pristina, thus exposing more Kosovars to the mechanics of democratic citizens' debate.

Conclusions:

ECMI's Kosovo/a Civil Society Project, with its focus on public policy issues that impact on people's lives, is a very timely development. It is taking imaginative and well-executed steps to involve civil society actors in the elaboration of public policy on a cross-ethnic basis. Strong ethnic minority participation is a noticeable aspect of the Civic Forum's work. The evaluators were impressed by the absence of any palpable strain or tension of an ethnic character at the sessions they attended and several participants with whom they talked confirmed this impression.

Through the Expert Groups that shadow particular ministries and their plenary sessions, the Civic Forum is seeking to widen societal involvement in the process of rebuilding a society that has witnessed little meaningful debate on many of the acute problems affecting daily living for nearly twenty years. Bringing elected representatives and NGO members together in this way, and not overlooking the contribution of the general public, is a difficult-enough task in the most well-ordered of societies. Competence and acute sensitivity to local conditions have marked the efforts of the local ECMI office in Kosovo and its director as they have facilitated, and widened the scope and membership, of this initiative.

The Kosovo/a Civil Society Project is a unique and promising initiative that addresses often urgent policy issues that are not currently receiving the attention they deserve because of elite preoccupation with constitutional matters. It is clear that there is support for this type of initiative and that it has released energies and widened expectations among the membership about how the project can grow and increase its relevance in Kosovo. The evaluators see the ECMI project as contributing in significant ways to the normalisation of public life in a post-conflict society. An imaginative approach for securing cooperation and dialogue within and between the main ethnic groups, across party lines, and among different sectoral interests, has

been devised. The project's aim of improving the quality of policy-making by widening participation is a difficult one to achieve. Nevertheless, it has obtained the backing of a range of individuals, some of them strategically placed in emerging institutions, and all seemingly ready to contribute towards the shaping of an informed public opinion on critical policy questions. No other initiative has sought to make government accountable to citizens in the way the Kosovo/a Civil Society Project has set out to do. It is enormously important for the normalisation of Kosovo that the Forum at expert group and plenary level is an inter-ethnic body. A lot of positive energy has been released by this initiative and the evaluators are in no doubt that it deserves continuing support from the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and indeed other sponsors.

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