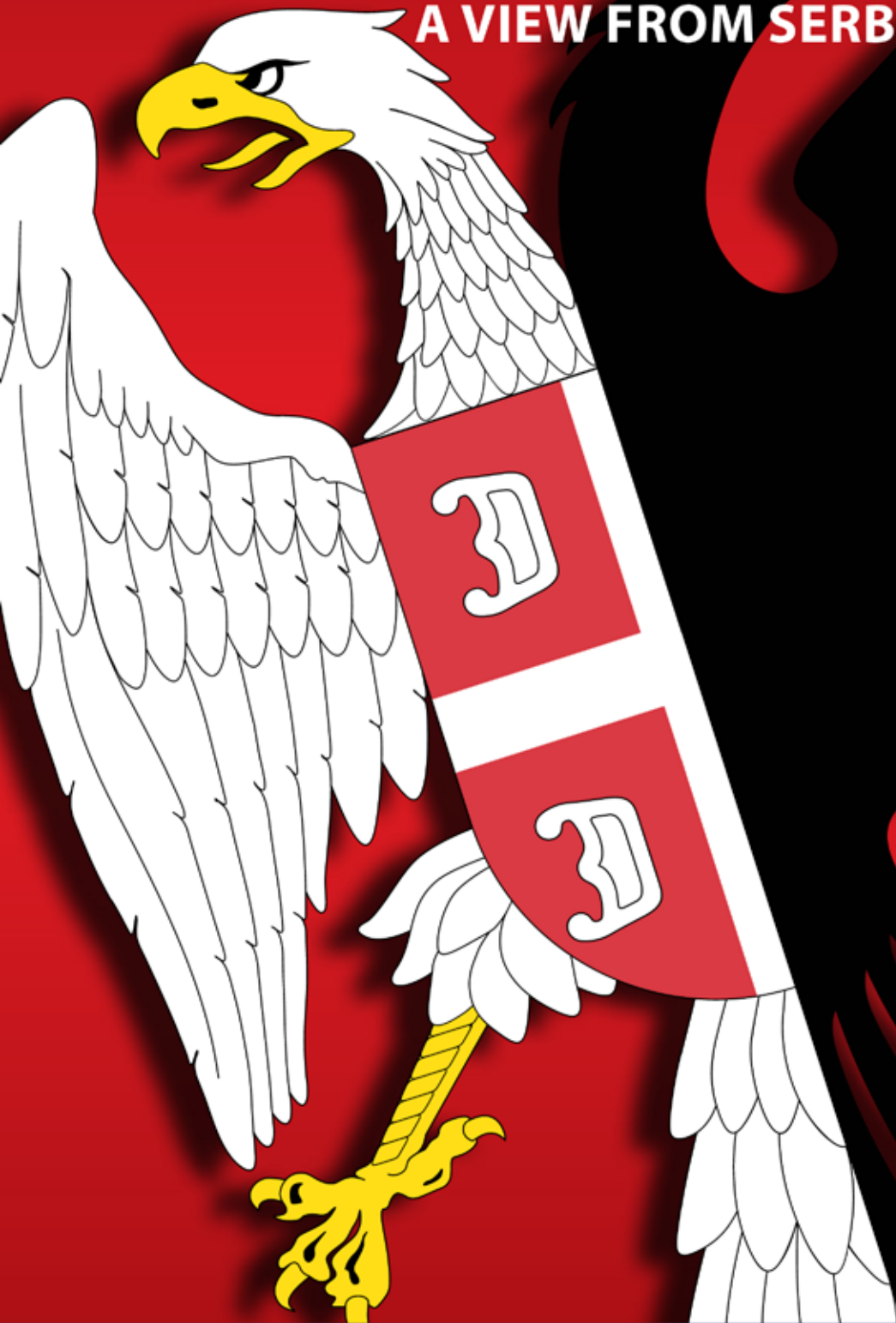


SERBIAN-ALBANIAN RELATIONS: STATE AND PERSPECTIVES

A VIEW FROM SERBIA



Little is known and even less written about the relations between Serbia and Albania. This Paper represents an effort of the ISAC Fund to address another sensitive topic of regional cooperation. It strives to show that there are numerous issues in bilateral relations between Serbia and Albania which should not wait for the Kosovo issue to be finally settled.

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A VIEW FROM SERBIA

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, relations between Serbs and Albanians have been to a great extent influenced by the Ottoman legacy with the dispersed ethnic and religious communities intertwining in a relatively geographically small area. The creation of nations-states at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century created another dividing line of self-identification of communities and competing national narratives of history, tradition and national interests. After the Second World War, the relationship between Yugoslavia and Albania from 1948 to 1991 was characterized by the ideological confrontations between the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and the Communist Party of Albania, creating additional distance among the two peoples and societies. The dissolution of Yugoslavia after 1991 and the rise of ethnicity-based politics in the region widened additionally the antagonism between Serbs and Albanians. This was especially evident and exacerbated by the conflicts in Kosovo which further deepened the mutual distrust.

Overcoming pasts should be one of the most important tasks of pro-European political elites in Serbia and Albania. Fostering the dialogue between Serbia and Albania should contribute to bridging the gap in mutual perceptions and exploring ways and means for the improvement of relations. This would not only benefit the stability and development of the region but also assist the European integration process as co-operation between countries in the Western Balkan (WB) region is a necessity for their membership prospects.

BILATERAL RELATIONS 1990-2010

The 1990s were cast by poor relations between Serbia and Albania, with the Kosovo issue looming large for most of the period in question. Mutual diplomatic relations were cut-off on 17 April 1999, during the NATO air campaign and the escalation of the Kosovo crisis. However, following the change of regime in Belgrade in early October 2000, diplomatic relations resumed with Albania on 17 January 2001, and a series of meetings between high officials took place¹. These meetings aimed at intensifying co-operation and overcoming open issues in bilateral relations. In December 2004, Vuk Drašković, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, paid the first official visit to Albania since 1948. In return, Kastriot Islami, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, repaid the visit to Belgrade in May 2005. This was seen as the most important breakthrough in bilateral relations between Serbia and Albania. Further meetings between ministers of foreign affairs of the two countries followed, at both bilateral, on the fringes of multilateral forums, and on the multilateral level. However, after the declaration of independence of Kosovo on 17 February 2008, the relationship stalled once again since Albania was perceived in Belgrade as one of the prime promoters of Kosovo independence.

Recently, a positive change became evident: on 11 March 2010, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania Ilir Meta met with his Serbian counterpart Vuk Jeremić and Serbian President Boris Tadić in Belgrade. Minister Meta also visited Albanian populated parts of Southern Serbia and spoke with local leaders of Albanian community. Currently, there are discussions of a possible visit of President Tadić to Albania. These developments promise fresh prospects in relations between the two countries. Albania recently sent a new Ambassador to Serbia, in a move that openly suggested a necessity for Serbia to raise the level of its own diplomatic representation from the current chargé d'affaires in Tirana to the ambassadorial level. On 28th June 2010, when President Tadić has appointed Mirosljub Zarić for the ambassador of the Republic of Serbia in Albania.

1) For instance, the meeting of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić with Albanian Prime Minister Ilir Meta in Greece in 2001, the unofficial visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the FR Yugoslavia Goran Svilanović to Albania etc.

SERBIA AND ALBANIA IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The main foreign policy priority of both countries is eventual membership to the European Union. In that regard, Albania applied for membership to the European Union on 29 April 2009. After submitting to the European Commission its answers to the Questionnaire on accession preparations on 14 April 2010, Albania is now waiting for the Commission's opinion on accession to the Council, expected in the course of 2010. Serbia submitted its application for membership to the EU eight months later, on 22 December 2010. EU member states are in the process of ratifying the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Serbia, but it is still the question when will the Commission start the screening process of Serbia. At the moment, Albania is ahead of Serbia on the EU integrations path.

Adhering to the Europeanism both Serbia and Albania are eager to prove their commitment to improved regional co-operation. They participate in the work of various regional bodies and organizations, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the South Eastern Europe Co-operation Process (SEECP), the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), the Central European Free Trade Agreement 2006 (CEFTA), the South East Europe Co-operation Initiative (SECI), the Energy Community, etc. Their contribution to strengthening stability in the region helps pave the way to faster EU accession.

In the field of security, the situation is somewhat different. Unlike Albania, Serbia has declared "military neutrality" and does not see the accession to NATO as its foreign policy priority. Notwithstanding this, however, Serbia is a member of the NATO Partnership for Peace program, and is actively cooperating with many NATO member states, including the United States. As of 2008 Serbia obtained an observer status in the Adriatic Charter, which is an association formed by Albania, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia and the United States of America in 2003 to improve cooperation with NATO and to advance Euro-Atlantic integrations. Importantly also, Albania is a member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. While Albania has a strong partnership with the United States of America, Serbian President spoke about four pillars of its foreign policy (the EU, USA, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China), suggesting wider and a more dispersed foreign policy orientation, which, however, is not mentioned in any official documents of the Republic of Serbia.

COOPERATION BETWEEN SERBIA AND ALBANIA

After 2005, agreements on avoiding double taxation, economic and trade cooperation, cooperation in tourism, as well as the Protocol on Cooperation of Chambers of Commerce, have all been signed. In 2006, the Protocol on Cooperation between the Ministries of Justice of Serbia and Albania was also signed. During the last visit of Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilir Meta to Serbia in March 2010, he and Serbian Minister of Interior, Ivica Dačić, have signed the important Agreement on Cooperation in Fighting Organized Crime, International Illegal Drug Trafficking and International Terrorism. The signing of the important Agreement on Cooperation in Fighting Organized Crime, International Illegal Drug Trafficking and International Terrorism is expected

a) Economic cooperation²

Similar economic challenges face both countries. In order to increase their economic performance and the level of preparedness for the EU Single Market, both countries strive to improve their external economic cooperation. The first step towards improved bilateral cooperation was made on 1 August 2004 when the Free Trade agreement came into force. Then, at the end of 2006 both countries became members of CEFTA. Since 2002, and especially in the last five years with the free trade regime in power, a modest increase in foreign-trade exchange is evident. It ranges annually from 22 million US dollars in 2005 to 75 million in 2009, with Serbia having a trade surplus (64 million US dollars in 2009) and with Albania rising from the 27th to the 23rd place among Serbia's most important economic partners. Since 2005, the Serbian Chamber of Commerce (SCC) increased its activities towards the Albanian market. In February 2005, the SCC signed a Cooperation agreement with the Albanian Union of Chambers, while later that year the SCC formed its Section for Albania.

2) Source: Serbian Chamber of Commerce - Economic Foreign Relations Board, Information about Economic Cooperation Serbia-Albania, March 2010

Trade exchange structure 1998-2009 (In thousands of USD)

Year	Serbia's export to Albania	Albania's export to Serbia	Total
1998	757	317	1.074
1999	281	29	310
2000	232	1	233
2001	1.132	16	1.148
2002	6.399	89	6.488
2003	14.572	329	14.901
2004	16.241	640	16.881
2005	21.667	2.124	23.791
2006	34.485	4.695	39.180
2007	80.834	11.118	91.952
2008	76.785	13.292	90.077
2009	70.035	6.486	76.521

Trade exchange Serbia – Albania 2009 – main exchange product

Serbian export to Albania	Albanian export to Serbia
Iron products and Iron sewage (15,4%)	Hot-rolled bars with deformations (36, 3%)
Yellow corn (12,9%)	Wooden furniture for bedrooms (15, 7%)
Electric energy (7, 7%)	Soft oils for further processing (12,05)
Non-alcoholic drinks (3, 4%)	Fresh watermelons
Detergents for dishes and clothes	Male shoes
Wheat flour	Oriental tobacco
Barrels, cans, boxes and similar containers under 50 litres	Concrete, iron
Ceramic roof tiles	Fresh melons
Tin, iron and steel constructions	Salt
Paper, impregnated cardboard	Plants and plant parts for further industrial processing
Cast iron sewage and remains	Female jeans trousers
Diesel fuels	Female cotton trousers
Medicines	Leather shoes
Ice-cream	Hot-rolled profiles(height from 80mm to 220mm)
Flour, grits products and similar	Aluminium alloy profiles
Books, brochures etc	Male cotton trousers
Potato	Hot-rolled profiles(height over 80mm)

Main exporters from Serbia to Albania/Main importers from Albania to Serbia (Serbian companies)

Main exporters from Serbia to Albania 2009	Main importers from Albania to Serbia 2009.godini
Steel Impex, Bačka Palanka	Mundial Beograd
ČEZ Srbija	Feromet, Beograd
GEN-I Beograd	Novometal, Novi Sad
Ball Pakovanja, Beograd	Koncern Farmakom, Šabac
Rauch Sokovi, Koceljeva	Četnik Valjevo
Novi Balkan, Novi Sad	HIP Petrohemija, Pančevo
Hemofarm Vršac	RP Tehnometal, Beograd
Potisje, Kanjiža	Steel Impex, Bačka Palanka
Beohemija, Beograd	Braća Ilić, Bačka Palanka
Rudnap, Beograd	T P Gagi, V.Trnovac, Bujanovac

In recent years some prominent Serbian companies entered the Albanian market: Galeb Group, Com-trade computers, Delta Maxi (bought the Euromarket- Albanian chain of supermarkets), Hemofarm (Pharmaceuticals) etc.

b) Cooperation in transport and the energy sphere

The European Commission foresaw in 2001 an increasing need for cooperation in transport and energy spheres in the WB³. The South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO) is a regional transport organization established by the Memorandum of Understanding for the development of the Core Regional Transport Network (MoU) signed on 11 June 2004 by WB governments and the European Commission. With progress on the two Pan-European corridors in the region – Corridor X and Corridor VIII - both countries would establish transport connections as never before in history. Of particular relevance are the construction of the Belgrade – South Adriatic Highway (Belgrade-Bar), rehabilitation of the Belgrade – Bar railway, and finishing of Durres – Kukes motorway and its connections (via Pristina) to the other important roads (Belgrade-South Adriatic, Corridors X (Niš) and VIII (Skopje)). Presently, the main ports for export of goods produced in Serbia are Rijeka, Constance, Thessaloniki, Bar and Koper. The construction and rehabilitation of the previously mentioned corridors would also increase the attractiveness of the port of Durres for the Serbian companies.

The improvement of regional transport could be expected in case new agreements: on Customs Cooperation or on Cooperation in the area of Air Traffic and International Road Transport of Passengers and Goods. To this end, the full abolishment of visa regime would be conducive to regional transport and trade. Albania abolished visa regime with Serbia and Albanian citizens in possession of the Schengen visa of working permit are allowed to transit across Serbian territory in the period of 5 days without visa. The Energy sphere is one of the core sectors where improvement of cooperation and coordination is necessary. Keeping in mind Serbia's potential to become one of the main transit corridors for the transport of Russian and Caspian gas and oil to Europe (pipeline projects South Stream, Pan European Pipeline), the prospect for cooperation becomes even more important considering the increasing energy import ratio of WB countries. It is also an essential interest of the EU to keep this region energy-wise stable. Serbia has an annual average gas demand increase rate of 1.9%, while the Albanian percentage is 5 times higher - 10.2%⁴. One of the suggested solutions for this growing problem is improvement of the regional cooperation and coordination, including the construction of regional interconnectors. Both Serbia and Albania signed in 2006 The Treaty Establishing the Energy Community in the South East Europe, which created a single electricity and natural gas market in South East Europe and European Union. The implementation of this Treaty will incorporate the energy sectors of the WB countries into the European Union already before these countries become full members of the EU. There are also significant possibilities for the transfer of know-how and cooperation in development, construction and rehabilitation of electricity network in Serbia, but also in Albania, taking into account challenges which countries are facing regarding the shortage of electric energy. Furthermore, Albania is in the starting phase of gasification of its territory, which also creates opportunity for the exchange of know-how and cooperation with the experts and companies from Serbia.

c) Cultural cooperation

Although political relations often overshadow cultural cooperation, the latter between Albania and Serbia is on the rise, although from a low point. Cooperation largely depends on individual initiatives and NGOs provide the main channels of cooperation for it. From 2000 onwards, various institutions, artistic groups, amateur theatres and others have established cooperation and a regular exchange of cultural contents (like the participation of Belgrade Children Cultural Centre on the Children Festival in Durres (October 2007), the joint Serbian-Albanian coproduction of the movie "Honeymoons" made by Serbian director Goran Paskaljević in cooperation with Genc Permeti from Albania). Main channels for official cooperation on the state level are established through multilateral initiatives and programmes such as The Council of Ministers of Culture of South East Europe, the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (First round table: For tourism, culture and inter-university cooperation), Cultural Heritage: A Bridge Towards a Shared Future (regional cooperation process on culture and cultural heritage established in 2004), etc.

3) European Commission, Transport and Energy Infrastructure in South East Europe, October 15th 2001

4) Zorana Mihajlović Milanović, Energy Security in South-East Europe in Light of Russian Energy Policy, 2009, <http://www.isac-fund.org/download/06e-Dr.%20Zorana%20Mihajlović%20-%20Energy%20security%20in%20SEE%20in%20Light%20of%20Russian%20Energy%20Policy.pdf>

The Department for Albanology (Albanian Studies) at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade has a long tradition in educating new generations of teachers of Albanian language, literature and culture. According to the latest curriculum of the faculty, annually there are 19 posts for the future students at the department⁵. Since 1990, 283 students were enrolled in this department, while 69 of them have successfully graduated by May 2010. Currently, this Faculty has cooperation agreements with the Universities in Shkodër and Tirana. At this time, two professors from the University of Shkodër are teaching at the Faculty of Philology as visiting professors. In May 2010, the Department hosted a delegation from the University of Tirana.

d) Minorities

There has been certain progress in past few years in the realm of minority protection. Albanian cultural organisations from Serbia are regularly participating in the project funding calls for proposal of the Serbian Ministry of Culture. However, the Albanian minority in the three municipalities still complain about the widespread discrimination and systematic deprivation of economic opportunity, which they perceive as a result of ethnic – based policies of Serbian government. Many refuse to participate in the public and political life, although there are some positive movements towards the prospective for the establishment of “national councils”. Ethnic frictions in this region are not uncommon as these societies are multiethnic by its composition and are not consolidated multiethnic societies.

According to the 2002 census, 61,647 members of the Albanian community live in Serbia proper, with the highest concentration in the Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa municipalities. They are guaranteed the right to use national symbols, use of Albanian language at the local level, as well as education in their mother tongue. This also includes representation in the Coordination Body for the Municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa and the establishment of an Albanian National Council in Serbia (the formation of the new Albanian National Council in Serbia is still on hold, due to the different conceptions of the two biggest Albanian national minority parties). In the National Assembly of the Serbia, one delegate is a member of Albanian community from the south of Serbia and represents the alliance of Albanian parties. The Electoral system in Serbia allows positive discrimination – existence of a “natural” threshold for the parties of national minorities while the regular threshold for entering the parliament is 5% of votes⁶. The position of Albanian minority in Southern Serbia, however, is strongly influenced by the Kosovo status issue. Members of this minority continue to assert insufficient interest and activity of the official Serbian bodies in improving the economic and social situation in this region. Furthermore, they claim excessive “militarization” of the region, lack of opportunities for the youth in this region, and problems in relations with Kosovo.

In Albania, members of the Serbian-Montenegrin ethnic community are concentrated in the region around town of Shkodër and Vrakë valley. Their number is not precisely known in Serbia but estimates range between 2,000 and 8,000 Serbs–Montenegrins, although some estimates put this figure at around 30,000. In Serbia, there is no information about legal guarantees for this ethnic minority. Its representatives, gathered around the Serb-Montenegrin Minority Organisation Morača-Rozafa are campaigning for integration in the political, public and cultural life; protection and promotion of national identity; education and studying of the mother tongue and representation in the media supported by the state programmes. Members of the organisation managed to establish contacts with the Albanian Government’s representatives as well as the representatives of the European Commission. Serbian ministries for Diaspora and Culture helped in the work of the organisation Morača-Rozafa which resulted with the launching of their web site (the first media on Serbian language in Albania) and courses of Serbian Language. The same ministry recently started to support financially cultural activities of the Serb-Montenegrin minority Society Morača-Rozafa. In 2008, with the support of the Serbian Ministry for Diaspora, this organization established a Information, Cultural and Economic Contact Centre with the Republic of Serbia in Shkodër (Skadar), as a tool for establishing and improving cooperation with relevant organisations in the Republic of Serbia in the field of culture and cultural heritage.

5) Source: <http://www.fil.bg.ac.rs/ssluzba/upis2009/kvote.pdf>

6) Republic of Serbia, Law on Election of MPs, http://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/cirilica/propisi_frames.htm

CONCLUSIONS

Relations between Albania and Serbia in the past two decades have been on a rough footing and at times officially not existing at all. Although recently strides in improving these relations have been made, further improvements seem necessary.

Good neighbourly relations between Serbia and Albania are not just a prerequisite of their EU integration priorities, but also a nascent need for both countries. Embracing the cooperation agenda and exploring avenues for improved cooperation aimed at achieving practical results in the political arena would enable the blossoming of private and individual initiative and thereby economic cooperation. For example, cooperation between Serbia and Albania has a lot of room for improvement in very practical affairs: economy, energy, transport and culture. It can be reasonably expected that practical cooperation would have a positive spillover effect to other fields of public and social life.

The level of trade relations between the two countries is very low and this could be considered to be, to a large extent, the result of the low level of political relations.

The present visa-regime, which Albania recently unilaterally abolished, somewhat hinders cooperation and communication. It would be a sign of goodwill, and a demonstration of good neighbourly relations, for Serbia to follow Albania's lead and also abolish visas for Albanian citizens. Serbia needs to exercise foreign policy initiatives which demonstrate that it can work with all regional states as future members of the European Union.

Another area where improvements can be made is in the field of culture and the treatment of minorities in the respected states. As cultural and minority policies can be a strong consolidating political factor in the Balkans, enabling minorities to fully exercise their rights can present a real bridge between the countries and the two peoples. They should feel secure and prosperous enough in their two respective environments and be motivated enough to become active lobbyists for mutual understanding and improved cooperation between countries and peoples. Support for cultural exchange and cooperation and cultural autonomy of minorities is absolutely necessary for strengthening of ties between the two nations.



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U službi preobražaja Srbije

ISAC doprinosi i služi preobražaju Srbije na putu ka članstvu u EU i Evroatlantskim institucijama, suočavajući se sa izazovima koji stoje pred našom zemljom i regionom, utičući na politiku i donošenje odluka kroz istraživanja, predloge delovanja, političke analize i procene, kao i specijalističko obrazovanje, sa konačnim ciljem dostizanja naprednije budućnosti za sadašnje i dolazeće generacije.

Serving the transformation of Serbia

ISAC promotes and serves the transformation of Serbia towards EU and Euro-Atlantic membership by addressing the challenges facing the country and the region, influencing policy and decision-making through research, policy proposals, political analysis and forecasts, and specialist education, with the ultimate aim of attaining a more prosperous future for the present and coming generations.