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What the Police are Supposed to Do: Contrasting Expectations of Community Policing in Serbia

Barry J. Ryan

Concentrating specifically on policing reform in the Republic of Serbia shortly after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime, this article focuses on the process of introducing community policing to a police force equipped and trained to operate in an authoritarian context. The article aims to define the difficulties encountered by transitional police organizations and to examine the type of solutions that have been proffered both by the police and by community leaders and other informed members of the public in Serbia. Based on findings from parallel qualitative surveys undertaken between August and November 2002, the article concludes that community policing should be defined in terms that prioritize public participation as a principle of good governance to be adapted by the Serbian Ministry of the Interior. The findings ultimately suggest that a form of progressive political accountability focused on local police policies, requiring devolution of Ministry power to the local level, is a fundamental prerequisite to a more effective policing environment in Serbia.

Keywords: Community Policing; Serbia; Public Participation; Legitimacy; Democratization; Police Reform

Introduction

The decision to use a community policing strategy as a means to institute the principles of good governance to policing organizations in post-authoritarian or post-conflict environments has become almost automatic over the last decade of

The position(s) and opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily represent the official position(s) or policies of the Serbian Ministry of Interior. The author would nevertheless like to thank members of the Ministry who participated anonymously in the interviews. The researcher would additionally like to acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences. Correspondence to: Barry J. Ryan, Centre for Peace and Development Studies, Foundation Building F1-120, University of Limerick, Ireland. E-mail: Barry.Ryan@ul.ie

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25 police reform. In addition to the ONUSAL peacekeeping mission to El Salvador in
1994, community policing has featured in every police reform programme over the
last decade. The essential challenge in a transitional environment is to reconcile the
high expectations of democracy held by a newly liberated populace with the capacity
30 of a police force trained and equipped to function under very different political
circumstances. Community policing, possibly due to the rhetoric of decentralization
and accountability that attends its introduction, has therefore fused with the very
notion of democracy. It has been observed that in Spain, until quite recently, criticism
of community policing was often construed as an attack on the actual democratic
35 transition of the country (Rabot, 2004). Endowed with the potential to transform an
authoritarian police force into an organization capable of accommodating the
principles of liberal pluralism, the philosophy behind the approach also seeks to instil
the economic efficiency associated with public management reform and performance
management as developed in Western European and North American jurisdictions
(Clarke, 2002; Crawford, 1998).

40 Seagrave's (1996) analysis of the innumerable policies used under the rubric of
community policing in the United States reveals an amorphous concept, open to
varying interpretations. For instance, some commentators are drawn towards a
communitarian interpretation that lays emphasis on the need for communities to be
secured by local police officers who work in tandem with, and are answerable to, the
45 local community. Others see community policing as a powerful and osmotic
philosophy with the potential to permeate and guide the substantial re-structuring of
the reforming police organization. Those who interpret the concept in this light look
to community policing as a catalyst for wider reform and advocate the potential of
community policing to affect positively closed and centralized organizations from
50 which authoritarian and sometimes discriminatory policing practices emanate. It is
within this discourse that we find community policing as a peace-building
mechanism that needs to be supported by wider political and societal reforms
(Marenin, 2000). Based upon the assumption that institutions and power structures
in emerging democracies are more open to change than those in established
55 democracies, this school of thought emphasizes the need for police organizations to
facilitate the creation of more equitable communication structures between the police
and the public. Indicatively, community consultative structures have played a key role
in police reform programmes implemented in Macedonia, South Africa, Malawi and
Northern Ireland (Mathias et al., 2003).

60 The elasticity of the concept, however, leads commentators such as Mawby (1990)
to claim that community policing can be used to describe any activity so long as it
gains the support of the community. This can result in the view that community
policing does not require internal re-organization and that it may be used as an "add-
on" policy to existing reactive enforcement-type strategies. For example, it is not
65 uncommon to find under the rubric of community policing the strategy known as
"zero tolerance policing", where the rule of law is given priority over police discretion
and certain low-level crimes are given specific attention.

Few studies record the expectations of both police officers and members of the public in transitional environments where the trajectory of community-oriented policies is under debate. Ronald Weitzer's seminal study of police-community relations in Northern Ireland was one of the first studies to utilize in-depth interviews to measure community attitudes to policing in a divided society (Weitzer, 1995). Nevertheless, this study was somewhat constrained because the police were unwilling to participate in the research. Work undertaken by Haberfeld et al. (2002) in Poland benefited from utilizing questionnaires distributed to members of the public and the police. This article builds on the methodology of Weitzer and Haberfeld et al. by contrasting the concerns of the police with the concerns of representative members of a transitional society. It aims to define policing problems encountered by societies in the midst of change and examines the solutions that have been proffered both by the police and by community leaders and other informed members of the public in Serbia.

It seems unfortunate that a study into community policing needs to establish a dichotomy that assumes a divergence of opinion between members of a policing organization and members of the public. It is, however, entirely appropriate to draw this methodological dividing line. Numerous studies have found a distinctive occupational police culture (Reiner, 2000; Chan, 1997). Additionally, many of the officers interviewed in this survey had served together as combatants in the 1999 war in Kosovo, contributing to a shared history that further justifies assessing their perceptions separately from those that might be held by members of the public. A strong sense of solidarity is therefore assumed and although the research is cognisant of differing perspectives between management and rank-and-file officers, it takes into account Seagrave's (1996) finding that both police leaders and officers "articulated similar interpretations of community policing". In fact, in many ways the research presented below serves to strengthen this finding.

Methodology

The findings in this article are based on parallel qualitative surveys undertaken between August and November 2002. Four municipalities, chosen as pilot sites by the Ministry of Interior for the Republic of Serbia for the introduction of community policing, participated in the research (see Table 1). The survey on the police was conducted between 29 August and 4 September 2002 using focus groups consisting of six to eight police officers representing different ranks within the organization. Over forty members of the police were interviewed altogether. Avoiding the common problem with surveying police whereby younger, less senior officers are slow to respond in front of senior management, a number of one-to-one interviews were also conducted. Unfortunately, no female officers participated as they had not yet been deployed to the pilot sites involved. The second part of the survey was conducted with the assistance of a market research firm in November 2002. Eight focus groups were held with an "older" group and a "younger" group participating in each

Table 1 Municipalities under Survey

Municipality	Description	Population (2002 census)
Zvezdara, Belgrade	Urban with rural margins and large Roma settlement	132,352
Vrnjačka Banja, central Serbia	Tourist resort, rural mostly, presence of internally displaced persons	26,445
Novi Bečej, Vojvodina, north Serbia	Agricultural region, rural, 20 per cent Hungarian, autonomous province of Serbia	26,881
Kragujevac, central Serbia	Urban, industrial city, high unemployment	175,182

municipality. Participants were chosen by the author and included local opinion leaders, local government representatives, members of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), media representatives, representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, social workers and professionals in the fields of health and law. A total of 64 people participated in this aspect of the survey. The issues raised in these focus groups were largely informed by the findings of the research undertaken with the police.

Background

On 5 October 2000, when the Serbian Republic's Assembly building was stormed in Belgrade, 3,650 armed police, with orders to take "extreme measures" against protesters, were deployed to control a crowd of over half a million people. For years, students and protesters had been mimicking dogs, barking at the police, to insinuate that the police were the dog of the Milošević regime. Criminalized by their political masters, demoralized by forced service in the Kosovo conflict and by their complicity with a regime that had brought war, poverty and international isolation to their country, most officers readily capitulated to the demands of the crowd. The image of them removing their helmets, borrowing jackets from protestors and melting into the massive crowd proved symbolic for a police organization that was about to embark on a process of reform and democratization.

Reform was deemed necessary to re-establish the legitimacy of the police in the new democratic state that emerged in the wake of Milošević's downfall. A survey taken at the time by a respected current affairs weekly found that only 44 per cent of the population trusted the police.¹ The survey concluded that: "The public increasingly supports the necessity of establishment of democratic control over the military and the police, as well as their parallel professionalization and modernization." A subsequent report undertaken by Richard Monk on behalf of the Ministry of Interior, Republic of Serbia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) pointed out that: "The police have become isolated from the community they serve... they are mistrusted by the public" (Monk, 2001). Recognizing the legitimacy crisis, the Ministry of the Interior, together with members

of a Serbian think tank, local NGOs and members of the Danish Centre for Human Rights, formulated a "Vision"² that, among other priorities, spelled out the need to involve members of the community with the police. A community policing board was established comprising police commanders from the four municipalities that were chosen to be test sites for community policing projects; a chairman from the Ministry of the Interior; an academic with a research interest in crime prevention; and a representative of OSCE, which was the main coordinating body for international support and assistance to the project.³

This formulation of a "Vision" document and the creation of the community policing board represented a departure from tradition in a policing organization that throughout the twentieth century had been the political instrument of an authoritarian power. The architects of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after the Second World War re-organized policing to be a people's militia. Constructed around the philosophies of self-management, the police were expected to enforce the ideologies of the Communist Party. Described as part of an "intricate and pervasive police system" (Crampton, 2002: 17), police officers were expected to enforce social control and maintain a visible presence on the streets. In the 1990s, the police came under the influence of Slobodan Milošević, who slowly increased their power and importance relative to the Yugoslav army. The internal structure and rank system was re-constituted to reflect the new militant role of a police force that was used to repress dissenting elements to Milošević's political objectives. The reputation of the police suffered as the authorities came to rely on them more. Violent reactions to student demonstrations and the ever-growing political opposition to the regime ensured that the majority of citizens associated the police with an undemocratic and repressive order.

Arguably, the transition from a communist to a regime-supporting force involved merely increasing the powers and extending the mandate of a police force that was trained and equipped to protect the Communist Party's ideologies. The move, however, from authoritarian to democratic policing involves a fundamental shift in the orientation of the police and, it might be said, has resulted in the organization suffering from an identity crisis. New skills are required to uphold the rule of law that were never before required. New loyalties to a largely suspicious public demand a revolutionary degree of openness and transparency from an organization unused to being accountable in any manner for any action. At the same time, the concept of providing a *service* while remaining an effective *force* seems at times contradictory in a highly criminalized and politically unsettled region.

The Ministry of the Interior in Serbia realized early on that the ability to adapt in the new democratic environment depended on whether it had managed to "establish successful cooperation with citizens and other society structures, trained the police adequately, developed the necessary strategy, passed relevant legislation, adapted the police service to the working conditions, reformed police education, [and] secured the necessary funds and support of the entire society".⁴ Accordingly, the Ministry looked at community policing as a basis upon which to re-negotiate a new social

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contract with the general public through an inclusive partnership approach to local security and governance. The findings included here derive from research undertaken by the author on behalf of OSCE and the Ministry of Interior, for whom the first priority before the introduction of community policing was to understand fully the extent of the gap between the expectations of the public and the capabilities and willingness of the police to implement community policing. The findings of the police and the public will be presented separately in order to facilitate comparison.

The Police

Police at the four pilot regions examined in this survey exhibited a fairly uniform approach to the problems that faced their adoption of community policing. This seems natural as the police force in Serbia is highly centralized. The practice of returning police officers after training to the region in which they were brought up seems to have been the preferred technique used by the Ministry of Interior to bring a local dynamic to policing. In Zvezdara, an expansive suburb stretching from the edge of Belgrade to its rural outskirts, the police claimed that 90 per cent of the station's officers were from the area. The station commander, for example, was born in the local maternity hospital and had lived his entire life in the area. Similarly in the smaller towns that participated in the survey, such as Vrnjačka Banja, the idea that officers native to the town had local knowledge was promoted as a fertile basis upon which community policing plans could be drawn. That being said, the interviews at Novi Bečej, a small rural town in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, revealed that despite the fact that 20 per cent of the town was ethnically Hungarian, there were no Hungarian officers among the 72 men employed. Also, it should be noted that there were no members of the Roma-speaking community in any of the police stations surveyed. Male Serbs dominate policing. At the time of these interviews, female officers were consigned to administrative duties and were not included in the survey.

At interview, all police surveyed spoke enthusiastically about their day-to-day relationship with members of the public. Individual officers regularly claimed that they knew the first names of many people on their "security sector" or territorial beat. The initial impression given to the researcher was that a form of neighbourhood police officer tactic was being implemented. However, when asked to give examples about how this local familiarity had assisted their work, police officers were unable to provide anecdotal evidence. Officers complained that their "security sectors" were too large to build a proper relationship and that there were not enough police officers to police the area effectively. Zvezdara, for instance had 172 officers (including management) to police an area of 3,188 km² with a population of 132,352. This translates to 0.86 officers per thousand people. A young officer at Vrnjačka Banja, not long emerged from the Police Academy, spoke about how it was quite embarrassing at first to return to the town in uniform. He talked about how friendly he had since become with the local shop-owners whose district he policed. Another young officer,

from Kragujevac, explained that he had caught a man guilty of sexual assault by getting information from the victim and her friends. He explained that he was lucky to get the description of the man and felt the evidence was given only because the victim knew him. He had grown up in an adjoining apartment block.

Obtaining information from the public was, according to officers at all ranks, a serious problem for police. In Kragujevac, the former industrial heart of Yugoslavia, officers spoke quite frankly about the issue, seeing it as a target for community policing to address. Asked during interview about the potential for a “neighbourhood watch” project in the jurisdiction, officers pragmatically concluded that its success would depend on the community in which it is implemented. The primary problem would be that cooperative citizens would be considered “police spies”. It was especially difficult to get people to act as witnesses to crimes, it was explained. Police said that citizens wishing to report crimes were reluctant to give their names to the telephone operator and, according to one officer, it often happened that the witness contacted individual officers privately in their homes rather than go through official channels. Police emphasized that this was not due to a fear of criminals, but was instead symptomatic of a “mentality of non-cooperation”. “It’s difficult here,” said one officer, “family connections are very important. People have learned to look after themselves without the police.” Another officer remarked that “there was a fear of further processes, and that people did not want to become known locally as someone who calls the police”. A senior officer concurred and added: “The police were not always present in the past, but now we are re-building ourselves.”

The problem of under-reporting seems to be more acute in urban regions than in rural locations. In Zvezdara there was also a perception among officers that the public is reluctant to contact the police in case they are seen as “police spies”. One officer with whom we spoke was particularly concerned about this and estimated that at his police station only one in every 400 crimes come to the attention of the police. He also said that the number of arrests made have decreased dramatically since October 2000. It is difficult to compare the type of arrests as the police recording method changed shortly after October 2000. “People have no confidence in the police,” he said “People don’t understand.” One officer said that giving his personal mobile phone number to local business people increased the number of incidents he was called to adjudicate.

Whereas in urban regions the problem with the public was generally perceived as that of a misrepresented police force trying to establish relations with a distrustful and apathetic populace, police in the rural regions spoke about the sudden growth of their towns. A senior officer in Novi Bečej talked about how the nature of policing had altered and that in recent years the town “became a bigger place and the community less familiar. . . . It used to be we knew who did what, but now it’s different. . . . [F]elons have become more mobile and travel here from Belgrade.” Under-reporting is also evident in cases involving domestic violence. According to police, domestic violence had only been criminalized recently and goes largely unreported.⁵ The problem according to most police was “sociological”. Domestic

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violence is seen by people to be a “family affair” with victims tending not to involve the police unless there is a life-threatening incident. Police believed that this problem was embedded in the cultural make-up of people throughout the country.⁶

The problem of police-community relations with the sizeable Roma communities in every region under discussion was also perceived as being a “sociological” one. It is noteworthy that the officer who spoke about only one in 400 crimes being reported supervised a sub-station situated beside a Roma camp of over 10,000 people. Of the four project sites, the police at Zvezdara had made the most effort to build relations with this socially marginalized minority group. The station commander was able to point to a certificate of gratitude presented to him after a police football team participated in a Roma football competition. Attempts had also been made to establish contacts with opinion leaders in the camp and one officer had spoken on the local Roma radio station. Unlike the police in any other region, the police in Zvezdara recognized that work needed to be undertaken to improve relations between police and Roma groups. It was underlined again and again that communication with this group was difficult; no officers were able to speak any of the Roma dialects or to define exactly what level of language skills was actually required. In Vrnjačka Banja, police spoke at length about the difficulties in dealing with Roma communities. It was explained that although there were groups representing Roma concerns, “they remain an autonomous people who live outside society”. Officers at other sites spoke of how the Roma operate a system of community justice that does not require police intervention.

While the Roma “problem” was universal, particular issues arose in each region that served to highlight a lack of communication between the police and the public. The most indicative occurred in Novi Bečej—a rural town about which a senior Ministry of Interior official said that initiative was not being shown by the people and that they expected the police to solve everything alone. Speaking to the mayor of the town, it was explained that the primary problem between police and the public revolved around the issue of farm produce being stolen from fields during the night. Asked if they had any solution to the problem, police at Novi Bečej explained that field thefts were out of their jurisdiction. They were awaiting a legislative solution that would render the theft of “movable farm produce” a criminal offence. A legacy of socialist times, it seems that there are no trespass prohibitions in place as all land and the food produced thereupon is in the realm of public property. Police shrugged when it was put to them at interview that a number of farmers had asked them to tackle this issue by circumventing legislative hindrances. It emerged that farmers had formed a group with the aim of raising funds for private security, but had received no assistance from the police. This was not a solution, according to the police, as the funds raised did not cover the costs of securing the fields. It was also pointed out that the physical area that needed monitoring placed a considerable strain on police. The consensus around the table was that “nothing could be done until the police are given more power”. The station commander expected the problem to be solved once the appropriate legislation was passed.

310 Apart from Novi Bečej, where there was some tension between locally elected
officials and police, the relations between local authorities and the police in the
surveyed regions were relatively healthy. This is a significant observation as one year
previously there would have been no contact between local officials and police
315 officers. The mayor in Novi Bečej spoke of how historically he had been ignored and
denied access to the police, but that the situation was changing. Other regions,
however, witnessed the emergence of close relations being constructed between police
management and municipal authorities. In Zvezdara, for example, the mayor and the
police commander met regularly, both formally and informally, and together agreed
upon a community policing strategy with full support of the local authorities. There
320 was a page devoted to policing in the local municipal magazine distributed free to
every household. In Kragujevac, the police and local government shared the same
building and relations were excellent. In Vrnjačka Banja, although officers openly
disagreed with the attitude of the president of the municipal council on a number of
issues, including his discriminatory attitude to internally displaced persons (IDPs)
325 residing in the town, it was evident that police were working quite closely with the
institution.

A system of quantitative reporting had begun nationally whereby daily crime
statistics were sent to local government authorities. One region attempted to go
further by stimulating an informal accountability system in which local councillors
were allowed to submit written queries regarding police policies. The questions,
330 which covered issues beyond the remit of the local police force, and the written
answers provided, showed this to be an ineffective but highly innovative scheme.⁷
Throughout all the pilot regions, police concurred that the system of *mesna
zajednica*⁸ would be a site upon which deeper relations could be built. There seemed
to be an unawareness of NGOs and the possible function they could play in a
community policing strategy. At one site, the police were unable to name one NGO in
335 their region. The relationship between NGOs and the police, at the time of this
survey, remained antagonistic. According to one commentator,⁹ this was due to the
fact that NGOs would have been the prime motivators of public actions against the
police in the Milošević era.

340 The pride of the Serbian community policing strategy was a project centrally
initiated by the Ministry of Interior in Belgrade called the 'school policeman'.
Commenced in March 2002, this project involved deploying a dedicated school police
officer to over 250 schools around Serbia. There were two aspects of the programme.
The first involves a uniformed officer, entitled an "educator", whose function it is to
345 "build contacts with schoolchildren and increase the level of trust and confidence"
between them and the police through the provision of thematic lectures. Entitled
"Policeman Friend of the Children", talks were given by older more experienced
officers to pupils, teachers and parents who would be invited to attend "lectures" on
subjects such as drugs, religious sects or traffic regulations. This same police officer
350 would be involved in the "School Police Day" activities where police officers would
arrive on the first day of the academic year and speak to children. According to

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Ministry officials this officer served a dual purpose: to dispel the image of police officers as “bogeymen”¹⁰ and to recruit candidates to join the police.

The other aspect of the programme involved a plainclothes officer working in the school “observing and monitoring” the schoolyard, advising school management and facilitating a clinic for students and parents to discuss crime problems around the school. The job description tasks the school police officer with the prevention of crime and the protection of the school and its students and compiling regular reports. Meetings with school management prior to the beginning of the academic year are held to formulate strategies that would decrease the number of crimes perpetrated on school grounds. Asked to comment, one school police officer listed tasks that would enable him “to note pattern behaviour and to suggest changes to traffic around the school”. A Ministry official spoke about how the school police officer is an ideal model for a community policing officer. The traits for the job included: sufficient working experience, clean professional career, men with a family and a good attitude towards children.

The school police officer programme reminded older police officers of crime prevention methods used during Tito’s Yugoslavia when crime prevention seemed to be a more successfully applied concept due to the manner by which information gathering was a priority task for uniformed police officers. Many senior officers, seeking a base upon which to build contemporary community policing, tended to look to the structure of the Yugoslav police and the emphasis placed on the need for patrol officers to build and maintain contacts with local members of the community. Central to that strategy was the policy that police officers build relationships with the community through crime prevention projects aimed at schoolchildren. As the next section illustrates, members of the public who remembered this time agreed with police that it was a “golden age” in the history of policing in Serbia.

The Public

The most noticeable perception of the police emanating from those interviewed was an agreement that the events of October 2000 represented an opportunity for the police to break with their past. It was clear that there existed an “old police”, associated negatively in the minds of respondents with the “old regime”, and a “new police”, associated positively with the new democratic order. And although it was observed that the introduction of female officers and the attitudes of younger police officers symbolized the ethos of this “new” police, more importantly there seemed to be general agreement that the behaviour of the police since October 2000 had altered. The initial discussions at all focus groups were therefore dominated by observations and complaints about the old days—linked with war, economic decline and authoritarian political systems—but progressed quickly to address the public’s expectations of the new democratic police force.

The uncertainty associated with a changing environment was everywhere evident in all focus groups. “Community” as a concept was defined in its narrowest terms; as

the street upon which the respondent lived rather than the wider area policed from a central police station. In both rural and urban regions, the transition being experienced related to the fragmentation of old communities and an adjoining sense of fear for one's personal security. In Zvezdara, a suburb of the capital of Serbia, participants spoke the decline of community: "I believe the last few years divided us and estranged us from each other." In Kragujevac and Vrnjačka Banja, there was perceived to be a division between newcomers who had arrived during the previous ten years and people who had been living in the city for a long time. One woman explained that "the town has lost its compactness . . . there is no sense of local community. . . . Kragujevac has become a town of refugees, new settlers, displaced persons."

A common theme throughout these discussions was the remembrance of an idyllic past, an era associated most strongly by the familiar presence of a local police officer. One woman explained: "I am from Kragujevac . . . and we used to have neighbourhood officers. As a child I remember Officer Gille, but he also knew every one of us. By the number of bread loaves sold in the store he knew if someone had guests." A man from the group interviewed in Novi Bečej echoed these feelings when he said that "there used to be a so-called 'neighbourhood policeman.' It was a very important thing for the criminal police as well because that officer knew every citizen." The disappearance of local police officers with deep roots in the community was marked by the appearance of a new centralized police force, manned by arrogant police officers with little communication skills and priorities at variance with the needs of the public. Current difficulties, it seems stem from this period: "The complete trust is lost because the police was not protecting the safety and security of its citizens but the system. Their role was simply altered, distorted."

The police became a more threatening presence in the early 1990s. One respondent talked about how the small number of officers in his small town suddenly increased and it became necessary to carry identification at all times. A municipality worker in Novi Bečej spoke of how the police became a political weapon and would "scare people". Respondents described a police force corrupted by power, "distant from the people", "frightening people". According to one man, a father of a political activist beaten by the police, "they were omnipotent, they loved the power. How can they change overnight now?" Another woman relates how a police officer forced her to wade across the river because a cavalcade with Milošević was due to cross the bridge later that day. A legacy for the post-5-October police is the attitude of those who grew up under a repressive force. A respondent in Vrnjačka Banja put it succinctly: "The youth are burdened by some stories, some prejudices, and they see the police as some institution for persecution, for retaliation. It is rare that someone young decides to ask the police for help."

This lack of confidence or mistrust is manifested in the reluctance of people to become involved in any manner with the police. That people in Kragujevac have become used to being without an effective policing institution was exemplified in the statement: "A man saw someone sneaking around a neighbour's house and he said it

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never occurred to him to call the police.” Another cause of under-reporting might be found in an anecdote provided by a respondent in Kragujevac who was detained until dawn having brought a collapsed drunk to the hospital:

I noticed a man lying on the pavement. I took him to the hospital. By the time I settled down it was almost dawn. The police didn't allow me to go home; they wanted to interrogate me. They wanted to know who I was, why did I help the man. That is how citizens feel about the police: frightened. Especially about giving information.

In Novi Bečej it was underlined among a group of town burghers that “no one wants to do anything with the police, no one wants to cooperate”. Another man explained that he is often in a situation “to report cases of serious theft to the police. . . . Then they take all the data about me as if I were the suspect. I know that they don't take anonymous reports seriously.” Others complained that there was a lack of feedback from the police, “a culture of secrecy”. This seems to propagate a perception that the police are not working. Respondents described individual officers as “passive and angry”. Crimes that are reported are seen to disappear forever inside the police station. In Vrnjačka Banja, a solution was offered:

They should inform us at least once a year what is happening. When we run across something that is missing we will report it to the police. The police come and we expect them to start something . . . [but] it seems we have to call them again. They are in a hopeless state—maybe not all of them—to do the job correctly . . . they should be more effective, finish something and let the rest of us know that a job was finished. They should come and inform us, they us what they have found.

At every interview, journalists and social workers expressed their frustration with the reluctance of police to provide them with information. Police never refused requests for data, but all respondents agreed that the information was never provided. A social worker in Belgrade spoke about her experiences in her dealings with the police where “sooner or later I would face a stone wall which I could not get across”. This lack of inter-agency cooperation was a principal topic at the Zvezdara focus group.

Whereas social workers and those in similar professions tended to understand the lack of transparency and openness as a symptom of an inexpertly managed information system, members of the general public tended to understand it in more conspiratorial terms. The police, for many people, are members of an insecure organization that is attempting to hide its incompetence. The perception was that feedback from investigations is withheld to mask the fact that the police have no criminal investigation abilities. This belief was evident from interviews in both rural and urban sites. A respondent in Zvezdara talked about her experience reporting a robbery to the police. She concluded that it was useless. Eventually, she explains, she had to use personal connections in the police to discover that neither the thief had been caught nor the stolen goods recovered. Another respondent at the same

interview spoke of how a month after his house had been burgled and his car robbed, he (also using personal contacts within the police) was told the perpetrator that had been identified by the police was being protected by powerful people and could not be arrested.

This sense that the police are ineffective comes out most strongly among inhabitants of urban areas. Whereas those in rural regions spoke about the ever approaching threat of serious crime, people living in Belgrade and Kragujevac were constantly confronted by lawlessness. Respondents were concerned with their personal security, particularly at night, and for the safety of their children. The absence of police officers on the street led respondents to believe the police were neglecting their duties.

In the busiest streets in Kragujevac and in the centre of the city, where the café Zelengora is, you will never see a policeman. There are many people during the day and night, young people. They [the police] know that they are a risky group and problems can always occur but they are not there. I know three cafés where police are always in. In fact they are very near our police station.

Police were seen to be overly indulgent in activities that generate income from fines, such as traffic policing. They are seen to be avoiding serious criminals, “protecting buildings”, according to one lady from Belgrade, “not the people inside the buildings”. One man claimed a young police officer told him that: “During my working hours, I look to it that I see as little as I can, that I get through my day.” Inconsistency in the use of police discretionary powers has led the public to see the police as discriminatory. In Kragujevac: “I never saw a tow truck take away a good expensive car. It is usually Zastava vehicles, Yugos, Ficas.” In Vrnjačka Banja: “Somehow [the towing vehicle] always tows Yugos and old Fiats and skips a jeep or an Audi although it is parked where it is not allowed to.” Another woman related how police always asked: “What is your profession?”

The manner in which police deal with victims of crime also, for some respondents, highlighted an inappropriate approach. Their inability to handle properly victims of domestic violence and rape was a particular concern for social workers and NGO representatives. A respondent from an NGO related how she witnessed a female police officer place a little girl who had been raped by seventeen boys in front of over 150 pupils from her school to identify the ones who raped her. Numerous examples were given of incidents where the victim was treated as complicit in the crime. An example from Kragujevac, which seems to have a higher than average level of domestic violence and abuse, was given of a 16 year-old girl who was being beaten and abused by her father. The police came a few times, but said to her: “Listen you don’t make any problems so that we have to come here for no reason.” And later she was asked: “Why don’t you get married, you’re a pretty girl, why don’t you get married?”¹¹

The most serious charges of discrimination, however, came from members of the Roma community. A representative of the Egyptian Roma living in the Zvezdara

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district of Belgrade was unequivocal about institutional racism in the police when he said:

The greatest threat for us in Zvezdara comes from the police itself. They beat all of us. I was physically threatened not to bring Roma people to the neighbourhood. A kid stole a car wheel and police in civilian clothes beat him to death; everybody knew that. My uncle wanted to build a house for his son next to his stall. He started building and the police came, tied him to tree and beat him really bad because he was building at an improper place. Just across the street a Serb was building one house next to another at the same time.

The respondent told the focus group that he maintained records of incidents of physical and mental abuse committed by the police on the Roma population, but that he has been advised not to make it public. His own mother was included in this record: an 80 year-old woman who had her jaw broken by an impatient police officer because she was slow to produce her identity card. In his opinion, discrimination against the Roma population was an “official policy” of the police. At every pilot site, during these meetings and at other less formal discussions, the researcher was left with the impression that members of the Roma communities in Serbia are under-policed and discriminated against. One respondent, an ex-police officer, explained that police only enter a Roma settlement if they are pursuing a suspect:

If a fight takes place in a Roma settlement and the police force does not want to get involved . . . police officers just say it's none of their business. People shoot at cafés, innocent people on the streets get hurt, but there are no police officers in a Roma settlement. There are no firemen to put out a possible fire. There are no ambulance vehicles in a Roma settlement so if a woman is in labour she will deliver in the settlement without medical assistance. There are 150 settlements inhabited by more than 70,000 people who have no protection provided: neither by the police nor the state.¹²

In Novi Bečej, the issue of field thefts, which had obviously become politicized, epitomized the public's dissatisfaction with their local police. A retired judge from the town spoke about the high incidence of thefts from farmers fields: “There are still many thefts in the fields and that's a criminal action. The police say it's none of their business, and I say it should be their business.” A politician spoke about the manifold efforts that had been made by local inhabitants to solve the problem. He argued that: “We shouldn't be discussing the law, but how to improve police work in the scope of already existing laws and within the police jurisdiction and also to meet citizen's interests.”

A local “Security and Safety” committee was set-up in Novi Bečej to address all aspects of local security, but, according the President of the City Council, the police told the committee that they would attend local government meetings “when they have time”. The idea was to create a board comprised of members from various government structures, citizens and police officers to work together on local concerns. At the moment the police are “under no obligation to come, and [claim]

that it is none of their business". Police management, it seems, is awaiting the new Law on Local Self-government (2002) to be passed, which would empower local authorities to work with police structures. What is interesting about the Novi Bečej case study is that local government was in the hands of representatives of the minority Hungarian population who firmly believed that "there is no cooperation between local government and the police". Their conclusion was that the president of the municipality should take responsibility for public security. The initiative whereby police sent local crime statistics to municipal offices was welcomed, but more accountability was requested as the police at present "are more untouchable than any other public service". "Some kind of civilian control" was called for. The point was made that there is no cooperation between the two important power structures; democratically elected local government see themselves on one side, while on the other there is the police, whose power is seen to derive from Ministry officials in Belgrade rather than from the public.

This concept was also raised in other localities. The community in Zvezdara was fortunate, it was said, that their police commander was a hard-working, devoted police officer, but that this was an exceptional case. "It is important that we be consulted on who will be the chief of Zvezdara [police]." Another concurred, adding: "I don't know anyone from my generation, or even a younger one that was present at any such meeting with representatives of the police force." A publisher in this mid-40s also mentioned civilian control as a prerequisite to police becoming a more effective and trusted institution: "They are mentioning civilian control over the army. I believe that should happen with the police force as well. That way ordinary citizens can have insight into what they are doing, and how they are doing it." And again, by the manager of a factory in Novi Bečej: "If their plan was available to us, we would be more informed. What they need is a planned approach." In Kragujevac, similar sentiments were expressed. A respondent spoke of the "problem" when the city assembly and the local authorities have no power over the police. It is interesting to note that during a similar survey undertaken in the ethnic-Albanian dominated region of south Serbia, civilian control and a say in the choice of police chief was one of the few issues upon which members of the Roma, Serb and Albanian populations agreed fully.

Therefore, the core perception of the police is that they need to build relationships with the public. A physician in Vrnjačka Banja concluded: "One thing for certain is that in the police reforms something has to be done about bringing them closer to the citizens." People in general understand that the police are undergoing transition and at every discussion the achievements of the police to distance themselves from their authoritarian past were fully acknowledged. The introduction of female officers, the less militant uniform, the noticeable softening in attitude and behaviour were often cited as examples that indicate the start of a cultural transformation of policing in Serbia. The school policeman programme was a reference point for respondents, most of whom had children. This programme contained for many the future direction of community policing in the Republic. For some, the school policeman

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and the effect his or her presence had on the consumption of drugs in schools was an model of effective crime prevention. When asked what traits a police officer should possess, the school policeman was considered to be very similar to the neighbourhood policeman respondents experienced in the 1970s when they were growing up. A teacher describes his effect:

We were all sceptical about having a policeman in the school. We all agreed that the children would be afraid. So we weren't very thrilled about the idea but I can say that it was really a nice and peaceful period. He had a lot of work until all the fights and thefts ended. It was nice. He fitted in and the pupils accepted him. It was possible to talk to him. We were satisfied.

Conclusion

There is evidence of a divergence between police and public opinion on the future direction of community policing in Serbia. Much is expected of the Serbian police and it is quite clear that reform is being demanded on two fronts. First, there is the political issue of reform that is connected to a historically justified nervousness about the ease to which Serbian policing can be manipulated from a central source. This push for reform is emanating mainly from local government sources who understand too well that policing is intimately associated with central rather than local government. This is observable not only in the autonomous province of Vojvodina where local government is demanding more control over the Belgrade-controlled police force, but also in the other project sites under examination. The police force is understood as an institution that requires control mechanisms in order to foreclose the possibility that it could be used again as a political weapon by an authoritarian government. Subsequently, community policing is defined in terms of the police relinquishing power granted to them during the 1990s by coming under the control of democratically elected local officials.

Second, there are calls for reform coming from ordinary men and women who have genuine concerns regarding the effectiveness of the police. There is doubtlessly a feeling that the police are moving in the right direction. Two years after 5 October 2000 the residents of the regions surveyed were able to point to a number of visible differences in the police that signalled, at the very least, that the police were reform-oriented. All respondents appreciated the "new face of policing" and spoke about the new attitude of police officers who are more polite, less anonymous and more accessible in general. Especially appreciated is the introduction of patrolling female officers, 750 of whom were being deployed during the research period. However, a degree of cynicism was also expressed by respondents impatient with the slow progress of reform and suspicious about the ultimate destination of change. One woman put it thus: "[A]t least they don't do what they aren't supposed to do, the only problem is that they still don't do enough of what they *are* supposed to do." This perception was most clear in responses that described the police as an institution with

which it remains difficult to communicate. There is therefore a strong need to see a cultural transformation of the institution as evidenced by the pre-occupation of many respondents with the attitude and behaviour of the police, the discriminatory practices, and the overtly male and ethnically Serb constitution of an organization policing a republic with over twenty minority groups. Yet respondents also spoke of the need for a police force with improved criminal investigation abilities and resources to tackle the growing sense of personal insecurity mentioned at every interview.

What the police *are supposed to do* is therefore the crux of the issue facing the police in a transitional setting. There is some evidence to suggest that the policing organization is less certain of its role in a democracy than it was under previous forms of government. Influential reformers within the Ministry spoke about the need to return policing to the period when Yugoslavia was under Tito's rule. Crime prevention tactics such as the "School Policeman" programme epitomized this approach to community policing. This highly successful programme was a direct descendant of crime prevention tactics practiced in the 1970s (see Simonović & Radovanović 2003). Many rank-and-file officers, frustrated by what they perceived to be the public's lack of understanding, felt that thematic lectures delivered to selected audiences would be a method by which to increase police-public cooperation. Such "civic education and social protection programmes" were also used in the 1970s. Furthermore, it was felt that television advertisements showing police officers in a good light would reinforce this new approach to a public. This leads to an unfortunate observation that for many officers it was the public and not the police that needed to be educated. Moreover, it exemplifies an organization in an unfamiliar environment attempting to reconcile old skills to new expectations. The fear is that it might be interpreted by the public in terms of the brand changing, but the product remaining the same.

There was also a noticeable divergence among senior officers, some of whom were more reform-oriented than others. With the glaring exception of police in Zvezdara, who had authentic plans to build sustainable and moderately accountable systems with local government and NGOs, the most discussed problem with community policing was expressed in terms of manpower and a lack of resources. Police leaders felt (and with some justification) that without sufficient vehicles, equipment or manpower, community policing could never be practised as it was in Western European countries. Additionally, most police felt the problem with the public could be remedied by up-to-date legislation, which serves to blame the slowness of reform on the government rather than on the police itself. The police are ready to reform further it seems, but are constricted to act within the boundaries of their current means.

Unfortunately, many of the demands made by the respondents in this survey are located outside these boundaries and necessitate major internal change in the Ministry of the Interior. At the heart of both political and societal dissatisfaction with policing is the issue of communication. Civilian respondents at all sites agreed that

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some sort of two-way channel was required. The police also sought more opportunities to communicate with the public, albeit on their own terms. Additionally, police at interview conceived that there was a need to utilize local *mesna zajednica* institutions and local government structures in order to contribute better to local safety issues. Some officers referred to the difficulties of this becoming sustainable without appropriate legislation in the long-awaited Local Government Bill and were hesitant to speak about the degree of control over their activities that might be devolved to local authorities. This is evidently a sensitive political issue as there are local governments that are under the control of non-Serb representatives. That the Ministry of Interior could itself re-structure to devolve more authority to local police commanders seems to have been the theme of a contest within the Ministry between reformists and conservative forces. Other than local authorities, police also wanted to have greater access to social workers, clergy and NGO leaders in each region and thus the creation of "Safety Boards" was supported. It was envisaged that the composition of these boards would be entirely voluntary, but that the agenda would be directed by the police. One needs therefore to question whether participation on these boards would convey a less authoritarian image and produce the sort of two-way communication upon which an improvement in public confidence seems to depend.

Evidence from countries such as Canada and the United States operating the form of public consultation being suggested by officials from the Serbian Ministry is not encouraging (Hayes, 2001). In Britain, studies have shown that if local policing policies cannot be influenced, the consultative process tends to be "ritualistic, neither encouraging involvement nor enhancing accountability" (Neyroud, 2001: 13). Similar findings were discovered by Malan (2000), who has heavily criticized the community consultation boards established in South Africa. He contends the boards were generally problematic as they were set up without sufficient forethought into the role to be played by members of the general public.

Taking into account the views of those surveyed, it would seem that Serbian community policing should be defined in terms that prioritize public participation as a principle of good governance to be adapted by the Serbian Ministry of the Interior. The public is patently awaiting egalitarian local communication structures with authentic and statutory (if not financial) powers over local police forces. In order to be effective, however, a participatory approach is required that goes beyond public consultation that too often, as Jürgen Habermas (1971: 62–86) observed, results in the acclamation of decisions already made. A form of progressive political accountability focused on local police policies that supplement retrospective legislative accountability structures would seem to be a fundamental prerequisite to a more effective policing environment in Serbia. This would, of course, require a fundamental shift of attitude by the police who seem to be somewhat reluctant to accept the need for internal re-organization as a prerequisite for more democratic local policing. However, the Ministry must at the same time address the more deep-rooted concerns expressed by those who participated in this survey. This would

require policies that will strengthen community-police relations not only through a well planned and relevant community policing programme, but also through wider reform based on training, infrastructural development and organizational devolution.

Notes

- [1] *Vreme*, Belgrade, Former Republic of Yugoslavia, 16 November 2000—Taken on a sample of 1,639 adult citizens in Serbia, 24–30 October 2000.
- [2] *Mission and Vision Summary: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Republic of Serbia*, presented at the Coordination Meeting on Ministry of Internal Affairs Reform, 17 December 2001.
- [3] Other pilot sites were later added, including the post-conflict region in southern Serbia. Findings are confined to the initial four.
- [4] From the *Proposal of the Plan for Development and Implementation of a Community Policing Project*, Ministry of Interior, Republic of Serbia, 2002.
- [5] Legislation was passed in April 2002.
- [6] It should be noted here that besides having few female officers, the police in Serbia do not receive training in victim support counselling.
- [7] One interesting question, for example, concerned the reasons why a local businessman who was known to be corrupt was not arrested by the police. Another question involved a request for a night-shift duty police officer in village five miles from Novi Becej. Police answered that they did not have evidence to arrest the businessman and did not have resources for the night officer, but that police would ensure that local nightclubs and cafés did not serve alcohol to anyone who might create a disturbance or play music too loudly. The night officer, it seems, was a question related to the issue of field theft.
- [8] This concept of socialist self-management was given force in the constitutional reform of 1953 when people's councils (*mesna zajednica*) were set-up at borough level in each municipality and empowered as the "basic organs of state authority". They were designed as community-level institutions under the municipality's authority intended to manage community events. They have buildings and full-time officials, and exist in proportionate number to the size of a municipal area. E.g., Zvezdara, with over 130,000 inhabitants, has seventeen *mesna zajednica* of varying capacity. Today, they are generally run-down places in urban areas, while they often remain central to rural life.
- [9] From an interview with Dereta Milijenko, Director of the NGO, Citizens Initiatives, in November 2002. Also, it must be noted that this relationship was swiftly changing as a number of NGOs expressed a willingness to become involved with police community projects. Mainly, NGO members wished to help with police training in human rights, but it was unclear to what extent the Ministry of Interior were willing to accept this offer of assistance.
- [10] According to a Ministry source, this programme is to counteract the way parents in Serbia often use the police as a threat to naughty children and diminish the manner in which police are negatively perceived by young children.
- [11] This incident occurred before the relevant legislation was passed in April 2002.
- [12] According to the IWPR'S *Balkan Crisis Report* (no. 506, 8 July 2004): "The exact number of Roma in Serbia is unknown as the majority have no registered place of residence. In the 2002 census, 109,000 persons declared themselves as Roma. In reality, the figure is bound to be higher. Dejan Markovic, representative of Serbia for the Roma National Congress, the international Roma organization, says 600,000 to 800,000 Roma inhabit the territory of Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Professor Bozidar Jaksic, sociologist at the Belgrade Institute for Social Sciences, gives a lower figure. 'There are about 350,000 to 400,000 Roma in Serbia,' this acknowledged expert on the issue maintains."

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