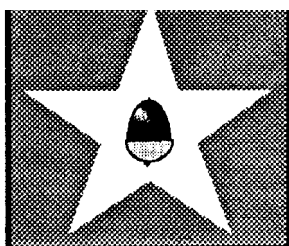


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

**Bob Churcher**

**Kosovo Lindore/Preshevo  
1999-2002  
& The FYROM Conflict**

**March 2002**



**G104**

# **Kosovo Lindore/Preshevo 1999-2002 & The FYROM Conflict**

**Bob Churcher**

*This paper examines the recent history and underlying political forces at work in the Preshevo/Kosovo Lindore conflict and argues that the peace agreement reached in 2001 is likely to need revision and greater commitment by the international community if a lasting settlement is to be reached.*

## **Contents**

### **Abbreviations**

<b>Summary &amp; Salient Points</b>	1
<b>The Background to the Conflict &amp; the Connection with the Northern Macedonian (FYROM) Villages</b>	2
<b>Southern Serbia or Eastern Kosovo?</b>	4
Map of Kumanovo-Vranje Corridor	5
<b>The Events of 2001</b>	10
Box - Albanian Political Parties in the Preshevo Area	13
<b>The Preshevo Link with FYROM</b>	16
<b>Overall View in The Balkan Context</b>	18
Implications for Serbia	18
Implications for FYROM	19
<b>Implications for Balkan Stability</b>	21
<b>The Future, Peace Plans, NATO, the EU - &amp; the Likelihood of Success in Peacemaking</b>	21

## Abbreviations

DMZ	Demilitarised Zone
DOS	Democratic Opposition of Serbia
DPA	Party of Democratic Albanians
EAAG	Ethnic Albanian Armed Groups
EUMM	EU Monitoring Mission
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GSZ	Ground Security Zone, safe area
IC	International Community
JNA	Communist Period Yugoslav Army
JSO	Special Operations Anti-Terrorist Unit
KDOM	Kosovo Demilitarisation Observation Mission
KFOR	Multinational Force in Kosovo
KLA	Kosova Liberation Army
KVM	Kosovo Verification Mission
LDK	Kosova Democratic League
LKCK	National Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo
LPK	Kosovo People's Movement
MNB	Multinational Brigade
MUP	Serbian Interior Ministry Police
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PADU	Party of Albanian Democratic Union
PBDSh	Patria per Bashkimin Demokratik te Shqiptareve
PCPMB	Political wing of the UCPMB
PDA	Party of Democratic Action
PDD	Partia Demokratskih Delovanja
PDK	Democratic Party of Kosovo
PDP	Party of Democratic Prosperity
PDUA	Partia Demokratskog Ujedinjenja Albanaca
PMB	Preshevo, Medveja and Bujanovac
PVD	Partia e Veprimit Demokratik
SAJ	Paramilitary Special Police Units
SDSM	Social Democratic Party of Macedonia
SPS	Socialist Party of Serbia
UCK	Ushtria Climitare Kosoves
UCPMB	Liberation Army of Preshevo-Medvedje-Bujanovac
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNMIK	United Nations Mission in Kosovo
VJ	Yugoslav Army
VMRO	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation

## Summary & Salient Points

The recent (1999-2001) conflict by Albanians against the Serb Government in the Preshevo<sup>1</sup> area was ended, in the view of the International Community (IC) by a successful NATO sponsored negotiation. This paper examines this statement, the background to the conflict, whether it really has ended, and the question of what if any was the connection to the later Albanian insurgency in Macedonia.

There are perhaps three really salient points:

- The cause - which should be seen as the present borders and not a question of human rights - goes back to the Serbian seizure of Albanian inhabited territory to the south of what was then Serbia, from the Ottoman Empire in 1879 and 1912. There were already basic Slav/Albanian ethnic differences, and there grew up an Albanian dislike of being ruled by Slavs in what they see as their homeland.
- This in turn connects to Serbian expansionist ambitions of the nineteenth century, matching those of Bulgaria and Greece, versus Albanians' ideas of remaining within a reformed Ottoman Empire for reasons of religion, protection and so on.
- The “peace agreement” in Preshevo has been widely portrayed as the result of a NATO “negotiation process”, and not merely as a result of the NATO withdrawal of the safe area (DMZ) so necessary to any guerrilla war in such a small area (PMB is only around 1,200 sq km). There is also the question of the withdrawal of US support after Milosevic’s fall, and the outbreak of the Macedonian conflict, when NATO fears precipitately ended the DMZ, where the rebellion had concentrated.

The “negotiation process” was simply this: accept the Covic plan and return to the status quo and Serbian rule or face total destruction Kosovo style. Despite facilitating four meetings inexperienced NATO negotiators allowed three meetings to degenerate into stating Serb demands for the return of Serb prisoners. The fourth briefly touched on the Covic plan for police reforms, and was then followed by NATO announcing the end of the DMZ, and that any ex-fighters could cross the administrative border into Kosovo, if they surrendered their weapons. In reality the only negotiation was by NATO, in arranging that OSCE would have some role in the re-constituted “multi-ethnic” police force.

The Albanian rebels in Preshevo were, and are, not a unified movement - both the Kosova and Macedonian rebellions by Albanians against Slav rule (or misrule as they saw it) were reasonably unified, both had only one large and one small organisation involved in commanding parts of the armed rebellion. In Preshevo it was hard to distinguish how many organisations were involved in armed revolt, but there were at least 6 or 7 local village defence forces, each working back to a supporting organisation elsewhere. Admittedly this did have precedents in the early Kosovo conflict, but in Preshevo it was greatly exacerbated by the lack of any educated (intellectual) leadership in the villages. What passed for an educated

“middle-class” opposition in Preshevo supported Riza Halimi and the PDA, akin to the early LDK in Kosovo.

There are a number of other reasons why the Preshevo conflict is of interest.

Being on the edge of the Albanian and Slav/Serb inhabited areas of the southern Balkans, the Preshevo conflict epitomises Serb/Slav v Albanian conflict in the Balkans - possibly the end of the Slavic expansion into the Balkans dating from Byzantine times.

The conflict has been widely alleged to have been started by the US, or at least encouraged and supported as part of the plan to destabilise Milosevic. The conflict can also be seen as part of wider pan-Albanian aims, or at least part of the aims of a small element of radical nationalists who saw success in Kosovo as only the start of regaining control of all Albanian inhabited lands which had fallen under Serb control successively in 1876/9 and 1911/12.

The conflict also has an unusual geo-strategic significance: the hills around Preshevo were seen, at least in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as potentially controlling Serbia's route to the south, although in reality modern artillery has probably obviated this consideration. This possible threat to the main route south from Serbia to Salonica still has great significance in Serb and Greek minds.

Lastly, the real interest in the Preshevo problem is that it is continuing, albeit at a markedly lower level. There are small scale attacks on the police, including the multi-ethnic police. VJ military expenditure on bases and road building remains very high, and the Serbian press continues to carry articles on how Serbs are being forced out of the area. In Belgrade the ongoing problems remain one of the main causes of dispute between the old unreformed VJ and reformers (albeit very limited reformers) such as Covic.

And the future: Shefket Musliu (ex commander of the UCPMB) stated to *Zeri* in Pristina<sup>2</sup> that there could be no lasting peace until the agreement (presumably the Covic plan) was fully implemented.

## **The Background to the Conflict & the Connection with the Northern Macedonian (FYROM) Villages**

The conflict examined in this document has broken out around the borders of Serbia, Kosovo and FYROM, but this is no geographic accident. These particular (formerly internal Yugoslav administrative) borders have never been gazetted<sup>3</sup> in any way that western Europeans would understand, and were created for the first time in 1946-47.<sup>4</sup> At that time serious violence between the victorious communists and local resistance groups, predominantly Albanian and Moslem, was in progress. Prior to that the international and regional administrative borders in the Kosova Lindore/Preshevo region had changed radically several times in various ways over the previous 70 years, revised village by village at various times subsequently, and were recently changed again by FRY and FYROM<sup>5</sup> without reference to the UN mandated administration of Kosovo.

These changes all have one thing in common. They cut across contiguous districts inhabited by people of Albanian ethnicity and language, who have not been consulted in the process. To take the village of Tanushec (on the Kosovo/FYROM

border) where the FYROM conflict started in February 2001 as one example - this village was previously the summer grazing village of Vitinje, in Kosovo, and the two were part of the same administrative division (the Vardar Banovina) until 1947. The separation of Yugoslavia has torn these villages apart, but for strong economic and social reasons they wish to remain together.

Despite the wishes of the International Community to pretend otherwise, Serbs and Albanians seem to have had a cordial dislike for each other since time immemorial<sup>6</sup>, or at least since 1876, when the Serbian army first drove<sup>7</sup> large numbers of Albanians out of what is now south Serbia, giving rise to a cycle of violence and expulsion that haunts the southern Balkans until this day. The very borders of even the countries concerned were undefined, except very loosely, until recently, and the inhabitants of the peripheries, here Albanian, as distinct from Slav-Macedonian or Serbian, are loath to accept what has been imposed on them by force in successive invasions and massacres over the last century or more.

Most international observers of the Balkans' problems over the last 10 years have resolutely set themselves against any mention of history, citing as their justification its alleged irrelevance to the problems of today. Whilst it is true that most of the wars of the Yugoslav succession were largely caused by the Serbian desire to keep all Serbs in one state, as distinct from the desire of states such as Croatia to separate, the roots of the current troubles in the southern Balkans lie not in the Serb treatment of their Albanian citizens (whilst it is true that they would like to expel them, or get them to leave), but in the Ambassadors' Conference of London. This conference, in 1912, apportioned Albanian inhabited land between the neighbouring states, leaving many more Albanians outside the new Albanian state than inside, not to mention making northern Macedonia part of Serbia, rather than Bulgaria, which is where most local Slav-speakers at the time thought of as their nearest kin-state.

The years of 1912/13 (the First and Second Balkan Wars) were accompanied by "Balkan style" ethnic cleansing of villages which resisted, with all the usual atrocities, as the Serbian Army occupied what is now Kosovo and northern Macedonia. The Serb atrocities after the Battle of Kumanovo remained notorious for many years afterwards. In the Preshevo and Bujanovac villages, these memories were very strong, since their neighbours in Medveje had been subject to the same process in 1878, following the Conference of Berlin, and such oral histories of expulsion and atrocity can easily be found in households in the area on both sides of the 1947 administrative border today. Many ethnic Albanian Preshevo village families are descended from impoverished ex-middle class families who were expelled from Kumanovo by the victorious Serbs, an important factor in the traditional radicalism of the region. A district of Pristina in Kosovo is still inhabited by Preshevo valley refugees from that time, joined by the post-World War II expulsions.

The result of the Great Powers' (principally Russian)<sup>8</sup> backing of the Serbs' expansionist aims was serious fighting and instability in the southern Balkans for most of the last century, with the exception of the communist period, which saw its own horrors. The fears and uncertainties consequent on Yugoslavia containing large numbers of Albanians who did not regard it as their state are with us till today. Whilst present events may, as noted above, result directly from Macedonian (FYROM) and Serb repression of their Albanians, ultimate stability is unlikely to come only from addressing issues of human rights (or from changing the borders, which is currently unacceptable). None of the Belgrade governments, Royalist or

communist or post-communist has shown any intention of implementing the numerous agreements made in the past, and after the last century the dislike between Slav and Albanian simply runs too deep.

International speculation is that the recent Preshevo conflict was being fuelled by militants from the former KLA, but in terms of intra-state war it is not, unfortunately, the wishes of any majority that brings a state to terrorism, but the aims and intentions of a militant but violent minority. This does not mean that the IC should not try approaches centred around the conflict resolution, human rights, minority rights, and borderless regions ideals, but it does mean that success through these methods alone is unlikely. The key problem in the Preshevo communes is the rule of a local Serb minority over a localised Albanian majority, which remains contiguous with its Albanian speaking neighbours in Kosovo. IC and Serbian opposition to any form of autonomy is based on borders which were created in two of the communes only decades ago, and which have little validity in local Albanians' minds even today.

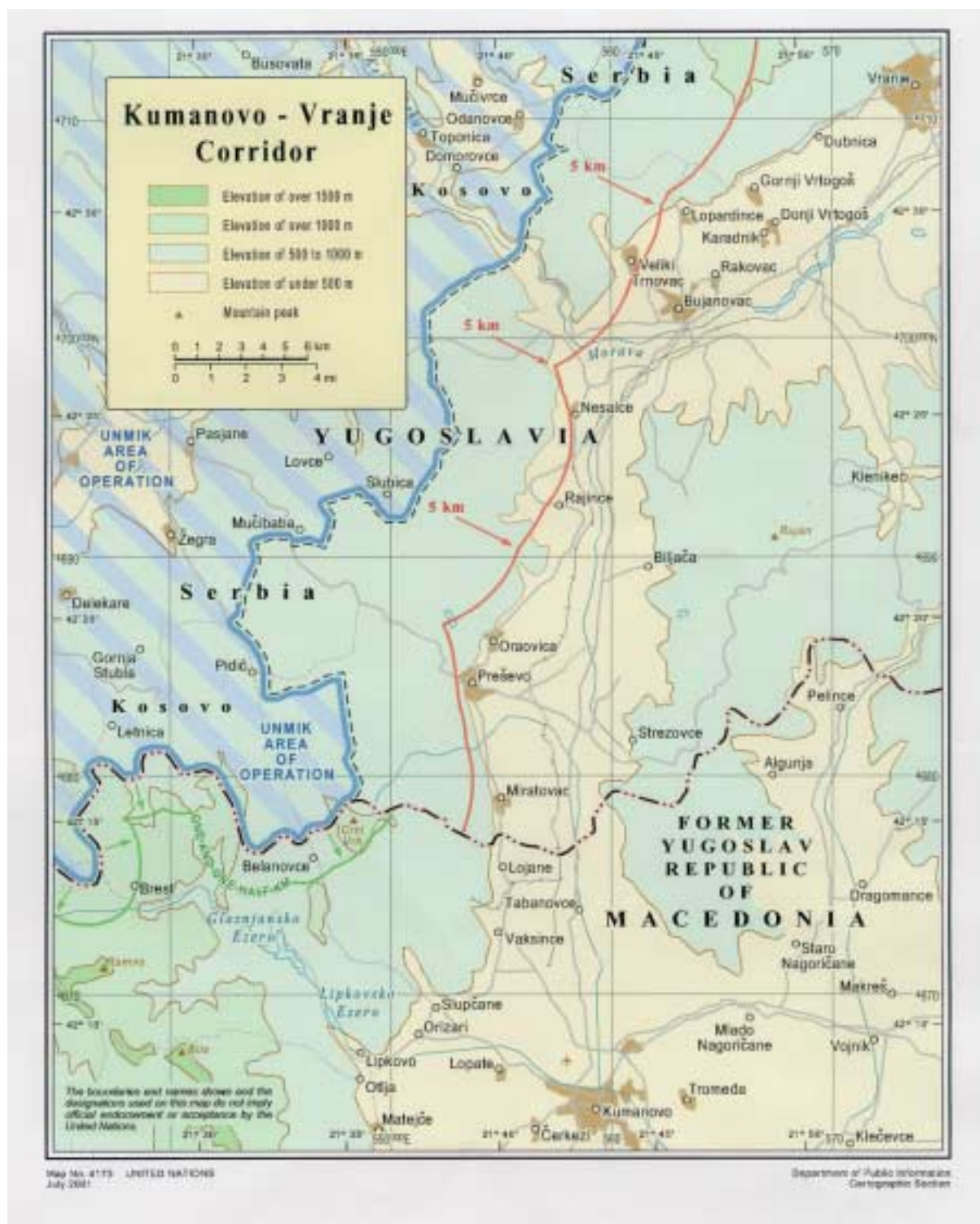
### **Southern Serbia or Eastern Kosovo?**

The towns of Bujanovac and Preshevo lie in the upper part of the southern Morava river valley along the route of the main north-south land corridor for the entire Balkans. This road connects Belgrade with the Macedonian (FYROM) capital of Skopje and the Greek port of Thessaloniki (Salonica). Comprising the Morava and Vardar river valleys, this corridor contains the main road and rail routes between central Europe and the Aegean Sea. Loss of Bujanovac and Preshevo is seen by the Serbs as effectively cutting Serbia off from FYROM and Greece and giving Albanian forces a wedge to use in any demands against the Serb and FYROM governments. In this context Greece has played an important background role in the conflict, as the breaking of this link is seen in Athens as a Turkish objective in the region.

Further north, Medveja<sup>9</sup> lies in the mountains to the south-west of the city of Leskovac in the Jablanica river valley, which feeds into the southern Morava. Although in a strategic sense of lesser importance than Bujanovac and Preshevo, Albanian possession of Medveja could drive a wedge towards Leskovac, cutting off this route at yet another point.

But the question of who controls this region now in eastern Kosova/southern Serbia goes beyond simply severing a strategically important route. In a January 2001 report on southern Serbia,<sup>10</sup> the UN Special Envoy for the Balkans, Carl Bildt, warned that any escalation in fighting could lead to renewed ethnic cleansing from Kosovo, as well as this time dragging in the tense ethnic Albanian regions of northern and western Macedonia.<sup>11</sup> The potential for escalating regional conflict is still considerable, despite Macedonian problems having taken the lead in the IC's minds.

## Kosovo Lindore/Preshevo 1999-2002 &amp; The FYROM Conflict



During 2001 fighting between the approximately 700 to 1,000 Albanian guerrillas and Yugoslav security forces was confined largely to skirmishes with infantry weapons, including 82mm and later 120mm mortars.<sup>12</sup> Extremists on both sides in the early stage of the conflict appeared intent on creating provocations, the Albanians in the hope of NATO intervention, and the Serbs in the hope of lining up international public opinion in favour of dissolving the buffer zone.<sup>13</sup> In the first stage of the conflict, the Serbs won the battle for IC opinion, producing what Serb Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic later described as 'our first victory for ten years' when Serb troops re-entered the demilitarised Ground Security Zone. Ironically, it



appears that the guerrillas purchased at least a portion of their weapons directly from the Serbs and the VJ.<sup>14</sup> Much of the remainder appears to have been coming through FYROM, where the police are alleged by FYROM press sources to have been assisting the arms smuggling operation in return for bribes.<sup>15</sup>

In the view of many in KFOR, the Albanian guerrillas have been at least unwittingly aided in their efforts by the US Army, which patrols most of the Kosovo side of the administrative boundary with southern Serbia. Operating under a policy of "Force Protection" that places the safety of US soldiers ahead of actually accomplishing any given mission, it was claimed in early 2001 that the US forces were reluctant to risk incurring casualties and leave their bases to engage in the heavy patrolling necessary to prevent cross-border infiltration by the guerrillas. Defenders of US KFOR have claimed that the heavily wooded and remote border is impossible to police effectively, and that KFOR views are based on experience in the much easier territory in MNB Central Zone where BRITFOR is the lead force. The dispute may be as revealing of the dominant pro-Serb ideologies within French and British KFOR as anything connected with ground level military realities. But as a result, there was a relatively unhindered flow of volunteers across the boundary from Kosovo into Kosovo Lindore/Preshevo.

The limiting factor in the early stages of the war was to be Yugoslav unwillingness to provoke a KFOR or international community response should the VJ enter the five kilometre-wide buffer zone created by the July 1999 Kumanovo military-technical agreement between KFOR and the VJ. This agreement, which regulated the terms and conditions of KFOR's entry into Kosovo and the VJ's withdrawal, permitted only police with small arms inside the buffer zone, while forbidding all VJ forces. Heavy weapons were specifically excluded. Given the unwillingness of the VJ to provoke a NATO response and international condemnation, as well as the reluctance of the police to incur losses in frontal infantry assaults without artillery support, the ethnic Albanian guerrillas in the region successfully seized large parts of the buffer zone. This process began as early as November-December 1999, when the UCPMB began to form and develop local military activity.

Based on their behaviour and tactics, it would appear that the UCPMB may have benefited from US style training or trainers (though not necessarily funded by the US, of course).<sup>16</sup> This training could have occurred after NATO entered Kosovo and before Milosevic was overthrown, and it has been suggested that it was part of a plan for destabilising the Milosevic regime.

The Preshevo Albanian guerrillas, both at village level and within extremist party thinking, were no doubt encouraged by the success of their ethnic brethren in Kosovo during 1996-1999, particularly in their ability to provoke a NATO intervention. Funded, encouraged and supported by former KLA fighters and commanders, the local Albanians formed the Liberation Army of Preshevo-Medvedje-Bujanovac (UCPMB). Formal operations began in January 2000, with a political wing and local spokesmen operating out of Pristina and Gjilane, and a journal, *Ushtima e Maleve*, that was soon appearing regularly on Kosovo bookstalls, giving news of the war.

But Albanian success in Kosovo was not the only reason for a local Albanian uprising. The approximately 70,000 Albanians in southern Serbia had legitimate long term grievances, on top of their historical memories and the recent results of the Serb VJ retreat from Kosovo. In administrative regions that are 75% to 90% Albanian speaking they have long remained excluded from participation in public

life. Throughout the three communes the Serbian authorities have subjected the ethnic Albanians to widespread official discrimination and persecution, particularly over the last 10 years, when under the Milosevic regime Albanians were sacked from their jobs and positions of public authority.

In the 1998-1999 wartime period, the Serb forces ravaged the Preshevo valley, completely destroying 3 Islamic buildings and causing serious damage to 11 of 23 others in the valley. Serbia excluded Albanians from the education and health care systems, subjected them to dismissal from jobs in state-owned companies, the police, and other public sector jobs, while severely limiting access to Albanian language media and political office. As in Kosovo, the disenfranchisement of an entire sector of the population caused the homogenisation of the local Albanian population against the Serbs. Coupled with the successes in removing FRY power across the administrative border in Kosovo, it was only a matter of time before the situation boiled over.

It suited Milosevic both to create and then to ensure the continuation of the rebellion in Preshevo, since it kept the "threat" to Serbia alive. Interestingly, it seems also to have suited his successors. Kostunica and Djindjic have both used "the Albanian threat" as a talking point, and have both, and especially Djindjic, exploited the conflict in the international arena, as each time they refrained from military action it could be presented as a public relations coup. The Belgrade regime employed substantial foreign expert help in presenting its case. It enabled Belgrade to publicly demonstrate the new moderate democratic government at work, and was initially successful. The problem is that creating this media situation has been very easy, but finding a real solution in the three Preshevo communes will be much harder.

The Serbian media has presented the UCPMB as part of an irredentist movement intent on carving out sections of Serbia to form a Kosovo-centred Greater Albania or Greater Kosovo. As was common during the Milosevic era, the Albanian forces in the region are portrayed as "terrorists", all Albanians are referred to by the derogatory term *Siptar* (about the equivalent of "nigger" in American English), KFOR is depicted as incompetent, and Kosovo and other Albanian areas are havens for drug trafficking, white slavery, and other crimes.<sup>17</sup> The Serbian press whipped up hysteria with sensationalist headlines and stories, including the threat of Albanian artillery attacks, on the city of Vranje.<sup>18</sup> No mention is made of what the Albanians' demands are, and whether these demands may or may not be legitimate. International community and diplomatic figures in Belgrade, anxious to assist the DOS government, were prepared to overlook the lack of change in the VJ and police.

Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica took a hard line in the Serbian press in regard to southern Serbia, refusing to negotiate with "terrorists", and encouraging the VJ and police to stamp out the rebellion.<sup>19</sup> In retrospect, this illustrates the central dependence of the so-called 'democratic' Serb regime on army support. Kostunica refuses to acknowledge the background of Serb policies that led to the Albanian insurgency.<sup>20</sup> He also publicly encouraged calls for reducing or eliminating the buffer zone, so as to permit the VJ to bring artillery and tanks to bear on the insurgents and - if Kosovo is any guide - the civilian population. By February 2001 he seemed confident that this would happen, only to find that whilst NATO was prepared to reduce the zone, the offer was hedged about by restrictions on Serb withdrawals of controversial units such as the VJ's Pristina Corps. But NATO gave way fully to Serb demands later in the summer of 2001, due to the Macedonian conflict, and the Ground Security Zone was fully opened on August 17

2001, a major strategic victory over NATO for the unreformed VJ under Milosevic henchman (and now Kostunica's Chief of Staff) General Nebojsa Pavkovic.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to Kostunica, Serbian Premier Zoran Djindjic has not ruled out talking with anyone, provided that the party be willing to enter into constructive dialogue. With foreign help, Serbian vice-president Nebojsa Covic came up with an innovative three-part plan, the Programme for the Solution of the Crisis in the Pcinja District,<sup>22</sup> to solve the problem by promising to emancipate the Preshevo Albanians and reintegrate them into Serbian civil, political, social and economic life. This plan combined a series of confidence-building measures, which include reintroducing Albanians into the local police force, combined with a gradual phased disarmament plan, with economic aid for job creation, and various social reforms. By contrast, the Albanians have not had the same IC expert help, and thus allowed the Serbs to set the political agenda, which NATO then forced through by agreeing to end the safe haven of the ground security zone.

The Covic plan - although not the answer in and of itself - was the first serious step taken by Serbia to address some of the underlying sources of regional tension and instability. Given adequate domestic and good international support, it helped to resolve the issue in a non-violent manner, while demonstrating good will towards the region's Albanian population. If fully implemented the plan could have sent a message to Pristina that the Serbs are finally ready for constructive dialogue with the Albanians. The plan was regarded by NATO in Brussels as a good basis for talks, though it needs to be remembered that the real problem is that the remaining Albanian inhabited areas in Serbia lost all trust in government by Serbian officials a long time ago, and the Serbs had no intention of entering into talks, unless they were surrender talks. The plan was "take it or leave it". In the long term IC ambitions are likely to founder on this local reality. What the Preshevo Albanians as a whole really want is peace, but to them that means "no Serb police or army". In constitutional terms, in Preshevo, it is claimed that a majority of Albanians are said to want a form of autonomy, while a more radical minority would wish to be reunited with Kosovo.

Set against the good efforts from the DOS government in Belgrade, Milosevic's SPS extremists in early 2001 still maintained control over much of southern Serbia's media, and their efforts appeared aimed at stirring rather than calming tensions. The SPS used the issue in an effort to destabilise the DOS government. The police and VJ favoured a forceful resolution of the problem, and engaged in deliberate provocations, hoping to provoke a UCPMB response that would permit them to enter the buffer zone and settle the matter once and for all through ethnic cleansing. For their part, the UCPMB guerrillas appeared all too willing to deliberately provoke the VJ and police and to respond in kind to provocation, hoping for a Serbian response that would draw in KFOR and NATO. Despite the implementation of the Covic plan Kosovo Lindore/southern Serbia is still providing a rallying point for nationalist passions on both sides of the ethnic divide, where nationalist extremists - including those within the VJ and police - see regional problems as an ideal way to advance their wider agendas. Serb weapons sales to the Albanian guerrillas were one manifestation of this, now it is more internal Serbian politics, as both sides feed off each other. It is also likely that the lingering remains of the Preshevo crisis are a significant factor in the lack of reform in the VJ under General Pavkovic.

Although the FRY, NATO, and much of the international community supported the Covic initiative for resolving the crisis in the Preshevo-Bujanovac-Medvedje region of

southern Serbia, strong nationalist forces within the police and army were pressing for a military solution, if the negotiations should fail. Looking back, a 18 February 2001 joint closed-door meeting between the Serbian and FRY governments decided on unspecified "measures for protection against terrorism". Following the meeting Serbian Minister of Justice Vladan Batic said "the boundaries of patience have disappeared";<sup>23</sup> while Federal Minister of Defence Slobodan Krapovic added that if negotiations failed, "our forces will be forced to undertake anti-terrorist actions".<sup>24</sup> The VJ military journal in 2001 had frequent reports of training for 'anti-terrorist' operations in the Preshevo area. There is clearly a lack of goodwill amongst many sections of the security forces even now.

Given the resolve of local extremists on both sides of the issue, a peaceful solution may not prove readily forthcoming. Already signs are appearing that Serbian and FRY security forces in southern Serbia may adopt new tactics against potential renewed insurgency.<sup>25</sup> The VJ is conducting a very large construction operation in the area, building new bases and roads to access the new Kosovo administrative border.

If the issue festers, the VJ and police - supported by conservative nationalist elements within DOS - will certainly seek a military solution that could include ethnically cleansing the entire region. Official VJ statements that the UCPMB is planning a spring offensive in 2002 give credibility to the likelihood that they themselves wish to act, and everyone sees the spring as a likely time for a provocation from either side.<sup>26</sup>

On the question of southern Serbia, Yugoslav diplomacy has successfully lined up international opinion on its side, and appears to have won significant backing from NATO, the US and the EU to find a negotiated solution. There was increasing western acceptance of Belgrade's proposal for shrinking or eliminating the buffer zone. Technically this was agreed to, in phases, starting in Montenegro and not with the Preshevo area. In practice, it was completed by September 2001.

As a result, any FRY military intervention through the buffer zone into Kosovo itself might find KFOR and NATO unwilling and unable to react, short of a politically untenable return to sanctions or outright warfare. Yugoslav military action inside southern Serbia would trigger greater Albanian violence against the remaining Serb enclaves in Kosovo. Serb reaction to this in turn could catch NATO, KFOR and international aid agencies unprepared for new refugees from Preshevo and the resulting internal Kosovo violence. Renewed television pictures of fighting and refugees in Europe could once again push western governments in directions they would not naturally go.

The problems in southern Serbia are presenting a political headache to the new DOS leadership as well as creating a litmus test on nationalist issues, reform and co-operation with the west. Southern Serbia is also diverting sorely needed resources away from the country's dire social needs towards not only the VJ and police, but also towards repair of civilian infrastructure, such as telecommunications and electricity distribution installations, some of which the guerrillas are alleged to have destroyed. All told, the southern Serbia question has exposed significant weaknesses in the VJ, Serbia's police, civilian government, policies towards its minorities and KFOR's policy of Force Protection. It will continue to create instability until such time as Serbian authorities and the local Albanian population can come to agreement on the proper role of an Albanian minority in a Slavic majority state, if this is still a possible, practical scenario. In

the meantime, Albanian and Serb extremists are both using the threat of renewed guerrilla war in southern Serbia to advance their agendas at the expense of more moderate voices.

The international community is quick to blame both the Albanian and (to a lesser extent) the Serb side for the current problems in the Preshevo valley. Yet the international community too is blind to many of the problems. Having created unworkable entities in 1912, and again in 1919, and turned a blind eye to Tito's ethnic cleansing after World War II, the IC is now determined to insist that the panacea of equal human rights will somehow solve the problem. In fact most IC governments neither know nor care why the problem arose, they would simply like to see a quick fix to solve it, without addressing the underlying issues.

## **The Events of 2001**

The military conflict started when ethnic Albanian men in uniform appeared at the funeral of two brothers, Isa Saqipi (36) and Shaip Saqipi (32), who were allegedly killed by Serbian police forces whilst driving a tractor in January 2000. This brought the formation of the UCPMB into the open, when uniformed Albanian men came to the funeral in events which seem indistinguishable from those at the start of the main Kosovo ground war in January 1998. The UCPMB then started a campaign of using small arms (mostly AKs) and the occasional anti-tank mine to drive the by now entirely Serbian Police (MUP) out of the GSZ. They were assisted in this, since for reasons of force protection (and avoiding getting lost) US troops, who should control the adjacent Kosovo border, not only do not come into the GSZ, but do not come within one and a half kilometres of it either.

They also seem to have received training assistance from someone or some organisation training<sup>27</sup> in an American military style. This became apparent both from the style of marching, complete with US-type marching songs, and the infantry tactics used. (The effectiveness of this was seen in November 2000 when a series of well coordinated infantry attacks demonstrated the UCPMB's ability to coordinate the use of 82mm mortars and to effectively "re-organise on the objective" - something that the Bosnian army never learnt in three years.)

The UCPMB had acquired a number of 120mm mortars and 79mm recoilless anti-tank weapons (which to the uninitiated look like small artillery pieces, but can only fire directly, not over hills). Publicly the Serb forces claimed never to fire back, but in fact this is pure nonsense, since they always engaged the 79mm pieces with tank fire, and also occasionally used artillery and mortar fire, in what might be very loosely described as counter-battery fire. Serbian statements claimed that the insurgents had at least two genuine artillery pieces, with both D30s and 122mm (relatively large, long range artillery) being allegedly in UCPMB possession.

In this case the changing nature of the situation is affected by the weaponry being used, and prospects for peace or war may be indicated by changes in this. It may also be useful to have an independent view from the ground of the veracity of the claims by both sides.

By the end of January 2001, the Serbian army was again shelling villages, this time in what is now Serbia, and the first Serb soldier had been killed by the UCPMB. KFOR, rather than the UN, had become involved in talks with Serbia, and running political negotiations to try to prevent the situation escalating.

The most fiercely contested area was part of the same Banovina (county or district) as Kosovo until after WWII (1947), and closely connected to Gjilane in Kosovo. The area is important both as being part of Serbia in Serb eyes (most Serbs are unaware of the former Kosovar connection) and as being very close to the strategic Nis-Skopje highway. The new Yugoslav government seemed to be benefiting from the clash, winning considerable sympathy for their restrained views on "going in hard". However, "going in hard" was clearly the view of the Yugoslav army, which had continually exerted pressure locally with its Pristina Corps, and the notorious SAJ units (plus the JSO "Frenkie's boys" - extreme nationalist paramilitaries) squeezing up against the edge of the zone, and whose original behaviour, taking revenge for their defeat in Kosovo on the largely Albanian speaking inhabitants in 1999 is alleged to have resulted in the local Albanians taking action to defend themselves and forming the UCPMB.

Another cause of ill feeling was the occupation of socially-owned buildings. When the Pristina Corps moved in from Kosovo they took over the only working factory in Vranje as a base, putting 400 workers out.<sup>28</sup> It was hardly the way to start winning hearts and minds, but the security forces' intentions back in 1999 seemed to be more to get rid of their remaining Albanian citizens after losing Kosovo, rather than to win the battle for IC opinion.

Violent incidents in early February 2001 intensified the conflict. On February 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Serb buses in Kosovo were attacked by Kosovar Albanian extremists, with 10 dead in the latter incident. Belgrade immediately suggested a connection with Preshevo (although there was no geographical connection, and the Albanians arrested for the crime had no connection with Preshevo), and accused "Albanian terrorists" of attempting to destabilise the peace talks (although these had not yet started). Interestingly the UCPMB joined in the general Albanian condemnation of this attack. These incidents were then followed by the deaths of three Serbian police who drove over a mine well inside their lines - perhaps predictably the Albanians suggested they had driven unknowingly over a Serbian army defensive mine. This in turn was followed by the killing of a senior UCPMB commander by Serbs less than a couple of hours later.

Once again the IC was left with the choice of condoning continued nationalist violence, this time in Serbia proper, or sending in international monitors or observers, risking assuming some degree of responsibility for the area. The alternative to this was likely to be a rerun of KDOM's and OSCE's experience in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, of simply bearing witness to more Serb atrocities. The problem is that whilst the Serbian government may have changed (though many doubt the reality of this where their Albanian citizens are concerned), it is very unlikely that the Serb army and police have. They will certainly revert to type when attacked by Albanians, whether local people acting in self defence, or politically motivated extremists intent on provoking a violent reaction.

Carl Bildt, in his report to the UN presented on January 15<sup>th</sup> 2001, had in fact advocated sending in monitors. He suggested the withdrawal of some Serb forces, followed by the creation of a multi-ethnic police force, but admitted this would take time. He also suggested that the Serb side agree to share power - "divide government" - with the Albanian community. He suggested that Belgrade start with confidence building measures outside the security zone, and complete this programme in "the presence of international forces".

Bob Churcher

His report went on to describe the enormous difficulties in doing this, but nevertheless stressed it as essential. In addition to his report, the UN appointed an inter-agency task force, headed by UNDP and OCHA to look into the humanitarian problems of Preshevo, though as yet it is too early to foresee what they may do. Only the first part of his plan, the EU monitor force, has been implemented.

It was against these UCPMB raids that Serbian Vice-President Covic proposed his three part plan (see page 8 above). In addition to this NATO, in the form of Secretary-General Robertson, also stepped in at a higher level. Robertson ostensibly welcomed the Covic plan as a basis for negotiation, but publicly stated it must not become an ultimatum, nor be used as an excuse for violence or "so called anti-terrorist action" by Serb forces. In fact his spokesman went as far as suggesting that the withdrawal of the notorious Pristina Corps and the paramilitary SAJ "anti-terrorist" unit would be helpful. Despite these statements the Covic plan did of course become an ultimatum (in many ways it already was), and the elements of the VJ previously in Kosovo also remained in situ.

In Belgrade the original Covic peace plan was said to be endorsed by the Albanian mayor of Preshevo, Riza Halimi, although what he is quoted as saying locally was that he favoured "complete demilitarisation"<sup>29</sup> and a locally recruited police force, reflecting the local population ratios, which would produce a very different force. Despite the difficulties it would probably have been wise to incorporate ex UCPMB fighters into this, or risk the continued violence which is now occurring (which would of course have been very difficult for the Serb government). Halimi's main demand, however, has always been that the basis of negotiations should be the unofficial local referendum of 1992, which voted overwhelmingly for autonomy for the region (but not independence).

The Albanian side nominated the shape of its negotiating team as follows:

UCPMB	3	(one for each main faction, presumably)
PC	PMB 2	(one Preshevo, one Medvedje)
Political Parties	4	(2 each),
plus possibly one independent expert.		

The Albanian side was as always complicated by the existence of numerous groups - there are two political parties, probably were six armed groups, under the umbrella title (but not command) of the UCPMB, which was in turn represented by the joint Political Council of PMB. All the Albanians were, however, united in stating the UCPMB should have the lead role in negotiations with Belgrade, as the "protectors of the inhabitants of PMB". NATO was also ostensibly keen that all the groups were represented in any talks, in order that they should be fully committed to any possible settlement or plan.

The political Council of the UCPMB did not seem to be very strong, and the real power may well have been with the Preshevo Mayor, Riza Halimi. He was probably perfectly correct in insisting that all military groups within UCPMB should be included in any negotiating team, suggesting that otherwise they would not be fully on board, and that any peace agreement might not hold. In the end only one or two groups were actually represented in what passed for talks, and in effect it was NATO's agreement to ending the DMZ which forced the groups to give up. In conversations at the time it was very clear that it was the perceived change in US support, and clear opposition by NATO, which demoralised the mainly poorly

educated village leadership of the UCPMB groups. In this context it is useful to note the diversity of ethnic Albanian parties in the region.

#### **Albanian Political Parties in the Preshevo Area**

PDA	(English)	Party of Democratic Action led by Riza Halimi, deputy Fatmir Asani
PVD	(Albanian)	Partia e Veprimit Demokratik
PDD	(Serbian)	Partia Demokratskih Delovanja
PADU	(English)	Party of Albanian Democratic Union led by Zeqirija Fazliu
PBDSh	(Albanian)	Partia per Bashkimin Demokratik te Shqiptareve
PDUA	(Serbian)	Partia Demokratskog Ujedinjenja Albanaca

There is also the political wing of the UCPMB. This is known as the PCPMB led by Shefket Musliu, and now by Jonus Musliu. The Spokesperson is Shaqir Shaqiri, or sometimes Tahir Dalipi (council member); Halil Salimi is head of Public Affairs. In many cases, these are ex-members of Dr Ibrahim Rugova's Kosova Democratic League (LDK), and most observers believe the LDK in 2000 was the predominant external political influence on events. In 2001, there was some evidence to suggest that the Kosova PDK party of Hashim Thaci increased its hitherto modest influence in the region.

Despite all these different problems, progress of a sort was made. The Albanian community in Preshevo appointed a nine person negotiating team (in itself quite a step forwards, since UCPMB had several separate components), but insisted on international mediation in any talks. In practice this did not really happen. NATO provided the tents for the talks, and attended the meetings, but there was no mediation. The NATO negotiation was at first carried out by Sean Sullivan, a US political adviser in KFOR. Later it was led by Peter Feith, who was styled as a "special representative of the NATO Secretary General". By then ending the Preshevo rebellion had become super-urgent, as the Macedonian Albanian rebellion had broken out, and at that early stage Lord Robertson in talks with the Macedonian government was describing Albanian rebels as "terrorists". Of the four brief meetings three were allowed to degenerate in arguments over Serbs alleged to be held by the UCPMB.

The Covic plan, although not presented to the Albanian side, was outlined in the Belgrade newspapers across two pages. It envisaged three stages, firstly a phased demilitarisation (in this case by the UCPMB, not the Serbian forces), then the "re-integration of ethnic Albanians in [Serbian] social and political structures, and finally the economic reconstruction and development in the area. In essence, this was what was agreed in May 2001. The plan was noteworthy for what it ruled out - no autonomy, no change of borders, and the threat of robust anti-terrorist action if it was not accepted. President Kostunica later added the caveat of "no talks with terrorists". He also explicitly rejected international mediation, saying that there was no place for this either in Preshevo or in Kosovo!<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps more interesting is what Covic said when introducing the plan. He would not rule out using the Yugoslav army for "anti-terrorist" action, but was able to rule out changing borders, or any form of special status or autonomy for the area. He also suggested that if this formula worked for Preshevo it could also work for Kosovo, which may provide an indication of the direction the Serbian government would like to move in. Kostunica then (Feb 2001) added to this by stating that there would be no negotiation with terrorists under any circumstances, and by suggesting the ground safety zone be ended, and policed by joint Serbian and KFOR patrols on both sides of the administrative border (the Kosovo-Serbia border).



'No negotiations with "terrorists"' caused a predictable problem with the Albanians, who insisted on UCPMB taking the lead, and who in any case refer to their fighters as defenders, armed protectors, or freedom fighters. The Albanian side also complained about the detail of the plan, its length and seeming lack of room for flexibility. They claimed that in essence the Serbs were saying: you can accept the plan, disarm, and live as you always did, which from the plan seemed to mean that about 50 Albanians could re-enter the police, and Albanian speaking children re-enter the schools, learn Serbian and live in a Serbian society. The plan, if genuinely implemented, might have been acceptable, and succeeded, in 1923, but in its present form is unlikely to enjoy any lasting success, except perhaps as a basis for talks.

The Albanian side did not publish any counter-proposals by early March 2001, and allowed the Serbs to set the first Preshevo agenda. However, it is clear from Riza Halimi's statements that the Albanian side would have liked to use the unofficial referendum of 1992, which advocated a special status for the area as the basis for talks. He was also very clear that UCPMB had to be included (a position initially advocated by NATO, as leading to inclusivity) and that the talks should include international mediation. He also made a counter proposal, that demilitarisation should include the withdrawal of Serbian forces from the whole of the three communes.

Although the Covic plan appeared to be an innovative step forward, it sounded remarkably similar to much earlier ideas in Kosovo, which in the end proved to be too little and too late. It does not meet international standards on minority education rights, or even those of pre-1990 Yugoslavia. It does not incorporate any ideas of international supervision, nor any guarantees of citizens or human rights, especially policing, other than incorporation into Serb institutions.

Tanjug, the official Serbian Press Agency, stated that the "concessions" would not start until demilitarisation was in progress. Demilitarisation, in this case, seemed to mean withdrawal or disarming of the UCPMB, and did not seem to incorporate any reciprocal offer other than to reduce VJ levels to those pre-conflict, which could mean anything. Whatever it meant, it was unlikely to be acceptable to local Albanians, especially the several thousand displaced by fear of the Serb forces.

As with previous peace proposals in Kosovo the IC, in diplomatic terms, enthusiastically endorsed the plan, thus backing the Serb interpretation of the history of the Preshevo dispute. This resulted in the usual trap - the IC endorsing one side's position, which is not one of negotiation, but of a fully formed plan, published in Cyrillic in Belgrade papers, but not presented to the Albanians in Preshevo at all, being tabled on a "take it or leave it" basis, to be followed by "robust anti-terrorist" actions.

Following widespread hints by Kostunica and the 28th February 2001 talks in Brussels it would seem that NATO had agreed to Belgrade's demands for a phased reduction of the demilitarised zone. Two things need to be borne in mind - as always in negotiations over the last few years with the FRY there are two stories. Belgrade announced a phased reduction of the GSZ, whilst NATO, in a press comment by Lord Robertson, suggested that this would depend on Serbia withdrawing the more provocative elements of its forces (possibly this meant the Pristina Corps, and perhaps part of the SAJ), and that the phased reduction would be linear (ie it would not start adjacent to Preshevo, but further north).

The spring 2001 initiative by the EU, based on Carl Bildt's report to the UN Security Council, with monitors setting up offices in Bujanovac, Preshevo, and perhaps Vranje, was undoubtedly a sensible step forward. EU monitors were to rise to 30, but in practice have not achieved this. The original plan, which did not happen, was that they would report directly to Carl Bildt (sidelining in this case OSCE and the UN). This, combined with more effective policing of the border by KFOR, as was recently done by the UK force reserve, resulting in several dozen arrests, may slowly stabilise the situation, although resolution will be a different matter.

As always in these negotiations there was a snag. Once again there was a demand for an International Military Rescue force stand by somewhere close. The obvious answer would have seemed to be KFOR, but press reports<sup>31</sup> indicated that there were differences in the IC over who would supply and command the force, with France advocating a non-NATO purely European force, and some suggesting that as a result this would have to be located inside Preshevo and/or Bujanovac. Paradoxically no one seems to have noticed that this would have achieved the guerrillas' main aim, of internationalising their conflict and obtaining an international peacekeeping force, so if implemented this could bring peace, at least in the short term.

But in reality, by April 2001 the situation and the dramatic outbreak of a new crisis in FYROM made a settlement imperative for both sides. It was suggested that the only way to get the UCPMB out was for KFOR, or some other international military force, to go in, supervise the disarming of the UCPMB, and then for Serbia to implement Covic's plan. This was originally anathema to NATO, and outside the KFOR mandate, but some people's views changed under the pressure of events. The American AFSOUTH commander in Naples, Admiral Ellis, expressed his desire to get NATO out of the political mediation started by their local spokesperson, Sean Sullivan, and for another organisation, more suited to political negotiation, to step in.<sup>32</sup> The US in February 2001 was holding in Camp Bondsteel around 80-100 alleged members of UCPMB who had been arrested by KFOR at various times, and there was no clear or effective way to try them. This alone was a good reason for seeking a political solution, since even in the dictatorial legal climate KFOR enjoys in Kosovo, there is presumably a limit to how long any western nation can hold people without trial on suspicion of intending to commit terrorism in someone else's country.

Unbiased information as to how well the settlement process has succeeded is difficult to come by. Economically there does not seem to have been much progress, except for road building up towards the border. Following the start of the implementation of the Covic plan the Serbian press has almost invariably referred to the police in PMB as "the new multi-ethnic police", although to what extent this has really changed as yet is open to question. Around "100 Serbs and Albanians" (the proportions were not specified) are quoted as having completed the one month OSCE supervised course, and some 62 Albanians are said to have completed the three month course. The next intake will include 10 women.

Surprisingly, recently there does seem to have been an effort to put some sort of discipline into the local police. The good side of this story is that dismissals have been carried out, whilst the downside are the reasons: on 22 December 2001 Preshevo Police Dept Chiefs Lt-Col Srdjan Ilic and Preshevo Town Police Chief Stole Filopovic were dismissed for taking part in the kidnapping for ransom of a leading Albanian businessman. The head of the Economic Crime Unit in Vranje was also arrested for unspecified offences. In addition 44 other police personnel were

reported suspended for various offences in or around Vranje.<sup>33</sup> The VJ seem to have taken a delight in reporting this, although they have been less forthcoming on their own problems.

Despite the Covic plan being for a civilian style of reintegrating the population, the Serb Army seems to retain much of the lead in the area. There were previously differing attitudes in the Serbian Army. Whilst the Serb three fingered V sign (a deeply offensive gesture to Albanians) was given by senior generals leading reoccupation of the GSZ, there was constant conflict within the VJ over LtCol-Gen Krstic - head of the VJ in PMB during the re-occupation, and deputy head of Covic's team, who was finally dismissed by the VJ (Kostunica in effect) after various failed efforts to get rid of him in summer 2001. His dismissal, or rather retirement, was announced in the Belgrade press on 26 September 2001.

LtCol-Gen Lazarevic, Commander of the Third Army, of which the Pristina Corps is part, has issued a number of provocative statements recently.<sup>34</sup> He warned that Albanian extremists were grouping in northern Macedonia and Kosovo ready to attack southern Serbia, and claimed that two brigades of terrorist forces had been transferred from Kosovo to Kumanovo. He also said that reliable sources indicated new groups forming in the Gjillane area of eastern Kosovo. Both he and the Third Army have made frequent statements about Serbs being forced to leave southern Serbia, or feeling so insecure that they were leaving (shades of Kosovo). *Politika* quoted a 3<sup>rd</sup> Army spokesman as saying that 1,500 Serbs in PMB had signed a petition asking for the army to stay on and protect them, whilst 20 Albanians demonstrated daily asking for the army to leave public buildings in Preshevo.

## **The Preshevo Link with FYROM**

The Preshevo valley continued to be in the news even after the spread of the conflict to FYROM in February 2001. Although overshadowed by events in Macedonia itself, it remains a central part of the new crisis in the southern Balkans, with the United Nations, OSCE, NATO, the Council of Europe and France all strongly condemning violence there, but unclear as to what to do. Together these two problems are widely regarded as the most serious threat to stability in the Balkans, if not Europe as a whole.

Now large numbers of Albanian inhabited villages and areas are depopulated - of a population of perhaps 7,000 in Medvedje only around 600 - 700 are alleged to remain, the others having fled from the alleged depredations of the Serbian forces over the last two years. In March 2001 the violence spread to neighbouring FYROM, in the shape of an armed takeover of part of the village of Tanushec, high on a ridge forming the newly defined FYROM-Serbian border, where the Albanian speaking inhabitants have also fled into Kosovo.<sup>35</sup>

It was widely alleged by both the IC and the Serbs and Macedonians that the initial border conflicts in Macedonia were a spill over from the Preshevo conflict. From personal experience and understanding this was not the case, although later in the year ex-fighters from Preshevo went to join their countrymen in Macedonia (but by then saying you were going to cross the border and join the UCK in Macedonia was about as interesting to most bystanders in Pristina as saying you were about to buy a new car).

It is probable that some form of insurrection in Macedonia was in the planning stages in early 2001. Extremist (and largely of Macedonian origin) Albanian political thinkers, usually known loosely as members of the two smaller parties (LPK and LKCK) were hoping to follow up on the Kosovo war by armed action in Macedonia. There were of course close connections between all Albanian armed groups, but the UCPMB seems to have been largely spontaneous armed village defence groups, with no clear intellectual leadership. On the other hand the Macedonian Albanian groups showed a high degree of competent and effective control and thinking from the beginning.

Despite this planning for an insurrection it would seem (and seemed to informed observers at the time) that the start of the Macedonian insurrection in Tanushec/Tanusevci in February 2001 was precipitated by the Macedonians. FYROM Prime Minister Georgievski confirmed this indirectly in December 2001 when he stated that the Skopje government had been warned by Belgrade about the start of an Albanian insurrection a week or so before both the Tanushec incident and the start of the Balkan PMs' summit.

What seems to have been intended to be a small "incident to order", in advance of the Balkan Summit,<sup>36</sup> or to divert attention from the contemporary telephone tapping scandal in FYROM, resulted in the death of one Macedonian-Albanian villager, and due to its proximity to Preshevo spiralled out of all control. The subsequent violence by FYROM special forces in Albanian inhabited villages left yet another legacy of bitterness and violence in the southern Balkans.

Tanushec/Tanusevci lies on that part of the Macedonian-Kosovar border adjoining the Preshevo Valley area and the GSZ. Located high (1050m) on what is now a border ridge, it was in origin the summer grazing village of Vitina, now in Kosovo. The Albanian speaking population remains very mobile, since the terrain and the primary occupation of sheep raising do not provide much of a living for most families. They certainly resent the new border, as being "an unnatural imposition upon their traditional regional habits and rights".<sup>37</sup>

There had been minor violent incidents along the Macedonian Kosovo border throughout the previous year, and indeed isolated incidents of terrorism or violence since 1992. The difficulty is distinguishing between Albanian para-militarism and ordinary smuggling, in which all three ethnicities (Serb, Macedonian and Albanian) have participated, keeping Serbia in consumer goods and food throughout the time of sanctions. This, whilst successful for Belgrade, and financially successful for Skopje, has left a legacy of violence and police corruption which it will be hard to eliminate in the area. However, the events of early 2001 were clearly politically inspired, albeit by both sides. The February 2001 problem seems to have started with an independent and hitherto unknown Macedonian TV crew (though working for a well known station, TV Al) managing or alleging<sup>38</sup> to have been kidnapped on 16 February for a few hours in Tanusevci.

Following their release there was supposedly a one hour gun-battle as a Macedonian unit, apparently initially from the border forces, attempted to enter the village. According to villagers, and the Deputy Minister of the Interior, there was no one firing back at them, but an Albanian village boy, or young man, Muzafer Xhaferi, was shot in the back of the neck, and later died. A series of minor but ever escalating incidents in the area then followed, culminating on 26 February in a two hour gun battle.

The "Wolves"<sup>39</sup> claimed to have been engaged in a major battle. Furthermore, they claimed that 200 black uniformed invaders<sup>40</sup> were lurking in Kosovo and Preshevo waiting to invade the homeland. At the time this seems to have been untrue, since KFOR could find no evidence of anyone in any uniform, and the villagers denied the boy was armed or involved. Interestingly, the Skopje government hastily issued strong denials of any problem in Tanushec, but the damage was done. The villagers evacuated into Kosovo. A few days later, following the boy's funeral, Albanian guerrillas in camouflage uniforms were visibly occupying half of Tanusevci, US units had pulled back a kilometre and a half, and yet another small war was well on the way to starting, with three FYROM soldiers dead, Macedonian and Kosovar Albanian refugees streaming down from the hill villages, and the border with Kosovo closed.

It is alleged by both Macedonian press sources, and informed international observers that the first shooting was not a gun battle at all, but a single shot which resulted in the death of Xhaferi. It is further alleged, on credible analysis, that the intention was purely for public relations, either to divert attention from the "wire-tapping" scandal, or to provide a talking point on the dangers of Albanian irredentism in the Balkans for the Balkans Leaders' Summit in Skopje on 22-23 February. It is certainly a fact that the FYROM Ministry of Interior is still widely regarded as containing many pro Serbian officials.

Following the reported gun battle Macedonian army units then moved into or closer to the border villages, and the local inhabitants, who are 100% Albanian speaking, mostly fled, alleging security force and police intimidation and violence. UNHCR reported that families, or at least women, children and old men, had moved out of the area from both sides of the border. In February-March 2001 informed sources among the International Community in Macedonia believed that "ethnic armed Albanian groups" - EAAG - would continue to try to extend their hold over the area.<sup>41</sup> The tri-border point, where the FRY ground security zone Kosovo and FYROM meet, lies less than 15km east of Tanushec, and UNHCR reports that all the inhabitants they have spoken to expressed a wish to be Kosovar, rather than FYROM citizens.

On Tuesday 6 March US Forces shot two Albanians apparently pointing weapons at the patrol, which was the first time presumed members of UCPMB or EAAG had been hit by KFOR troops. By 8 March US Forces had occupied quite a large part of Tanushec, seemingly convinced that their GPSs (locating devices) showed it to be in Kosovo.<sup>42</sup>

Behind the scenes the Skopje government was looking for a military solution, and avoiding talks with its own Albanian governing coalition partner, the DPA. Both Belgrade and Skopje advocated the creation of a five kilometre strip, (a free-fire zone?) running parallel to the Kosovo border inside Kosovo, and starting by crossing the old GSZ. The implications for instability, if not all out war between Albanian fighters and Serb or FYROM special forces, were obvious.

## **Overall View in The Balkan Context**

### **Implications for Serbia**

The security situation in Preshevo in 2002 may be described, albeit optimistically, as remaining tense. 'Yugoslavia' is a country whose borders were recently under attack by Albanian guerrilla forces in the region of southern Serbia bordering

Kosovo, and whose very existence is threatened from within by the spectre of Montenegrin and Kosovan independence. It would appear that the current political entity known as the FRY might be simply one further step in the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, eventually leaving seven independent countries in its wake (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, 'Macedonia', Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo).<sup>43</sup> The potential for border changes and instability is still high. In the case of southern Serbia, the potential for yet another small-scale war appears to have been entrenched, and the peace agreement based on the Covic plan has not removed the underlying conflict. Given these realities the international community would be well advised to prepare itself for the continued dissolution of Yugoslavia, and formulate adequate policy responses well in advance of actual events, rather than pretend it can halt what may well be the logical outcome of a process begun in 1991.

One of the key preconditions for Balkan stability is that Serbia find its natural borders, whatever these may be. Until such time as this occurs, Serbia will continue to stir up trouble among its neighbours and citizens. Until its borders are set, Serbia may have trouble attracting reputable foreign investment, and may also find itself unable to carry out the internal reforms necessary to adhere to modern European standards of good governance. Until such time as Serbia has receded into its natural borders, the international community should expect to see the continued dissolution of this 'Yugoslavia', culminating, in time, in an independent Serbia and Montenegro, as well as an independent Kosovo.

Assuming that Montenegro and Kosovo both become independent, Serbia should be within borders that are - in theory - sustainable from both within and without, namely Serbia proper and Vojvodina. Yet even then, border changes could occur and Serbia could continue to shrink, depending on whether or not Serbia's government is capable of creating the changes necessary to fulfil the functions of responsible government and meet the standards of modern governance, founded on principles of human rights. For Vojvodina in particular the issue may come down to local control over locally collected tax revenues, and pressure for reform, or failing that, change, should not be underestimated. Should Serbia fail to make the necessary adjustments in its governing practices, the international community should prepare to see instability continue in Serbia proper, with a potential for border changes in the Sanjak, Vojvodina and southern Serbia. Whether these changes become more violent (cf Preshevo) will depend in large part on the international community's willingness to engage local politicians and ethnic groups constructively.

### **Implications for FYROM**

The main fear of the International Community in relation to Preshevo is that any renewal of conflict there will not only be destabilising for the newly democratic (albeit still very nationalist) government in Belgrade, but also for Macedonia. There are good reasons for this fear. Although the IC is endlessly pleased that FYROM broke away from the FRY peacefully, in doing so it created a great deal of ethnic tension. It cut off its own Albanians from their relations in Kosovo, and from their university education. More importantly, the new constitution declared FYROM to be "the state of the Macedonian nation, ... using the Macedonian language ... in its Cyrillic form". This made it perfectly clear that there was little room for other nationalities, of which the Albanians are the largest, concentrated in a relatively compact geographical arc around the north-west and west. Theoretically the Albanians comprise 22.9% of the population, but in reality most observers feel this figure should be higher, perhaps much higher. The first (SDSM) Skopje government

did its best to minimise the numbers of Albanians in FYROM, by various methods of legalistic gerrymandering, such as provisions on citizenship (1994) and the census (1995). This would not necessarily be relevant to any briefing on Preshevo were it not necessary to show that there is also considerable potential instability in adjoining FYROM, and the remainder of this paper attempts to put this into context.

The situation is further complicated, in the eyes of the local inhabitants at least, by the FRY government in Belgrade having recently signed an agreement<sup>44</sup> delineating the new Macedonian Kosovo border without any reference to either the UN, who control the area by virtue of a UN resolution, or with any Kosovo political parties. Whilst possibly legalistically correct, this was a move calculated to inflame passions among Albanians (and at the same time establish a precedent in international terms, and to flout UNMIK).

Despite the allegations in the international press, and in Belgrade, Kosovo is not a hot-bed of arms smuggling, but FYROM is, and has been since 1991 or 1992. The presence of KFOR forces in Kosovo and frequent arms searches have meant that UCPMB (although basically Kosovo based) has found it much easier either to buy arms from the Serbs (as the UCPMB allege) or to smuggle them in via FYROM, where it seems (at any rate according to the Skopje press) to be very easy to buy off the police. The year 2000 saw complex incidents involving shot local FYROM police chiefs with Albanian mistresses, jailed Kosovars and kidnapped FYROM border guards, all alleged, in the Skopje press, to be connected to arms smuggling and bribes.

Tanusevci (Tanushec to its inhabitants) lies directly on this route, though why the Macedonian government should have chosen to send the Wolves into the village just before the Balkan summit, if it was not for political reasons, to highlight Albanian issues, remains a mystery. Tanusevci is part of a group of Albanian inhabited villages on the border north of Skopje. Largely devoted to herding sheep, the men have mostly stayed, whereas women and children have fled from the FYROM forces. This area largely supports the old (formerly socialist/communist oriented/ partisan) Albanian PDP (Party of Democratic Prosperity), whereas the present VMRO government is in coalition with the newer (and now much more powerful) offshoot of the PDP, the DPA - Party of Democratic Albanians, led by Arben Xhaferi, originally a more nationalist offshoot of the PDP. The DPA's electoral party support is stronger in western FYROM, rather than in this border region. This split has some relevance to the present situation, in that all the time the conflict was confined to the narrow group of villages adjoining Preshevo there was less risk of destabilising FYROM as a whole.

However, the Wolves and other FYROM units fully intended to "go in hard", and this was undoubtedly going to leave a legacy of bitterness in the Albanian community in FYROM, as the course of the war in summer 2001 showed. Up until then the programme of Albanians in FYROM had been one of seeking equal rights, and the use of language in local government, a university and similar civil rights issues. Ultimately they might have gone as far as wanting federalisation, or a form of cantonisation on the Swiss model.

It is quite clear that the entry of Skopje special forces units into Tanushec prompted other Albanians, a minority possibly of Kosovar or local origins, to take military action, in what they saw as defence of the villages. The situation rapidly escalated to violence or low intensity conflict, if not virtual war. However, the NATO (KFOR) initial ideas of letting the FYROM and Serbian governments use force to solve the

problem would only have been a temporary fix, as NATO, the EU and US rapidly realised. It would have both helped to turn Kosovars against KFOR, and store up a legacy of bitterness amongst the Albanian community in FYROM which would bring much greater problems later. In fixing the Tanushec problem through violence the FYROM government may well have been speeding up the process of the destruction of its own newly formed state.

Much of the above was written before the Macedonian conflict escalated, and particularly before the Skopje agreement. The Macedonian government remains split on implementing this agreement, and certain elements seem determined to try to push Albanians into further armed action in the summer of 2002, in order once again to "go in hard" and attempt a military solution together with renewed ethnic cleansing of the Albanian inhabitants of western Macedonia.

## **Implications for Balkan Stability**

The implications of a second series of wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia seem obvious, and are largely dealt with above. The break up of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, followed by that of Yugoslavia, has resulted in what Albanians in the southern Balkans (and perhaps the Russians) see as a proliferation of Slavic states. The Albanians, whilst carefully avoiding the phrases "greater Albania" or "Greater Kosovo" have started talking about a proliferation of Albanian states (the United States of Albania perhaps)!

The ultimate comment must be that there is clearly more trouble ahead on the territory of the former Yugoslavia - unless radical action is taken by the International Community. The wars of the Yugoslav succession have probably not yet ended. The present international policy of tinkering with seemingly attractive partial solutions<sup>45</sup> for minority rights is destined to fail when dealing with peoples who do not see themselves as minorities.

An effective answer is a fast track solution to the problem of Kosovo's status, and conditional independence, in return for an agreement that will keep present borders unchanged, and a Kosovar Albanian government responsible for keeping the peace and suppressing organised crime under threat of failing to gain a final status of independence.

## **The Future, Peace Plans, NATO, the EU - & the Likelihood of Success in Peacemaking**

Numerous organisations have taken an interest in making comments, suggesting ways of settling the conflict or proposing peace plans for Preshevo. These have included Carl Bildt, with his report to the Security Council of 15 January 2001, the Greek Government, with a proposal to the EU (26 February), and of course the Belgrade plan by Nebojsa Covic, Head of the FRY committee for Southern Serbia, among other appointments.

Now that the Covic plan has been accepted, it still probably stands little chance of success as long as the VJ is quite literally digging itself into the area in order to try to enforce a military domination. This is particularly so when both the VJ and the



government dominated Serbian press seem determined to oppose implementing the Covic plan.

On the other hand the broad direction of the Covic plan was to reintegrate Albanians into Serbian civic life. The problem is that Albanians do not want to be integrated into "Serb civic life", but want the opportunity to develop their own civic life, and in their own language. So there needs to be some form of autonomy for the Albanian speaking areas within the plan.

In particular Albanians quite reasonably fear Serbian police and security forces. Too many civilians have been killed by them over the last 10 years or longer. Covic has suggested the return of former (Albanian speaking) police to the police force, whereas Halimi proposed a new police force based on the population percentages. Clearly the latter idea would in turn concern the local Serbian minority, and a reasonable compromise might be 50/50, with the command structure also reflecting this.

Although any attack on Serbian police recently has been described as an attack "on the new multi-ethnic police force", in fact there is no new police force, and the new OSCE sponsored police training college for the area does not seem to have turned out very many new Albanian recruits as yet.

The final problem, and possible stumbling block, will undoubtedly come over monitoring implementation of any agreement. Unarmed monitors from the EUMM can only go so far. The only really successful solution which is likely to work should involve an armed, military peacekeeping force actually present in Preshevo. Anything less (ie unarmed EUMM monitors) is likely to be impotent in the face of any renewed Serb violence, and can only stand by and witness atrocities, as did KVM and KDOM in Kosovo in 1998/99. The possible downside of any plan is more refugees in Europe, and more in Kosovo, which runs the risk of further destabilising the Serb enclaves. Unfortunately an armed international peacekeeping force is clearly impossible, since the IC is determined to support the current regime in Belgrade, and to prop up what is left of Yugoslavia, in a Canute-like attempt to stop the march of history, postponing the inevitable.

Meanwhile progressive confidence building measures in both Preshevo and FYROM, as advocated originally by NATO spokespersons in January 2001, were still probably more appropriate than any premature effort at allowing a quick military fix by lifting the ground safety zone provisions and imposing the Covic plan. Lack of education means that Albanian families in these areas have some of the highest birth rates in Europe. More importantly, the resulting refugees will spread further across Europe, and denied legal economic opportunities many will undoubtedly settle into the criminal networks that Albanians are so often accused of fostering.

Lastly there is also the religious element.<sup>46</sup> Though an unpopular and delicate subject to mention it should be taken into consideration. Whilst it is certainly true that religion does not enter into the Kosovar Albanian psyche at present, it certainly does in FYROM, where a deliberate policy of restricting educational opportunities for the Albanian minority (through maintaining high standards of Cyrillic tests for entry) has resulted in many Albanians clinging to their identity through Moslem religious observance. Whilst no threat at present, should Albanians continue to be harassed and dispersed as refugees throughout Europe and the US there is an obvious comparison to the development of fundamentalism elsewhere.

To reiterate, the present international policy of tinkering with seemingly attractive partial solutions for minority rights is destined to fail when dealing with peoples who do not see themselves as minorities. The answer to Preshevo and FYROM is a fast track solution to the problem of Kosovo's status, in return for an agreement that will keep present borders unchanged, and a Kosovar Albanian government responsible for keeping the peace under threat of failing to gain a final status of independence.

The advantages of giving conditional independence to Kosovo, coupled with a caveat that this depends on removing support from the insurgents in Preshevo and FYROM, or at least agreeing that the borders will never change, are manifold. Firstly, and most importantly, although clearly difficult for the Belgrade government, it will enable it to concentrate on internal economic development, on its own economic crisis, and on its own democracy. The alternative for Belgrade is that it will continue to harbour imperialistic and nationalistic designs on its neighbours, with all the attendant expense and inability to concentrate on its own problems.

Making the Kosovars responsible for suppressing their own extremists, conditional on retaining or obtaining their own independence will also neatly remove the potential for presiding over disaster from the international forces there, and get the IC off the hook. The alternative to this remains clearly the potential not only to develop into a Cyprus-style situation, but to progress to a Palestine like situation at some point.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Language policy in this paper: almost all places have two names in this area, a local Albanian one, in use by the inhabitants, and a Slavic one in use by the government. This paper uses a single spelling throughout, but does not thereby imply partiality.

<sup>2</sup> *Zeri*, 26 December 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Meaning formally and legally established, perhaps because Tito was against the creation of internal borders.

<sup>4</sup> Since there seems to be no official gazetting of the new border, or at least none accessible, evidence for the local claims is hard to come by. However, useful sources are the village lists of the Conference of Berlin, and more importantly the records of which districts sent Deputies to the Skupstina (Parliament) in Belgrade. [Record of the Proceedings of the National Assembly, Book One, Belgrade 1947, printed 1955] Also useful are the 1947 Acts governing where pre-war Serb settlers expelled from Kosovo could return to.

<sup>5</sup> Border agreement of February 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Following the events of the last 50 years (of Macedonian speakers controlling the Republic of Macedonia, rather than Serbs ruling both communities) Albanians living there (who form an overwhelming majority along the west of Macedonia) have become the object of extreme dislike by most middle-class Macedonians, who (perhaps with some justification) see them as wishing to break away from Macedonia.

<sup>7</sup> With the usual accompanying events of massacre, rape, violence and theft of property, which has transmitted itself through oral history in the districts to which the refugees fled ever since, and is known as the movement of the "mohajir".

<sup>8</sup> Although Britain and France became the principal creators and backers of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia post World War I.

<sup>9</sup> Note that Medveje was retained by Serbia after 1879, whereas Preshevo was taken in 1913 as part of what is now Kosovo.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Bildt's report to the UN Security Council, presented 15 January 2001.

<sup>11</sup> In this he was of course unfortunately prophetic.

<sup>12</sup> If Serbian claims are to be believed, the guerrillas number 3,000. "Ado do anti-teroristicke akcije dode, pacace se samo na naoruzane ljude", *Nedeljni Telegraf*, 21 February

2001. This claim would appear to be implausible, with UCPMB admitting to only 200 fighters, the reality being perhaps around 600-700, according to KFOR sources.

<sup>13</sup> *VIP*, 7 February 2001.

<sup>14</sup> "Kosovo - Unsafe Zone", *AP*, 18 February 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Widely alleged in Macedonian press reports of the shooting of the local chief of police in September 2000. Quoted in *Start* magazine, published Skopje dated 6 October 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interviews with NATO officers in Kosovo. Supported by various articles in UK and other international newspapers.

<sup>17</sup> See "KFOR pustio, KFOR da vrati"; "Rasadnik droge I prostitutke"; *Glas*, 20 February 2001.

<sup>18</sup> "Pred Srbijom na pomolu novi rat: teroristi haubicama od 122 milimetra I lakim raketnim sistemima spremaju napad na Vranje", *Nedeljni Telegraf*, 21 February 2001.

<sup>19</sup> *VIP*, 15 February 2001.

<sup>20</sup> "Dogovoren niz mera za zastitu od terorizma", *Danas*, 20 February 2001.

<sup>21</sup> The grip that hardline unreformed officers such as Pavkovic retain on the VJ was recently demonstrated by the controversial retirement list of December 2001, whereby some 20 moderate generals were forcibly retired from the VJ, and long planned reforms once again put off.

<sup>22</sup> Name as published, Liber Press, Beograd, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> "Leks specijalis protiv korupcije", *Danas*, 20 February 2001.

<sup>24</sup> "Ako do anti-teroristicke akcije dode, pacace se samo na naoruzane ljude", *Nedeljni Telegraf*, 21 February 2001.

<sup>25</sup> "Protiv ofanzivnih oruzanih akcija", *Blic*, 20 February 2001.

<sup>26</sup> *VIP*, 8 February 2001.

<sup>27</sup> It is of course well established that a US firm MPRI (Military Professional Resources Inc) trained the Croatian army prior to their re-conquest of the Krajina in 1994.

<sup>28</sup> One of the main Albanian objections to the Serb Army presence, at least in the towns, was that the army was based in former working factories, schools, community halls and other public buildings. Military plans for new roads and barracks - northern Ireland style watchtowers and bases, are quoted in the JNA news as having cost 100 billion Dinar in 2001, budgeted for 200 billion Dinar in 2002 (exchange rate quoted 30 Dinar to 1 Dm). Of this around 400 million Dinar seems to have been spent on 22 new container bases in PMB. Krstic defended this on the grounds that living outside of inhabited areas would be safer for the army, an interesting reflection on the Serb feelings about security in PMB post the Covic plan. This money was said to represent just the VJ spending, and does not reflect the separate Serbian Government spending on policing, and especially new police posts.

<sup>29</sup> Meaning the removal of Serb forces from the whole of the communes as well as UCPMB from the GSZ.

<sup>30</sup> Kostunica speech reported by AFP, 12 February 2001.

<sup>31</sup> London Times, 5 March 2001.

<sup>32</sup> In the event he was replaced by Peter Feith, a personal representative of the NATO Secretary General. This transferred responsibility from KFOR to NATO in Brussels.

<sup>33</sup> *JNA News*, December 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *Politika*, December 2001.

<sup>35</sup> It may be worth noting that the whole problem of all these areas lies within a 30km radius or less.

<sup>36</sup> Note PM Georgievski's remarks on this in December 2001.

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR Skopje internal report dated 26 February 2001. Two separate reports from the Macedonian government categorically denied that there had been a gun battle. It was the time of the Balkan leaders' summit, and not much more can be said. It should be noted that this village had been the location of violent incidents in the early 1990s between local inhabitants and the Macedonian security forces. Owing to its remote location, these were not reported in the press at the time but were serious enough for entire ethnic Albanian families to decide to go into exile abroad.

<sup>38</sup> Conveniently or inconveniently they said they had their film confiscated. The cameras and mobile phones were later recovered by Macedonian security forces.

<sup>39</sup> The "Wolves" is the name of the FYROM special forces unit currently deployed in Tanushec. Exclusively recruited from ethnic Slav-Macedonian speakers with some Serbs from Kumanovo, it has a reputation for tough action.

---

<sup>40</sup> Black uniforms are or were the uniform of UCK Field Security Units in the Kosovo war, whereas both in that war and later in Macedonia almost all Albanians fought either in camouflage uniforms (if they had them) or their own clothes. Black uniforms were, however, a great “bogeyman” of the Serb and Macedonian press.

<sup>41</sup> In fact they (the Albanian groups) showed considerable strategic ability, and shifted the fighting firstly to the hills above Tetovo, and later to villages closer to Skopje.

<sup>42</sup> In February 2002 both KFOR and UN spokespersons seem to be arguing strongly (if belatedly) for the integrity of the Macedonian border with Kosovo, and by implication seemed to be placing in doubt the revisions of the Belgrade-Skopje agreements of 1999. Ground Position Satellite (GPS) system is used to find the position of a patrol. GPS is almost invariably very accurate but unfortunately the maps on which the results are plotted are not always so accurate. In this case the answer is rather more amusing - the American maps which show the administrative borders are based on old Yugoslav maps, which show the border prior to the Belgrade-Skopje changes announced in Feb 2000.

<sup>43</sup> At the time of writing talks between Serbia and Montenegro are under way under the auspices of Javier Solana. In a remarkable volte-face from two years ago Solana is bringing intense pressure on Montenegro not to leave, threatening the withdrawal of all EU aid. An Agreement brokered by the European Union was signed on 14 March 2002, which, if approved by the parliaments of Montenegro and Serbia, will put an end to 'Yugoslavia'.

<sup>44</sup> Border agreement between FRY and Macedonia announced February 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Quick fixes, based on assurances of civil rights which the governments concerned have no intention of implementing once the IC attention is distracted (as by 11 September).

<sup>46</sup> See the ICG report on Religion in Kosovo of January 2001, on [www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org). For an introduction to the FYROM crisis, see also 'The New Macedonian Question', ed James Pettifer, Palgrave, London and New York, 2000, and 'Former Yugoslav Macedonia - Shades of Night' by James Pettifer, on [www.csrc.ac.uk](http://www.csrc.ac.uk), July 2001.

I am grateful to International Crisis Group who first commissioned this research in 2001, although it was not published by ICG at the time, Julia Pettifer, Robert Curis and Laura Krizieu for practical assistance in Kosovo, and James Pettifer for editorial assistance at CSRC.

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed are those of the  
Author and not necessarily those of the  
UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-903584-67-1

**Published By:**

**The Conflict Studies Research  
Centre**

Directorate General Development and Doctrine  
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst  
Camberley  
Surrey  
GU15 4PQ  
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346  
Or 412375

Fax : (44) 1276 686880

E-mail: [csrc@gtnet.gov.uk](mailto:csrc@gtnet.gov.uk)  
<http://www.csrc.ac.uk>

**ISBN 1-903584-67-1**