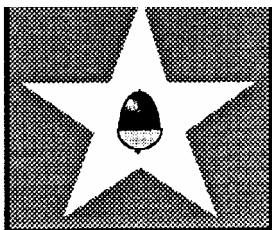


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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**Preshevo/Kosovo Lindore -
A Continuing Cause For Concern**

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Preshevo/Kosovo Lindore - A Continuing Cause For Concern

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Summary

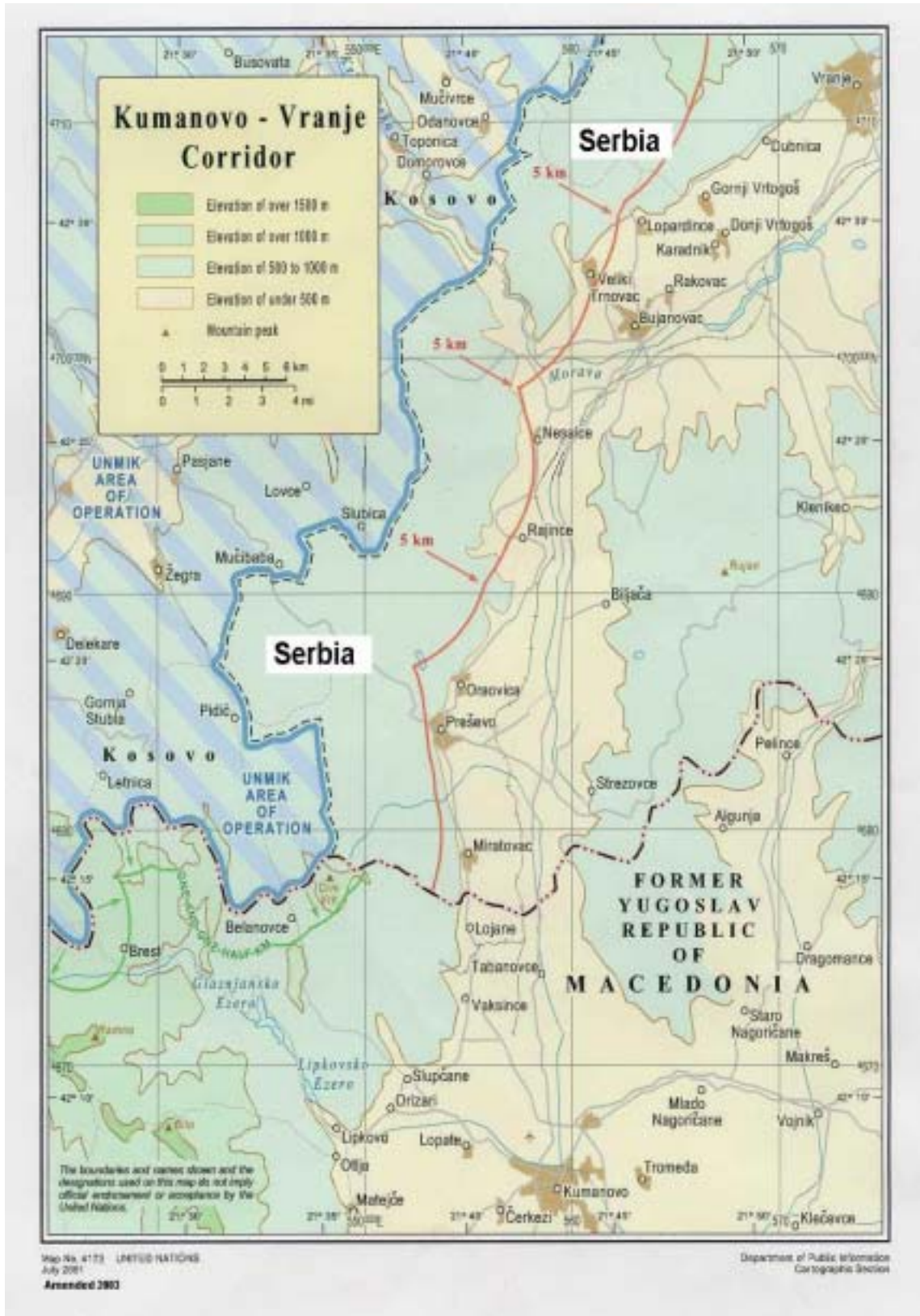
This short paper looks at the current situation in the Albanian majority-inhabited areas of southern Serbia, where a controversial but apparently successful peace settlement was imposed by the Serbian government in May 2001. The settlement was brokered by NATO, who brought pressure on the local Albanian armed groups, known as UCPMB, to disarm, and to allow the Yugoslav Army to reoccupy territory they had been forced out of in a strip along the Kosovo border, known as the GSZ (demilitarised zone).

The paper examines briefly whether the peace settlement has been successful, and in what ways. It looks forward to whether the situation has been stabilised permanently, or whether aspirations in areas such as education and language remain unsatisfied. A brief comparison is made to the situation in Kosovo in the early 1990s. The paper concludes that the area remains a source of potential instability in the southern Balkans, since the NATO brokered solution did nothing except support the potential use of force by the Serbs to leverage a choice between disarmament and defeat, with all the potential adverse consequences for the local Albanian villagers caught in conflict. In these circumstances, a revival of Albanian paramilitary activity cannot be ruled out.

Preshevo, Southern Serbia. Belgrade demanded on Tuesday that the UN and NATO troops in Kosovo prevent an imminent spill over of ethnic Albanian militants from Kosovo into Serbia's troubled south. "We asked for measures to halt the entry of armed militants from Kosovo," said Nebojsa Covic, a Belgrade official. The request followed a police sweep over the weekend in the Bujanovac region. Serbian police arrested 12 ethnic Albanians in two militant strongholds - the villages of Veliki Trnovac and Konculj - after uncovering an arms cache. Serbia's ethnically mixed southern border region adjoining Kosovo was the scene of an ethnic Albanian insurgency in 2000. The fighting between Serbian police and local rebels ended with a Western-brokered deal that gave more rights to ethnic Albanians on the municipal level, prompting the rebels to disarm. The area has remained tense, with occasional flare-ups. (*Associated Press, 10 February 2003.*)

On Saturday the media reported that large numbers of Serb forces blocked several villages of Bujanovac. Police forces arrested 12 people, mainly former UCPMB members, who were disarmed following the agreement between NATO, the UCPMB and Serbia in 2001. Serb forces also arrested former UCPMB leader and the current leader of the LPD (Movement for Democratic Progress) Jonuz Musliu, but he was released during afternoon hours. "I am used to informative talks and Serbians' jails. The aim of the Serbian Security Service and police was to arrest political figures besides former UCPMB members," said Jonuz Musliu. The main targets of police forces were the villages of Koncul and Tërnovc i Madh ... Serb officials stated that these operations were part of their strategy against terrorism, but Shefkut Musliu, the former UCPMB commander accused Serbian PM Nebojsa Covic of ordering security forces to arrest him and other former UCPMB members. He said that Covic did not respect the Koncul agreement on reducing Serb forces in the Valley and he established a new formation, gendarmerie to take the control over the Albanians in the Valley. Shefkut Musliu said that if seven arrested people are not released until Monday there will be no peace and the road will be blocked again. It is learnt that Goran Radosavljevic, known for Kosovars from the massacre of Racak gave the order for these arrests ... Serbian PM Nebojsa Covic said that today he will hand over to KFOR the list with the names of people involved in weapons smuggling in the south of Serbia and Kosovo. We believe that the group is hiding in the village of Rogacica, Kamenica, said Covic. (*OSCE Media Monitor, primary source RTK and KTV, Zeri, Koha Ditore, 10 February 2003.*)

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These recent arrests and subsequent releases, including that of Jonuz Musliu,¹ and the demonstrations that followed indicate that not all is well in the area known variously as the Preshevo valley, southern Serbia, or Eastern Kosovo (Kosova Lindore). Peace was signed there in 2002, brokered by NATO directly from Brussels. Known as the “Covic Plan”, it was widely praised as a model of western intervention to prevent conflict.²

Briefly, the plan made provision for the creation of a “multi-ethnic” police force, and for more, and more effective representation for Albanians in local government. There were also promises of more aid from both the US and the EU, and of more employment of Albanians. Crucial to this, however, was the lack of any agreement on educational syllabi, or the recognition of most Albanian educational qualifications, which were mostly from Pristina.

There were no real provisions in the “plan” about military deployments. The guerrillas were to disarm, but although the Serbian Army (formerly the Yugoslav National Army, in the form of the Pristina Corps) moved out of most of the schools and factories it had occupied in 1999 it did not withdraw. Instead a huge and costly series of new roads and bases was established in the overwhelmingly Albanian speaking rural areas.

Since then successful local elections have been held, in which Albanians gained control of two out of three municipalities, and some Albanian recruits have graduated and joined the police. However, apart from that there has been little progress. With Kosovo’s status unresolved, and the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic,³ openly raising the question of changing borders in the Balkans, it is perhaps not surprising that the Preshevo question continues to cause difficulties.

The 2000 Conflict In The Preshevo Valley & Its Aftermath

With the end of the Kosovo war in June 1999 Serb forces withdrew. In most cases they were angry and disappointed, but undefeated, at least in their view. Some went north, but most went east, where three Albanian speaking areas remained in southern Serbia. These were the districts of Preshevo, Medveje, and Bujanovac (PMB).⁴ The bulk of the Serb forces from Kosovo, in the form of the notorious Pristina Corps under 3rd Army, settled into emergency accommodation in these districts, in schools, factories and similar buildings. There had already been great pressure placed on the Albanian population of these areas by the various forms of military and police units since 1998, as the insurrection in neighbouring Kosovo started up. The general attitude amongst most Serb police,⁵ and indeed most local Serbs, seems to have been that the “shiptar” (Albanian) was a sort of undesirable second class citizen. After the loss of Kosovo there seems to have been a widespread feeling that the best solution to the remaining “shiptar” problem was to either drive them out, or intimidate them into leaving.

The newly arrived Serb forces immediately set about increasing this pressure, according to local Preshevo Albanians. As always the pressure was greatest in the rural areas, particularly towards the new administrative border with Kosovo.⁶ Whether this was a Yugoslav state policy in the way that the clearance of parts of Kosovo had been is debatable.⁷ There is no evidence as yet of this. It seems more likely that the ethnic cleansing of the Preshevo Valley by the Serb forces withdrawing from Kosovo at the war’s end was not conducted at Milosevic’s direction, but was spontaneous and locally orchestrated.

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The Serb view today is represented at the local level by continued protests in local and national newspapers on the government being “soft on Albanians”, the criminality of “shiptars”, their desire to drive good honest Serbs out and so on. It does of course sound exactly like the situation in Kosovo as depicted by Serbs in the mid-1990s. The general Serb view might be encapsulated in the recent article by S Ristic entitled “Great Patience” published in the Yugoslav newspaper Vojska on 16 January 2003. In this Ristic reminds his readers of the background to the campaign, and then goes on to lament the lack of resources, poor living conditions and the low pay of the Serbian army forces deployed throughout the area. He writes about the number of bases, and makes it clear that the Albanian inhabited border areas “can only be held [under Serbian control] due to the dedication and self-sacrifice of the resident forces”.

On the other hand, the Albanian view today seems largely to remain a desire to rejoin Kosovo (of which they were administratively part until 1948, although the current border was not finalised until 1956). The latest manifestation of this is a statement by Jonuz Musliu, the head of the Movement for Democratic Progress (a relatively recent nationalist Preshevo Albanian political party), quoted in the newspaper “Zeri”, in Pristina.

Albanians of Presheva valley will ask nothing more than what Serbs of northern Kosovo are asking”. Municipal councillors of Zubinpotok, Zveqan and Leposaviq [Mitrovica, Kosovo] formed the Union of Serb Municipalities. Many people see this as an effort to divide Kosovo. The Albanians of the Presheva valley will ask for implementation of the referendum of 1992 in case Kosovo Serbs ask for division. On 1-2 March 1992, the Albanians of PMB organised a referendum and the absolute majority was in favour of joining Kosovo, said Jonuz Musliu, the head of the Movement for Democratic Progress. “We know that there will be no violent change of borders and Kosovo has its own borders, government, parliament, and that it is administered by the internationals. But if a nation has one right, then why shouldn’t we Albanians have it as well?” said Jonuz Musliu. He did not exclude the possibility for violence to start again in that region. According to him, the nationalist feelings, especially those of the Serbs, still remain high and continuously create anxiety and insecurity among people. Naser Haziri, the vice-chairman of the Albanian Democratic Party, said that the status of Presheva valley has to be solved together with that of Kosovo.⁸

Serbs of course have their own riposte to this, seeing access to and control of the key Vardar valley as utterly essential as an instrument of their foreign policy in the region.⁹ It is also a key foreign policy objective shared by the Greek government, who see it as a crucial part of their land route to Western Europe, and wish it to remain under the control of a fellow Orthodox state.

Albanians boycotted the Serbian presidential elections in autumn 2002: “To the annoyance of the Serbian authorities and the international community some 65,000 Albanians stayed away from polls”.¹⁰ This follows the usual Albanian pattern when living in Slavic states, of taking part in local affairs, but ignoring anything to do with national governments. Riza Halimi, leader of the largest Albanian party, the Party for Democratic Action (PDA), did make an appeal for voters to turn out for Miroslav Labus in his bid for the Serbian Presidency, but it seems to have been ignored. In the event virtually no Albanians voted in the national elections, a fact that is seen by most observers as a further indication that

the Albanians have no interest in taking part in the political life of a Serbian (or for that matter any Slav dominated) state.

Sulejman Hiseni, an Albanian from Bujanovac, was quoted by IWPR¹¹ as commenting on the boycott: "I don't see what Belgrade can expect from Albanians here because they will never accept Serbia as their country". Other sources suggested that the Albanian boycott of political activity outside the municipalities would continue until final talks on the status of Kosovo.

Another typical incident recently occurred on 28 November 2002, Albanian National Day, which is a day when all patriotic Albanians wherever they are fly the Albanian national flag (which they see as the Albanian ethnic flag, if such a term can be used, rather than the Albanian state flag). Albanians in the district had been accustomed to fly their flags in Tito's time, but this had largely been stopped in Milosevic's era. This year they attempted to do the same,¹² only to arouse the wrath of both the Serb authorities and the International Community (IC). Nebojsa Covic (Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia) in particular warned Albanians that flags would not be tolerated. "We are not in favour of using force, but we will use it if we are forced to," said Covic.¹³

The only need to quote this sort of detail is to remind observers that despite the Covic Plan, little has changed overall in Albanian attitudes to being ruled by a Serb state. Most Albanians, and virtually all rural Albanians, refuse to accept or cooperate with the state more than is absolutely necessary.

The Covic Plan had been presented as a two page spread, in Serbian, in Belgrade newspapers in February 2001, and although George Robertson, Secretary General of NATO, stated that this should be a basis for negotiation, not an ultimatum, increasing anxiety amongst the IC about the stability of Serbia led to it becoming just that in May 2001. There were four meetings brokered by NATO between Covic and local Albanian village defence forces (the UCPMB), three of which were spent discussing Serbs who were being held prisoner.

Despite much speculation the six or so loosely connected groups that comprised the UCPMB seem to have been entirely home grown, and whilst consciously modelled on the Kosovo KLA (UCK) had no direct command connections with it. UCPMB was commanded by local villagers, not Kosovars as the Serbs alleged (which was one of their weaknesses) and could not even agree a command structure or any real cooperation, even on the peace talks, amongst themselves. It was a vainglorious, incompetent series of local groups, each of which tried to develop its own logistic connections to Kosovo groupings. Crucially they thought they had the support of the Americans (this may not have been the case, but it was their widespread perception), especially after March 2001 when the Kosovo US Office pushed them into forming a political council.

The Covic Plan led to an agreement that the UCPMB would withdraw, and hand over themselves and their weapons to KFOR. There was only one casualty when Serb forces shot dead a UCPMB senior commander (one who was not keen on the agreement) as he accidentally drove into a village the Serbs were occupying ahead of time. The Serb army moved back into the demilitarised zone in stages, with the most publicity given to one particular move where three Serb generals led a parade, giving the Serbian three fingered salute. Despite this there was no action by UCPMB, who almost all surrendered peacefully to NATO forces in Kosovo.

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That was the successful part, along with the opening of the zone to trade with Kosovo, particularly the town of Gjilan, and reduced border formalities. However, the Covic Plan had serious defects. All it really offered was a return to the Titoist status quo, with a new coordinating council for the valley, elected on a proportional basis. Previously Albanians had dominated most local councils, based on "first past the post" elections, so in relation to the past this was not such a great change.

The other main thrust of the plan was to be the "new" multi-ethnic police. This again was nothing really new, since in Tito's time the police had always been mixed. Nor was it particularly effective. The new police training school was located well north of the valley, in Serbia, with only Serb instructors, under OSCE supervision. Of the 64 recruits in the first full pass out parade the following November, 32 were Albanian, but of those only 7 had been part of the UCPMB movement, who were in practice largely excluded from any peace dividend. It might also be noted that whilst the plan was for this new section of the police to be split 50/50 - eventually - the population ratios are nearer 70/30, and many rural areas towards the border are 100% Albanian, and almost always Albanian-speaking in daily life. Only a tiny minority of Serb policemen speak Albanian.

The real downside of the agreement is that it did not touch the education issue, nor that of educational qualifications. The curriculum was still the old Serb curriculum, with its history of the Serb conquest of Kosovo, and all still in the Serb language, in its Cyrillic form. Since many Albanians have difficulty with Serbian and Cyrillic, this tends to exclude them from any real secondary education, and certainly from any tertiary schooling. Albanians in both FYROM and the Preshevo valley have, since 1950 or so, and very definitely since the 1960s tended to seek their education in what is now Kosovo, specifically after 1964 at Pristina University. However, this became a "parallel" institution after Milosevic's clampdowns in the late 1980s, so the qualifications of that generation are not recognised by Serbian authorities.

Overall, the Covic Plan changed little, it was a "take it or leave agreement", to return to the old ways, or face further destruction and expulsions by the army in the rural areas, where "out of sight" is assumed to mean "out of mind".

The Current Situation In 2003

About 3,000 ethnic Albanians rallied in southern Serbia on 15 February 2003 following a police raid the previous week. Serbian police and BIA (Security and Information Agency) arrested 12 suspects on 8 February in the towns of Veliki Trnovac and Konculj, former strongholds of the UCPMB. In addition to seizing a large quantity of weapons, police removed the Albanian national flag from the grave of a former UCPMB commander, Ridvan Cazimi, aka Commander Leshi. Holding banners that said "Freedom for all", and "We are no terrorists", the protesters demonstrated peacefully in the town of Bujanovac. "We demand that Belgrade stop the persecution" of ethnic Albanians, said Jonuz Musliu, a former rebel leader-turned-politician. "We demand the release" of the detained ethnic Albanians, he added.

Nebojsa Covic said that authorities would not "tolerate violence, terrorism or any illegal groups" in the region and would do "everything to implement law and order". "We agree with the message from the protest that civilians here are no terrorists," Covic told reporters after the rally ended. "But

individuals create incidents and stage terrorist actions ... and we will not succumb to their threats."

Earlier, the Serbian government had appealed for calm ahead of the rally, citing unspecified "indications" of possible provocations that could lead to incidents. The Serbian Interior Ministry issued a statement saying that police were stepping up security measures throughout the republic, and particularly in the south, to prevent possible terrorist actions. It did not specify what measures were taken.

In a joint statement, the three ethnic Albanian political parties organising the rally claimed that the recent police raids in the villages of Konculj and Veliki Trnovac were aimed at stirring up tensions in the region. The ethnic Albanian parties also complained that implementation of the 2001 peace deal was too slow, and that too many police and army troops are deployed in the ethnic Albanian villages along the boundary with Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians form a majority.¹⁴

Whether this really was aimed at stirring up ethnic tensions, by arresting former fighters from the UCPMB (who are supposedly subject to an amnesty for armed actions committed earlier) is obviously subject to debate. However, it cannot be coincidence that the Albanian National Army, ANA or AKSh, a shadowy pan-Albanian militant group, announced on the same day that it was mobilising forces in the Preshevo valley area.¹⁵ A 29 year old former UCPMB commander known as Murteza¹⁶ is quoted as adding, "The glory days will return, and this time we will fight until the end."

Arguably the most relevant comment on the question of whether these arrests were intended to increase tensions, as a preventive strike, or as part of a genuine investigation must come from Nebojsa Covic himself. Quoted in a Serbian Government press release on 27 November 2002 as Serbian Deputy Prime Minister, and head of the Coordinating Centre for Kosovo-Metohija, he said: "We must complete the formation of a multiethnic police force, and multiethnic authority in Southern Serbia, with the full integration of Albanians into State Institutions."¹⁷ This seemed a curiously bland statement after 18 months, almost admitting that there had been little progress on the eve of Albanian National Day, when once again there were to be illegal parades and Albanian flags flying.

The 8 February 2003 arrests of 12 former¹⁸ UCPMB members followed the murder of an Albanian member of the Serbian internal intelligence service (now the BIA),¹⁹ and some less well substantiated attacks on newly joined members of the "multi-ethnic" police. 1,000 Albanians demonstrated in the streets of Bujanovac following the arrests. They were demanding the release of the detainees and protesting at the involvement of Serbian police (as opposed to the local multiethnic police force of Serbs and Albanians that was established by the March 2001 peace accords). The protestors were particularly incensed that the Serb police force was led by the notorious Goran Radoslavljevic, who is well known for his alleged involvement in atrocities in Kosovo.

These events were followed by the Head of OSCE in Belgrade holding a press conference to announce his urgent consultations with Covic, to review progress and events. They were also followed by US General Daniel J Keefe (Head of US KFOR) stating categorically that "not one report of armed extremists operating in Kosovo has been substantiated", which was in response to Covic's assertion that "ethnic Albanian militants were grouping in Kosovo, in Kamenica and Gjilan".²⁰ UNMIK

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chief Special Representative of the Secretary-General Michael Steiner was also quoted as saying he was sceptical of such [Covic's] claims and asked to "see the evidence".

EU foreign affairs chief Javier Solana also spoke out against the continuing unrest in South Serbia. He described the unrest as an attempt to undermine the rule of law and destabilise the region, according to the Serbian news agency Beta.

The trigger for this chain of recent events had been the blowing up of a Serb police vehicle on a mine around 10km from Bujanovac early on 24 February in which Milan Vujovic was killed and two other policemen wounded. They were described as "members of the elite special unit called the Gendarmerie". Covic told the Beta news agency that the entire operation had been coordinated by leaders of the former UCPMB, naming them as Sefket Musliu, Besim Tahiri and Lirim Jakupi, who he suggested were in Kosovo and should be "extradited".

Nebojsa Covic followed this up with a personal appearance in Brussels at NATO, in which he claimed: "There are indications that "other paramilitary troops are operating in the region",²¹ namely the ANA. Seemingly contradictorily, he claimed that "Serbia was successfully working to restore law and order in southern Serbia," and then claimed that this was all really about organised crime, a standard Serbian reflex when discussing Albanian paramilitary matters. He then went on to say that "as a rule organised crime is associated with war criminals and war profiteers". What he did clearly confirm is that the situation in the Preshevo valley is no longer peaceful, and thus indirectly that the Covic plan has not yet been as successful as many commentators had predicted on its signing two years ago in May 2001. He ended his speech by a discussion on Kosovo itself, linking instability there to Preshevo and Albanian nationalism generally.

Looking back to the original Covic plan and to events following it, the local elections do seem to have been the most successful part of the plan, and perhaps there is some hope here (though the lessons of Kosovo's elections between 1978 and 1989 might prove a warning against relying too much on elections as a safeguard for minorities in Yugoslavia). The first elections following the Covic plan were the municipal elections of July 2002, organised under a proportional representation system. Riza Halimi, who leads the largest Albanian party, the Party for Democratic Action (PDA), which has close connections to the LDK in Kosovo, won control of Preshevo (his home town) and Bujanovac, where the PDA Mayor is Nagip Arifi, although it took until September to install the resulting Albanian council in Bujanovac.²² A Serb coalition won Mevedje; Serbs overran Medveje in 1879, and are much stronger there (roughly 60/40), whereas Preshevo and Bujanovac only became Serbian in 1913 and are still heavily Albanian speaking.

The other Albanian parties which contested the elections were the Movement for Democratic Progress (PDP) headed by Jonuz Musliu, which is broadly the party of the ex-UCPMB leaders (spokesperson Sevdail Hyseni). The status of this party is currently uncertain. There was also the Party for Democratic Union/Unification of Albanians (PDUA or DPAU), and the Albanian Democratic Party, or United Democratic Party of Albanians whose vice-chairman/deputy head is the much quoted Naser Haziri.²³ This has recently united with the Parliamentary Party, creating the Partia e Baskimit Democratic Shqiptar (PBDSH) - roughly the United Democratic Albanian Party.

Another development which was meant to follow from the Covic plan was to be the promised economic assistance, from the US, and the EU. The United Nations Development Programme quickly set up an organisation to plan and implement development projects, and both the EU and USAID designed projects, but as with so many post conflict international initiatives, after more than a year it is still hard for ordinary local people to see tangible results.

However the main problem with the agreement, the education issue, is connected to the qualification issue, which in turn leads to the question of how local Albanian speakers can achieve an equal share of the job market, which is still very much dominated in Serbia by state enterprises and government structures. This in turn leads to Albanians gravitating to education in other countries, small businesses, and working abroad, all of which fosters a sense of isolation, and thus nationalism – from a sense of being excluded and not “getting a fair share”. This sense of exclusion is clearly also a key issue. Albanians have never wished to have much to do with Serb (or indeed Slav) governments since their areas were taken over and divided following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. One way of drawing them in would be inclusion in state jobs, both government and in state enterprises, but so far jobs in these areas have been largely reserved to encourage Serbian immigration or retention in these areas.

This is not of course to deny that nationalism inevitably plays a part in the Albanian psyche, especially in areas which were only separated from their fellow countrymen in very recent times over the last century. There is clearly a strong desire to rejoin the motherland (or more correctly the Fatherland in Gheg Albanian), in this case in the sense of Kosovo, but these measures might go some way to alleviating this desire, or at least the feeling of alienation from national government.

However, by and large the Albanian population of the valley accepted the changes outlined in the Covic plan,²⁴ and UCPMB remained disbanded. A new rebel army did announce itself in September, calling itself the UCKL (Liberation Army of Eastern Kosovo - Kosovo Lindore), but nothing further was heard of it. It was widely assumed to be just a name, although the arrests of February and Covic's subsequent assertion that “this wasn't an isolated action and it is by no means finished”²⁵ possibly indicates otherwise.²⁶

Where the problems came from, surprisingly, was the Serbian army itself and the Serbian press, or at least that section which supported the then Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica. Throughout the summer and autumn of 2002 a steady stream of news items and articles appeared in the Belgrade papers with stories of security incidents in the Preshevo valley. Police and army were supposed to have been shot at, mines were found, a newly recruited Albanian policeman was alleged to have been murdered (he was not; a grenade was thrown into his yard, without causing casualties). However, ex-UCPMB members emphatically denied being involved, or that any incidents had actually taken place, other than Serbian army engineers finding old mines as they constructed new roads up to the new observation posts, patrol bases and barracks.

Personal communication from members of the political council confirm the statements at footnote 24. Throughout last winter there does not seem to have been any significant armed action by Albanians in the valley against either newly joined members of the police, or Serbian military forces. The pressure seems to have been from the Serbian army, who appear to have been running to a different

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agenda to the government, or at least to the Djindjic/Covic part of the Serbian government.

These are the facts. The reasons can only be surmised. There has been a massive building programme (massive by army standards over the last decade) of roads, barracks and new posts in the rural Albanian speaking areas. "Yugoslav government approves ... 200m dinars for barracks in Preshevo."²⁷ Informed observers estimate that this programme is costing the army up to one-third of its 2001/02 budget, and probably most of the actual cash available.²⁸ The question remains "why". Presumably wounded pride from the loss of Kosovo, perhaps the natural tendency of any bureaucracy to seize any opportunity for expenditure, and above all the strong nationalist feelings of the Serbian army leadership are possible reasons. Another possibility that must be considered is that Belgrade politicians feel the need to keep the army occupied as far away from Belgrade as possible, although this seems less likely. The army remains the most unreformed of Serb institutions, and regards itself as having a special, almost supra-constitutional role in safeguarding the state.

It seems clear from public statements that locally the Pristina Corps leadership, (and previously the 3rd Army leadership) are strongly opposed to Covic's apparent conciliatory attitudes to local Albanian political leaders. Perhaps this is allied at the highest levels to the generals' strong association with and support for Kostunica. Both the army and Kostunica as president were federal institutions, and it should always be remembered that Kostunica was not dismissed from the Communist Party for taking part in any democratic opposition, but in effect for "excessive nationalism", in the way that he opposed the 1974 constitutional changes.

In short there are many potential reasons for the Serb army pressure on the rural areas in the Preshevo valley. However, it does seem to have achieved what Serb generals may have been intending to prevent - another resurgence of the threat of Albanian nationalism.

It should of course be noted that there is an alternative view. Given the history of the involvement of the army in war crimes in the Balkans over the last decade, some observers have attributed more direct motives to the army stationed in Preshevo. Provocation and keenness to "go in hard" have characterised Serb army actions in the Preshevo valley, and to some it seems they are keen to provoke trouble now they are convinced that NATO and the International Community will not intervene.

The Future

Clearly, though, there remains a long term Albanian issue in the southern Balkans. Many Albanians continue to live in areas contiguous to both Albania and Kosovo which are part of other, Slav ruled countries. The border changes which caused so many Albanians to find themselves living outside their own country are very recent in historical terms. Less than a century has passed since the Conference of London (1913), and Serbs have yet to successfully establish their rule in Preshevo. An apt comparison might be that the UK has yet to successfully establish its rule in South Armagh, and for similar reasons.

Despite the world-wide changes induced by 11 September 2001, it would seem safe to predict that problems, possibly armed problems, will continue in the Preshevo valley, particularly in the rural areas adjacent to the Kosovo border.

Like South Armagh there is no easy solution, apart from perhaps the late Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic's suggestion of a new Balkan conference and border changes (but it seems unlikely that he was referring to giving anything away, let alone the Preshevo valley). More immediate solutions might lie in more genuine power sharing arrangements, and recognition of non-Slavic, non-Cyrillic educational qualifications. Changes in the educational curriculum would also help, as would a massive reduction in the Serbian military presence and their replacement by a more genuinely multi-ethnic police force. Neither are likely to happen. Serb opinions remain split between Covic's ideas on returning to a Titoist status quo, and the Serbian officers' view (and by analogy perhaps Kostunica's) of cracking down until "they", the Albanians, leave.

The current situation in the valley is at least superficially similar to that in Kosovo in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Then the situation was closely watched by many European nations. Now there is the rather vague hope that somehow "Europeanisation" or moving closer to the EU will make the problem go away. Most informed observers understand that whilst the borders in "old Europe" are relatively stable the borders in the southern Balkans are not. In the short term there is a determination to keep borders as they are (hence the desperate attempt to keep what is left of Yugoslavia in one union), whilst in the long term there is the feeling that somehow the EU will make borders irrelevant.

The latter may well be true, but meanwhile it will require the threat of armed force (ie KFOR on one side, and the Serb Army on the other) to keep the situation under control. Resolving the question of status in Kosovo may help, but ultimately it is very hard to keep the lid on nationalism.

The Albanians of the Preshevo valley used to be part of an area which is now split between FYROM and Kosovo. They have a feeling that they always belonged with other Albanian speakers. Serbia only took the whole area in 1912/13, and only created the divisions in the present form in 1946 (and then without ever officially gazetting the new borders). At the time there were no such geographic distinctions or divisions, and the local inhabitants all felt part of the Vilayet of Skopje. They only became part of Serbia in the late 1940s. The Albanians of the valley would like to be part of Kosovo again, so they can send their children to secondary school in Gjilan and on to university in Pristina.

Serbs, on the other hand, still need to find their natural borders,²⁹ and until this happens Preshevo will remain a problem.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jonuz Musliu is the former chief negotiator on behalf of UCPMB, and now a political party leader.

² For further details of this region and the plan, see Bob Churcher, 'Kosovo Lindore/Preshevo 1999-2002 and the FYROM Conflict', G104, March 2002, www.csrc.ac.uk. For news from an Albanian viewpoint, see www.presheva.com

³ Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic was assassinated in Belgrade on March 12th 2003, allegedly by Serbian criminal elements with close connections to the Serbian government.

⁴ There are of course two spellings for each place name in these areas. The use of a particular spelling here is not meant to imply any political meaning or inclination.

⁵ This statement can be seen as contentious, but less now that the Milosevic trial has so convincingly demonstrated the attitudes of most Serb security forces in Kosovo, and that all Serb forces were subordinated to the army at the time of the conflict. The discovery of several hundred bodies of Albanian men, women and children, removed from Kosovo and dumped in trucks in the Danube, lakes in Republica Srpska, and buried in police firing ranges should be enough to convince the most sceptical observer that Serb forces felt no need to observe the Geneva Convention, their own laws, or the most elementary and obvious human rights when dealing with Albanian citizens of Yugoslavia.

⁶ Evidence for this was widespread in newspaper reports of the time, in the 15,000 or so refugees who left the Preshevo communes for Kosovo, arriving in both Pristina and Gjilan, and in testimony to UK refugee tribunals, where harrowing tales of rape by Serb police in front of families has emerged. Albanian numbers in Preshevo were recorded as 72,484 in the 1991 census, but currently stand at 59,952 in the 2002 registration, a drop of 12,000.

⁷ Sonja Biserko, a very well known Serbian human rights commentator, asserts that "Albanians in south Serbia were pressed to leave their homes". Quoted in Balkan Human Rights, 8 January 2003.

⁸ Zeri, 22 January 2003.

⁹ For example: Professor Milorad Ekmecic of Belgrade University is quoted as saying that the Vardar "is the key to the Balkans", and, more oddly, that "anyone who controls the Vardar valley is a Balkan Hegemonist" - quoted in Balkan Human Rights, 3 January 2003.

¹⁰ IWPR Balkan Report.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² AFP, 28 November 2002. A Belgrade Official, Sima Gazikalovic, was quoted as saying that all Albanian flags had been taken down by 1400hrs.

¹³ Tanjug (Serbian News Agency), 27 November 2002.

¹⁴ AP, 17 February 2003.

¹⁵ ANA leader Vigan Gradica told the Pristina daily Koha Ditore in February that his units were active in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Greece.

¹⁶ AP, quoted in the Gulf Times, Dubai, article headed "Balkans brace for fresh strife".

¹⁷ www.serbia.sr.gov.yu/news/2002-11/23

¹⁸ Depending on reports, most quoted 10, whilst AP quoted 12 on 17 February 2003.

¹⁹ On 4 February two unknown assailants in Bujanovac, south Serbia, killed Selver Fazlia, an ethnic Albanian inspector of the renamed Serbian Security Information Agency, now the BIA. In the same town the next day, a bomb was hurled at the house of another member of the multi-ethnic police force. Note that the BIA is the new name for the old RSO. This organisation was the one that organised and ran the JSO, the Red Berets, commanded by Col Milorad Ulemek Leqija, who are widely believed to have committed many atrocities and crimes on behalf of the Milosevic government, including the murder of the then Serbian President, Ivan Stambolic.

²⁰ AP, 24 February 2003, <http://story.news.yahoo.com>

²¹ Reported in official Serbian (still described as Yugoslav) government news agency on 27 February 2003.

²² OSCE news release, Belgrade, 16 September 2002.

²³ A member of the Preshevo negotiating team.

²⁴ If only under the threat of the use of overwhelming force (in a parallel perhaps uncomfortably close the reasons behind the creation of Northern Ireland).

²⁵ Covic, quoted in a Serbian website, Decani News, from AP 31 minutes after the action, 8 February 2003.

²⁶ "Mustafë Shaqiri, a UCPMB lieutenant-commander, said that a statement of Serb Deputy-PM Covic, who asked for strong punishing measures against the Albanian terrorists preceded the recent escalation of the situation in the Presheva Valley. There are no terrorist groups in Presheva Valley and the Serb police and paramilitaries operating within the Serb police committed all the murders there, said Shaqiri. Light has not been shed on any case only because they were committed by the Serb regime. It is clear that if the Albanians had committed those acts, they would have been solved long ago. Stop the violence, free UCPMB members and start to concretely apply the Koncul Agreement or else you may face a new, better organised and more decisive guerrilla to protect the dignity and human and national rights of Presheva Valley Albanians, said Shaqiri." Koha Ditore, 12 February 2003.

²⁷ Foreign Ministry communiqué, Belgrade, 16 January 2003.

²⁸ VIP News, Defence and Security, 6 February 2002, p3, Pristina Corps (the Corps stationed in the Preshevo area) is said to have conducted 340 tactical exercises and 240 training exercises. 30 facilities for personnel were built, repaired or adapted, and soldiers are quoted as averaging 15 hours a day on duty.

²⁹ See Serbian PM Zoran Djindjic, talks on revising border if Kosovo becomes independent - Mitrovica, Republic Srpska, quoted in an interview in Vecernje Novosti Belgrade, 13 January 2003. See also VIP News, Belgrade, Defence and Security, Issue No 071, for the implications of the Preshevo crisis on relations with NATO. An important seminar was held on this subject, amongst others, in Athens, on 6-9 February 2003. A key Serb priority is the abolition of the Ground Safety Zone around Kosovo, as part of Serbia-Montenegro drive for Partnership for Peace membership. Membership of the PFP is seen by Belgrade as strengthening their negotiating position over the final status of Kosovo.

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