

Presevo Valley gained international attention mostly due to the insurgency of local Albanians in 2000, which was also a key factor destabilising Macedonia in 2001. Situated in southern Serbia and bordering on Macedonia and Kosovo, Presevo Valley is home to Serbia's Albanian minority. Although the Valley has been calm in the last few years and the resurgence of armed conflict is unlikely at the moment, the situation is still fragile and continues to pose a potential security threat for the wider region. As the solution to Kosovo's status is approaching, the problems of Albanians in Presevo Valley deserve serious attention. There are two main sources of security threats: one is the potential influx of Serbian refugees, the other is Kosovo's (hypothetical) partition. The latter could potentially lead to the outbreak of violence, as Albanians of the Valley recently declared their intention to be united with Kosovo if the Serbian villages in the North of Kosovo would join Serbia. This Policy Brief argues, however, that the Serbian government could reduce the chances of conflict by addressing some everyday problems faced by the Albanian minority, which could take the wind out of the sails of potential irredentists. Albanian grievances centre on issues such as their weak presence in the public sector, high unemployment, limited implementation of their language rights and the lack of economic development. Some of these problems could be effectively addressed through strengthening local autonomy, which could be part of the solution. It is argued here that continuation with the Covic plan, which combines decentralisation and demilitarisation, could bring about the desired stability for the region, which needs continued attention and assistance from international bodies, among them the European Union.

1. Introduction

In May 2001, the 17-month insurgency of Albanians in Southern Serbia came to an end. In the Konculj Agreement, Albanians agreed to disarm and disband the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and

The Presevo Valley of Southern Serbia alongside Kosovo The Case for Decentralisation and Minority Protection

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Bujanovac (UCPMB) in exchange for the promise of amnesty for their fighters, the return of refugees, the creation of a multi-ethnic police force and the integration of Albanians into public institutions. After decades of official discrimination and exclusion from state institutions, the adoption of the Covic Plan, which foresaw the goals mentioned above, provided an opportunity to respond to Albanian grievances and win loyalty of the Albanian minority to the Serbian state. The plan drawn up by Nebojsa Covic, Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia in 2001, contained clear goals with deadlines, including "the integration of Albanians into the political, government and social system", meaning into the police, judiciary, health services, education, municipal institutions, economy, etc. in proportion to their numbers.¹

During the Milosevic era, both during and after the Kosovo conflict, Albanians in southern Serbia were subjected to police harassment, including torture and execution of civilians, which was the main motivation for forming the UCPMB and igniting an armed conflict in the Valley. During the fighting, which lasted around a year and a half, about 100 people were killed and as a result 12,500 Albanians left the area. Since the fighting ended, around 10,000 people have returned and the situation has significantly improved. One of the greatest successes has been the creation of the multi-ethnic police force with the help of OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). In July 2002, local elections

¹ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Southern Serbia: In Kosovo's Shadow", Policy Briefing No. 43, Belgrade/Pristina/Brussels, 27 June 2006, p. 3.

were held which brought Albanian parties to power in local municipal assemblies.

Local Albanians mostly support moderate parties; thus the resurgence of armed conflict is quite unlikely – although in 2002 and 2003, small-scale incidents continued. Nevertheless, the situation is still fragile and still poses a potential security threat for the wider region. The 2001 conflict in Macedonia was due to a spill-over from southern Serbia (see on map1 and 2), and nobody knows how Kosovo's independence would affect the delicate situation in the Valley. Certainly goodwill on behalf of the Serbian government is needed to make local Albanians feel like equal citizens of the Serbian state. The lack of economic and social development, coupled with high numbers of Serbian security forces stationed in the Valley, does not foster mutual trust and stability. Moreover, Albanians are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their political moderates who, during the last political term, cooperated with Covic and Belgrade, yet delivered no results in terms of economic development and integration of Albanians into public institutions.

As a solution to Kosovo's status is approaching, the problems of Albanians in Presevo Valley deserve serious attention. The international community, especially OSCE, NATO, UNDP and other non-governmental and multilateral organisations, has played a crucial role in preserving peace, reconstruction and refugee return so far. Continuation with the Covic plan, decentralisation and demilitarisation together could bring about the desired stability for the region, which needs continued attention and assistance of international bodies, among them the European Union.²

The next section highlights the main problems the Albanian minority is facing today in Serbia, a significant portion of which could be effectively addressed through further empowering of municipal self-governments. It will be argued here that decentralisation coupled with demilitarisation and integration could mean a real solution to most of their grievances, which could ease tensions and bring lasting stability in the Valley, even if Kosovo goes independent.

2. The drawbacks of the current administrative organisation

Presevo Valley, a regional home to Serbia's largest Albanian minority, is situated in southern Serbia bordering Macedonia to the south and Kosovo to the west (see on map1 and 2). The municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja are part of the Pcinje district with its centre in Vranje. The total population of the Valley is around 86,000 inhabitants,

² Ibid., p. 4.

of whom around 57,000 are Albanians and the rest are Serbs and Roma. Presevo has an Albanian majority of 89% of the people. Bujanovac's population is split among the three ethnic groups, where Albanians constitute the majority (54%), although Serbs (34%) and Roma (9%) also live in considerable numbers. Medvedja is the only Serb majority municipality of the Valley, where Serbs constitute 66% of the population and Albanians 36%. Altogether Albanians contribute to around 25% of the Pcinje district population, yet the regional administrative centre in Vranje is dominated by Serbs, where the Serbian Radical Party and Serbian Socialist Party enjoy the most popular support. The local parties and their policies are often openly anti-Albanian and the court system is infamously corrupt.³ Albanians especially feel excluded from district-level administration, having no representative at the district-level court or in other institutions.

Whereas current administrative arrangements do not favour Albanians, some proposals for future regionalisation of Serbia could lead to even worse solutions, providing opportunities for ethnic gerrymandering. According to Kostunica's DSS proposal, Serbia should be organised into six regions, among which Presevo Valley's three municipalities would be added to a bigger region with its centre in Nis, instead of Vranje. Such a solution would mean that the proportion of Albanians in such a region would diminish to about 4%, further reducing their chances for effective political participation.⁴

Albanians would prefer either to abolish the present district-level administration and delegate its functions to the municipalities or to create a Presevo district made up by the three municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja.⁵

Altogether, the lack of local autonomy in various fields has numerous negative consequences for local Albanians, such as their weak presence in the public sector, high unemployment, limited implementation of their language rights and the lack of economic development. These issues are explored in the following section.

3. Central control and its implications

Under-representation in the public sector

In those municipalities where national minorities constitute a majority, it is a crucial question who appoints local police chiefs, staff and personnel of the

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Interview with Shaip Kamberi, Council for Human Rights, 19 September 2006, Bujanovac.

⁵ Ibid.

local courts. At present municipal local authorities have no control over local courts and police; all employees of these bodies are appointed by Belgrade. It is true in general, however, that Albanians are barely represented in *all* institutions under central control (such as the post office, tax authorities, land registry, local development offices, social institutions, health centres, customs services, different inspection bodies such as state financial, market, sanitary and labour inspections, and among principals of primary and secondary schools). In socially-owned companies, most of which are still waiting to be privatised, the situation is the same: the majority of employees are also of Serbian ethnicity. For instance, in the company called Heba, which is a producer of mineral water and one of the few profitable companies in the region, 95% of the workers are Serbs.

At the Bujanovac municipal court, only 4 out of 44 employees are Albanians and the rest are Serbs. At the municipal court in Presevo, 11 out of 40 employees are Albanians, 3 Roma and 24 are Serbs. The public prosecution department in Bujanovac has 8 employees, 7 Serbs and 1 Albanian who is a deputy prosecutor. In the same body in Presevo, there are 10 employees, 5 Serbs and 5 Albanians. The Health Centre in Bujanovac has 272 employees, of which 212 are Serbs, 57 Albanians and 3 Roma. The Health Centre in Presevo has 169 employees, 126 Albanians and 43 Serbs.⁶

The police force is an exception in this regard since the establishment of the multi-ethnic force, which incorporated many Albanians into its ranks.

Unemployment

Unemployment is a serious problem not only because Albanians have a hard time feeling like equal citizens of Serbia due to their under-representation in public institutions, but also because unemployment in the region is a grave issue, even for the Serbian population. Employment in the public sector can grant some level of social stability under such severe economic circumstances. In Bujanvac the rate of unemployment is estimated around 60%, and in Presevo around 70%. After five years of the adoption of the Covic plan which foresaw the integration of Albanians into state institutions, it can be concluded that, except for the multi-ethnic local police, integration has been very slow, if at all, in all institutions controlled by the central state. Since Albanians have been essentially excluded from the public sector, they were forced to open small businesses, or work abroad and help their families through remittances. According to the ICG, the greatest long-term security challenge is to address the

⁶ Shaip Kamberi, Council of Human Rights, Bujanovac, Annual Report 2004, p. 6.

unemployment of the young male population, many of whom are former UPCMP fighters.⁷

At the same time, cross-border smuggling is flourishing in the area, and not only Albanians, but Serb authorities and police, and Serb organised crime are involved in illegal businesses.⁸

Obstacles impeding official language use

Partially as a consequence of employment practices, the official use of Albanian in Bujanovac and Presevo is lacking in many areas due to the shortage of Albanian-speaking staff. In Bujanovac, in the local court out of eight judges only one is Albanian; therefore the official use of Albanian exists mainly on paper, except in the municipal administration. Since Albanian parties took control of the local governments in Presevo and Bujanovac, the communication with local authorities and administration can be conducted in Albanian. In principle, Albanian became an official language in Bujanovac and Presevo in 2002, when the law on national minorities was adopted at the federal level, which enabled municipal local governments to recognise minority languages as official next to Serbian. Besides the lack of Albanian-speaking staff, however, legal loopholes also hinder the official use of Albanian. The act on the official use of language foresees the issuing of bilingual official documents and empowers the minister to order the issuing of such documents. In Vojvodina, for instance, the provincial bodies have the authority to order the printing of bilingual birth certificates in all minority languages that are in official use on the territory of Vojvodina. Yet, outside of Vojvodina, in the rest of Serbia, if the relevant ministry fails to deliver these bilingual documents, local governments cannot do much about it.⁹ Clearly, in the absence of bilingual documents, the official use of Albanian cannot be practiced in reality. The fact that Albanian cannot be used in practice in many spheres of communication has also a gender aspect. It is especially a problem for Albanian women and children who often know very little Serbian, while the men in general have a good command of Serbian.¹⁰

It can be assumed that if local governments had authority over the institutions¹¹ that are currently

⁷ ICG, "Southern Serbia's Fragile Peace", ICG Europe Report No. 152, 9 December 2003, p. 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ Interview with János Orosz, Novi Sad, 25 September 2006.

¹⁰ Interview with Shaip Kamberi.

¹¹ These are: post office, tax authorities, land registry, local development offices, social institutions, health centres, customs services and various inspection organs such as state financial, market, sanitary and labour inspections.

under central state control, the integration of Albanians into those institutions would accelerate. It would not only improve their employment situation, but as a positive side effect it would provide the opportunity to implement the official use of Albanian more widely. Nevertheless, in general, responsibility would lie more with local authorities for fulfilling the need for integration and official language use of Albanian, and the Serbian state would be less easily blamed for the lack of progress. One solution could be the delegation of these functions to municipal local governments, while the state could still sustain its control over the lawfulness and appropriateness of the conduct of these functions. At the same time, local authorities could have an influence over employment practices in these institutions, as is the case in Macedonia. If the Serbian state insists on maintaining the district-level administration system, then it should be a priority to achieve proportionate representation of Albanians and other minorities in these institutions. It would be also desirable to define districts corresponding to the needs of national minorities; in this case, the three municipalities of Presevo Valley could constitute one single district.

However, full implementation of language rights would require further action by the state, besides decentralisation. Since Serbia's framework law on national minorities grants far-reaching rights to minorities in this regard, the Serbian government should address the legal inconsistencies and other obstacles that impede the practical implementation of existing minority rights, such as the issuing of bilingual documents.

Economic situation

Presevo Valley has been traditionally an economically neglected region in Serbia, with per capita income of less than one-third the Serbian average. In the last few years international donors have invested a lot of money in the local infrastructure, while the Serbian government gave most funding to the municipality of Medvedja, which is the only Serb-majority area in the Valley. This kind of investment policy of the state not only makes Albanians feel like second-class citizens of Serbia, but also remains a continued source of disappointment and instability.¹²

Privatisation has been marked by corruption and cronyism, and allegedly it has been much politicised. Municipal local governments have been left out of the process, and Serbs took control of lucrative firms with the help of the centrally-controlled Privatisation Agency. According to local analysts, Albanians do not have equal chances to purchase companies.¹³ In

general the whole process has been lagging behind, and as most companies are not profitable, they are therefore hard to sell. While in other parts of Serbia most firms have been sold already, in Presevo Valley very few companies have been privatised since 2001.

At the same time, local municipal governments do not have many tools at their disposal to attract investment. They can offer breaks from local taxes, yet they cannot offer property for investors, since all public property is owned by the state. Therefore, increasing the role of local governments in local economic development, which would above all require the devolution of property to municipalities, would be crucial in order to revitalise these local economies. Nevertheless, as long as Kosovo remains in a legal limbo, southern Serbia will not be perceived as a stable environment, and investors will probably keep away.

4. Other corrective measures needed

Besides the problems discussed above, which can be fully or partially associated with the lack of sufficient local autonomy, there are further concerns that could be addressed through means other than decentralisation. Such issues are related to education, refugee return and the presence of armed forces in the Valley that keep fuelling resentment among the local population.

Education

Presevo has eight Albanian primary schools, one Serbian and a mixed high school. Bujanovac has six primary schools and one high school, two of which are Serbian.¹⁴ For Albanians the biggest problem is posed by parts of the curricula, especially history containing humiliating ethnic content.¹⁵

As most students study in Kosovo, the recognition of Kosovar diplomas is a crucial issue for Albanians. A peculiar situation emerged in which diplomas received at Kosovar universities are accepted in practice since 2003, yet there has been no official decision in terms of legislation in Serbia. The use of textbooks brought from Kosovo is allowed in practice, yet the curricula have not been harmonised with Serbian curricula. Moreover, which particular

Vladicin Han and the BIA put political pressure on the Agency for Privatisation to annul the auction, because Nexhat Beluli, an Albanian businessman from Bujanovac, wanted to buy it. The BIA suggested to the Agency for Privatisation that the deal should be cancelled since an 'UCPMB terrorist' bought the company. Source: Shaip Kamberi, Council of Human Rights, Bujanoc, Annual Report 2004, p. 9.

¹⁴ ICG Report, 2003, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁵ Shaip Kamberi, Council of Human Rights, Bujanoc, Annual Report 2004, p. 5.

¹² ICG Report, 2003, op. cit., p. 5.

¹³ Such a case was the privatisation of Balkan Brick factory from Vladicin Han. The municipality of

books will be approved depends on ad hoc decisions of civil servants in Belgrade. On the whole, due to the lack of official regulation, the recognition of diplomas and permitting the use of textbooks depend on the goodwill of the central authorities. This is not an ideal solution, since it keeps the Albanian minority vulnerable to the political mood of the central government.¹⁶ The adoption of some kind of legal measure on behalf of the Serbian government would be needed to settle the problem of diplomas and textbooks received from Kosovo.

Refugee return

Another grievance of local Albanians is the fact that many who fled the area to Kosovo during the conflict in 2000 cannot return. They cannot go back either because UNMIK papers are not recognised in Serbia or because most of the houses that were destroyed during the conflict have not been rebuilt. Around 3,000 people from Bujanovac live as IDPs (internally displaced persons) in Kosovo currently, most of them in Gjilanje.¹⁷ Most of them fled from the 5 kilometre-wide ground safety zone in the Bujanovac highlands (see on map1), where their houses were either destroyed or were simply demolished after they were deserted by their inhabitants. Not only the policies of Milosevic, but economic hardships also prompted mass emigration to Kosovo and to Western Europe, which was also characteristic of other minority communities in Serbia, such as the Hungarians.

Serbia's loss of its authority in Kosovo, which led to the erection of a de facto international border between Kosovo and Serbia, hit the Albanians in Presevo Valley especially hard, making the movement of people across the borders extremely difficult. In the former Yugoslavia, there were no borders between Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia, and Albanians living along these three borders fostered intense social links with each other.

A recent report commissioned by Freedom House¹⁸ urged the Serbian and the Kosovar governments, to improve economic ties and free movement of people along the Serbian-Kosovar border with the assistance of the European Union, which would require a change in trade and visa regimes in both countries/entities. Admittedly, the report was inspired

¹⁶ Interview with Shaip Kamberi, Council for Human Rights, 19 September 2006, Bujanovac.

¹⁷ Interview with Emrullah Muftiu, chief of administration in Bujanovac municipal government, 19 September 2006.

¹⁸ *A Joint European Vision: Free Movement for Goods and People in Kosovo and Serbia*, report published jointly by Freedom House, European Movement in Serbia, Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development. (see http://www.otvoreno.org.yu/dokumenti/emins_eng.pdf).

by fears that the Western Balkans “risks becoming a ghetto consisting of ghettos”, meaning that the region becomes isolated from the rest of Europe, and that the countries of the region become isolated from each other as well. Another aspect of this problem, however, which was not mentioned by the report, is that the Albanian population living on both sides of the Serbian-Kosovar border and the Serbian minority living in Kosovo would especially need the improvement of trade and visa regimes between Kosovo and Serbia. Since the interests seem to be mutual, here the same proposals can be presented, only in a different context. Taking the interests of the Albanian and the Serbian minorities into consideration, trade and visa regimes should be placed at the top of the negotiations agenda between Serbia and Kosovo.

Security forces

The establishment of the multi-ethnic police force with the assistance of OSCE can be regarded as a real success. In the municipal police in Bujanovac, for instance, the chief of police is a Serb, but one of his deputies is an Albanian. Yet, at the district-level, which has its centre in Vranje and includes seven municipalities, 25% of which is Albanian, Albanians are not represented at all.

However, essential policing power, with the right of carrying out searches and arrests still lies with the Gendarmerie, which is a special police body incorporating former members of the Serbian state security. The presence of the Gendarmerie is very intimidating for local Albanians, as they drive around in the villages brandishing their machine guns in a demonstration of force. Their active operation in a 5-kilometer-wide border zone with Kosovo and Macedonia (see on map1) prevents the free movement of people within the area and the use of land. Local Albanians would prefer the buffer zone to be reduced to 300 meters instead of 5 kilometres.¹⁹

Construction of a new army base for the Gendarmerie recently began near Bujanovac, but the construction works stopped, probably due to the lack of funding. Besides the Gendarmerie, the army and the multi-ethnic police are the security bodies active in Presevo Valley. Certainly the deployment of special forces in such high numbers in the area does suggest that the state relates to this population as a potential enemy, and such an attitude certainly does not help to build trust and stability in the region. Therefore, one of the highest priorities for Albanian politicians is the demilitarisation of southern Serbia. Moreover, although the multi-ethnic police has been created, its authority is limited compared to that of the Gendarmerie. Albanian politicians would prefer the

¹⁹ Shaip Kamberi, Council of Human Rights, Bujanoc, Annual Report 2004, p. 4.

local multi-ethnic police to guard the borders and for ethnic Albanians to be incorporated into border police bodies and custom services, which currently do not employ Albanians.²⁰

Serbian media also contribute to the maintenance of distrust and tensions between Serbs and Albanians. Albanians are most often portrayed as 'Islamic terrorists' and smugglers, and are overwhelmingly presented in a negative light.²¹

5. Local Albanian politics

The issues explored above have to be addressed in the context of local politics. Interestingly, the Albanian minority is among the few in Serbia that has not formed its own national council. It is an important fact, because according to the law on national minorities, national councils are the bodies through which cultural autonomy can be realised in Serbia. That they have failed to set up their national council is telling about their attitude towards the Serbian state and also about their internal political dynamics.

Part of the reason might be that forming their council would imply acceptance of the fact that their country is Serbia. However, this kind of attitude seems to be changing, as evidenced by the Albanian parties' decision to participate in the recent parliamentary elections in January 2007. This is a big development, taking into account that they have boycotted all national election over the last 15 years.

The other reason why Albanian parties failed to form their national council was due to disagreements about who should be its leader. The strongest party is the moderate Party for Democratic Action (PDD) led by Riza Halimi. Recently, however, PDD lost its leading influence in Presevo's local government. In the three municipalities of the Valley, Albanian parties together control 66 seats in local assemblies, out of which 34 belongs to PDD. The other Albanian parties do not want PDD to dominate the national council, which would be inevitable due to its numerical majority. The failure to set up the Albanian National Council often serves as an excuse for Serbian authorities as to why many Albanian national minority rights, such as official language use, are not implemented in practice. Nevertheless, forming their national council would be the minimum Albanians could do to assert their minority rights. Given their unwillingness to create their national council, it is somewhat strange to put all the blame on Belgrade for the lack of progress.

²⁰ Interview with Ragmi Mustafa, mayor of Presevo, 19 September 2006, Presevo.

²¹ Shaip Kamberi, Council of Human Rights, Bujanoc, Annual Report 2004, p. 7.

PDD, which is still the most popular among Albanian voters, represents a moderate political option, fighting for the rights of Albanians in the Serbian state. Its leader, Riza Halimi, has been the chief negotiator with Belgrade and the international community.

During the last local elections in June 2004 in Presevo, the PDD failed to win the majority in the local assembly. The coalition of other Albanian parties – consisting of the Party for Democratic Progress (LDP), the Democratic Party of Albanians (PDSH) and the Democratic Union of the Valley (BDL) – worked together to remove the PDD mayor and replaced him in 2005 with Ragmi Mustafa, leader of the PDSH. The PDSH is a nationalist party advocating the unification of Albanian-inhabited regions in Macedonia and Southern Serbia with Kosovo and is closely linked to former UPCMB commanders.²² According to analysts, the take-over by the PDSH in Presevo is not a sign of radicalisation of local Albanians, but indicates that people got tired of Halimi's politics, which delivered no progress in terms of economic development, but were marked by much corruption. The low turnout of 21% during the June 2006 mayoral elections (when Mustafa's position as mayor was confirmed) also suggest that Halimi's call for a boycott was successful, and the moderate political option is still popular among people.²³

In Bujanovac, Albanian parties received 22 seats out of 44 in the local assembly (PDD 13, LDP 9), while Serbs received 17 mandates (SRS 12, DOS coalition 5). The incumbent mayor, Nagip Arifi, the PDD candidate, won the mayoral election. In Medvedja, Albanian parties won only 7 seats. A local citizens' group's representative won the race for mayor.²⁴

It should be stressed that most Albanian voters, not only in Serbia but also in Macedonia, favour moderates. The recent local elections in Presevo represent the first time a radical Albanian party promoting unification with Kosovo came out as strongest and could form the ruling coalition.²⁵ As was noted above, however, this vote was probably more an expression of dissatisfaction with the previous mayor, Riza Halimi, than a sign of radicalisation. The Kosovar Albanian leadership also tries to keep tensions low in Presevo Valley, which also does not favour extremists.

²² ICG Report 2003, op. cit., p. 19.

²³ ICG Report 2006, op. cit, pp. 8-10. See same source for more on local politics.

²⁴ ICG Report 2006, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁵ Such as the ICG.

6. The Kosovo factor

Despite that fact that a radical mayor took over the office in Presevo, the security situation seems quite stable at the moment. Yet no one knows what will happen if Kosovo gains its independence. It is very unlikely that the Albanians in Presevo Valley would want to take up arms to join an independent Kosovo within its present borders. Admittedly Albanians in Presevo Valley would be both happy and sad if their ethnic kin were to gain full independence – happy about Kosovo having gained its freedom from Serbia and sad because they cannot participate in the new state. Yet, they emphasise that if Kosovo becomes independent, it would not trigger irredentist aspirations in the Valley. According to the International Crisis Group, Albanian leaders in Pristina are encouraging their ethnic kin in Presevo Valley to accept the fact that their country is Serbia, since any conflict in southern Serbia might disturb Kosovo's drive towards independence.²⁶

Nevertheless, Kosovo's independence could still cause trouble on Serbia's southern borders. There are two main sources from which security threats can emanate: one is the potential influx of Serbian refugees, the other is Kosovo's partition. While the first could be dealt with if there was sufficient political will in Serbia and help from the international community, the second represents a trickier challenge.

Tensions could still escalate, if for instance Kosovo's independence would prompt a large influx of Serbian refugees from Kosovo to Southern Serbia, tipping the delicate ethnic balance in the region. Already around 3,500 Serbian refugees live in the area near Bujanovac. The arrival of Serbs fleeing from Kosovo might be especially dangerous, since ethnic tolerance can hardly be expected from people who just lost their homes in Kosovo and are ready to take revenge. The presence of the Gendarmerie and its possible reaction to potential unrest is a matter of concern as well. Therefore it is very important that authorities prepare for such a scenario and establish refugee camps outside of the Albanian-inhabited areas.

Conflict could also break out if Kosovo does not keep its present borders, in the event that some Serbian villages in northern Kosovo are joined to Serbia. Although the international community appears to be firmly against such a redrawing of borders, as reflected by the Contact Group's position, northern Mitrovica is essentially run by Serbian authorities and linked to Serbia's infrastructure. Most functions, including health care, schools, water supply and telephone services, are controlled by Serbia, hence the area is de facto under Serbian authority.²⁷ If this

²⁶ ICG Report 2006, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁷ Interview with James Lyon, Director of International Crisis Group, Belgrade, 26 September 2006.

control gains international recognition that could lead to the renewal of armed conflict in Presevo Valley. The Albanians will demand the three municipalities of Presevo Valley to be united with Kosovo in exchange for northern Mitrovica, Zevcan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic. In fact, the Albanian councillors of the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja adopted a common political platform in January 2006 in which they "commit to unification of Presevo Valley with Kosovo in case of ... possible change of Kosovo borders."²⁸

However, the councillors raised a list of other demands in the platform as well, many of which are related to aspirations of the Covic plan. Addressing them has been a long overdue task of the Serbian state, such as the proportional integration of Albanians in all state and public institutions. The platform also mentions the need for decentralisation, foreseeing some kind territorial autonomy for Presevo Valley. The platform maintains that the Valley "should have a form of administrative-territorial organisation with functions in the fields of the judiciary, police, education, use of language and national symbols, health, economic and cultural development, local planning, environment, natural resources, housing issues and social services".²⁹ This claim for local autonomy was repeatedly reiterated by local Albanian politicians who argue that Albanians are due the same rights that the Serbs demand in Kosovo; meaning essential decentralisation at the municipal level.³⁰

Probably any solution implying any kind of territorial autonomy or federalisation would be unacceptable to the Serbian authorities, yet essential decentralisation at the municipal level could be a feasible option. This would please not only minorities but all local municipalities regardless of ethnicity. Decentralisation could also accelerate the integration of Albanians into the public sector, and create better conditions for the official use of the Albanian language.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Whatever happens with Kosovo, it is very likely that developments in the province will have an impact on the security situation in southern Serbia. Therefore it

²⁸ Citation from the platform on "Albanian Councilors of Presevo Valley (Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja) in meeting held on 14 January 2006 in Preshevo."

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Allegedly, Veton Surroi, a Kosovar Albanian member of the Vienna negotiations insisted that if Belgrade demands more autonomy for the Serbian municipalities in Kosovo, it should provide an example of how to do it in southern Serbia.

would be urgent to address the grievances of the Albanian minority in Presevo Valley in an effective and credible fashion. The solutions are not hard to find, in fact they are ready on the table. Moving on with the Covic plan, reducing the presence of the Gendarmerie and continuing the decentralisation reform started in 2002 could be effective ways to reduce ethnic tensions in the Valley and prevent a renewed escalation of conflict. Such measures could make the Albanians of Presevo Valley feel more like equal citizens of, and at home in, Serbia.

Therefore, the following issues need to be addressed:

Recommendations to the Serbian government

- Continue with the decentralisation reform launched in 2002. The most important next step would be the devolution of property to municipal governments. The borders and the role of districts should be also reconsidered. The present district-level administration should be
 - either abolished and its functions delegated to the municipalities or
 - a new Presevo district should be created, made up by the three municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja.
- Legal and other necessary steps should be taken in order to guarantee the official use of the Albanian language in Presevo Valley, especially in the police and judicial bodies, but also in other state institutions. Since the right to official language use has been granted to the Albanian minority by the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities,³¹ the Serbian state should take the necessary action to ensure that the law is implemented in practice.
- The recognition of diplomas obtained at Kosovo universities and the usage of textbooks imported from Kosovo should be dealt with through a legal measure and not through ad hoc decisions by civil servants in Belgrade.
- Policing functions should be handed over to the multi-ethnic police, and the operations of the Gendarmerie should be reduced in the Valley in order to establish trust between security forces and the local population.

Recommendations to Albanian politicians

- In general, Albanian politicians should make the best use of the opportunities and institutions that are offered to them by law. While Albanians are not able to set up their national council, it is

³¹ Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, Article 11 [Official Gazette of FRY, No. 11 of 27 February 2002].

somewhat strange to put all the blame on the Serbian state for the lack of implementation of their cultural and language rights.

Recommendations to the Serbian government and Albanian politicians

- The use of national symbols and the celebration of national holidays, which are also due right of Albanians according to the law, should be allowed.³² However, in this regard, Albanian politicians should respect the stipulation in the law according to which “national signs and symbols may not be identical to the signs and symbols of another state”, and should give up insisting on the usage of symbols of the Albanian state.

Speeding up the integration of Albanians into the public sector should be put high on the agenda, as was foreseen originally by the Covic plan. The responsibility lies not only with the Serbian government, but also with local Albanian politicians who should pursue a politics of cooperation rather than confrontation.

Recommendations to the EU and the Serbian government

- Revitalisation of the local economy would be crucial in order to create lasting stability. A 70% unemployment rate and a lack of economic prospects continue to be serious destabilising factors in the region. The international community should provide financial and technical assistance to Serbia, recognising that stabilising the Valley is a regional interest.
- Lastly, it should be a priority to adopt trade and visa regimes that would make the free movement of goods and people across the Serbian-Kosovo border easier. This would serve the interests not only of southern Serbia’s Albanians, but of Kosovo’s Serbian minority as well.
- Since any escalation of the conflict in southern Serbia might easily spill over not only to Kosovo but to Macedonia as well (see Maps 1 and 2), an intensified and continuing monitoring of the situation on the ground by the international community – especially by the EU – and increased international political engagement are strongly recommended.³³

³² Ibid.

³³ These points were stressed in a recent ICG report on southern Serbia as well – see *Southern Serbia: In Kosovo’s Shadow*, Europe Briefing No. 43, ICG, 27 June 2006 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=4184>).

Map 2. Map of Kosovo with Sandzak and southern Serbia



Map No. 4133 Rev. 26 UNITED NATIONS
August 2006 (Colour)

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

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Founded in Brussels in 1983, the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) is among the most experienced and authoritative think tanks operating in the European Union today. CEPS serves as a leading forum for debate on EU affairs, but its most distinguishing feature lies in its strong in-house research capacity, complemented by an extensive network of partner institutes throughout the world.

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