

**PEACE IN PRESEVO: QUICK FIX
OR LONG TERM SOLUTION?**

10 August 2001



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**PEACE IN PRESEVO:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The past decade in the Western Balkans has seen very few peacefully negotiated transfers of territorial control. The most recent example – albeit one not involving any change of sovereignty - was also the only one achieved by NATO's direct mediation. In May 2001, the Presevo Valley was brought back under Serbian government control, ending an ethnic Albanian insurgency that had lasted some seventeen months.

This report traces the political process that achieved this transfer of authority over 1,200 square kilometres of territory, focusing on two issues. First, it considers the reforms that are still needed to achieve lasting peace in the Presevo area. Second, it considers the hopeful claim from some quarters that this transfer of authority, based on unprecedented cooperation between NATO and the new regime in Belgrade, may offer a model for tackling other disputes in the wider neighbourhood.

Ethnic Albanian rebels calling themselves the "Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja" (UCPMB in Albanian) exploited a five kilometre-wide demilitarised strip along the Kosovo border inside Serbia – the Ground Safety Zone (GSZ), established in June 1999 to prevent accidental clashes between NATO forces and the Yugoslav Army. Operating from the GSZ, the UCPMB attacked police and other state targets with virtual impunity.

After the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000, the new government in Belgrade prepared a plan to reintegrate ethnic Albanians into state structures, along with guarantees to demilitarise the region, create a multiethnic police force, and fully respect minority rights.

Persuaded the reintegration plan was viable and keen to break links between ethnic Albanian forces in southern Serbia and northern Macedonia, where violence was building up dangerously, NATO dashed rebel hopes by taking Belgrade's side. The alliance negotiated a phased reoccupation of the GSZ by FRY forces that occurred between 14 March and 31 May 2001. Contrary to many expectations, the reoccupation went smoothly. However, an estimated 2,000 former fighters remain in the area, along with substantial arms caches.

On the evening of August 3, the most destabilising event since the FRY reoccupation of the GSZ occurred when an unidentified gunman shot and killed two Serbian policemen and wounded two others. The killings were part of a wider upsurge of incidents that appear to be coordinated and intended to derail the nascent peace process.

The circumstances of peacemaking in Presevo were unique and cannot be emulated elsewhere. Recent events, moreover, illustrate that declarations of victory by Western observers remain premature. The insurgency in southern

Serbia reflected real and deeply rooted problems, both local and regional. Conditions for reconciliation are in place, but the process itself has hardly begun. The longer term prospects for peaceful reintegration now depend on effective follow through by the Serbian authorities assisted by ethnic Albanian leaders and the international community.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

GENERAL

1. All parties involved – the governments of Serbia and the FRY, local ethnic Albanians and the international community – should realise that the impressive achievements in southern Serbia are merely the beginning of a long process of reconciliation and integration which will not succeed without sustained commitment.
2. International organizations – the EUMM, OSCE, UN – and individual embassies should maintain their current level of personnel stationed in and visiting southern Serbia.
3. Recognising that this process is fraught with political risks for its champions, the international community should adapt policies to local conditions to ensure that they reinforce the positions of moderates in both ethnic communities in southern Serbia.

POLICE

4. The Serbian government should, in cooperation with the OSCE, complete the training and deployment of the newly created multiethnic police force by August 2002.
5. As the multiethnic force is deployed, MUP [Ministerstvo Unutrasnjih Poslova or Interior Ministry] police should be progressively withdrawn from Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, leaving no MUP stationed in the region after August 2002.
6. The MUP should introduce to the new multiethnic police force the blue and white uniform that is already standard for civilian police elsewhere in Serbia and forbid

officers from wearing the purple camouflage uniforms hitherto standard in the Presevo Valley.

EDUCATION

7. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) should quickly create a system of certification of diplomas from the unofficial ethnic Albanian educational system that operated in Kosovo from 1991 to 1999 so that ethnic Albanians will be qualified to work in the state sector and on state-facilitated infrastructure projects in southern Serbia.
8. The international community should continue to target school construction and other education support as a top development priority in southern Serbia.

ECONOMY

9. A substantial portion of international development aid for the FRY should be earmarked for southern Serbia.
10. Disbursement of funds for essential infrastructure projects – electricity, water, roads – should be accelerated to provide concrete examples of progress.
11. International donors should insist that on infrastructure projects they fund at least half the labour force is composed of ethnic Albanians.

POLITICAL REFORM

12. The international community should support legislation currently being drafted in the Serbian parliament regarding minority protection and decentralization.
13. The Serbian government should carry out a census in southern Serbia, with international assistance, as quickly as possible, ideally as part of the republic-wide census that is intended by the end of the year, but if necessary separately for southern Serbia.
14. A commission of officials from the Coordinating Body for Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja plus local representatives

- should draw new electoral districts to redress Milosevic's gerrymandering.
15. After the census and redistricting, the government should hold new elections for municipal assemblies, and these results should supersede the results of the municipal elections of December 2000.
 16. To advance the Serbian government's stated goal of integrating ethnic Albanians into all aspects of the state, the three municipalities should be unified into a special electoral district to enable election of ethnic Albanians to parliament.

Pristina/Belgrade/Brussels, 10 August 2001



PEACE IN PRESEVO:

QUICK FIX OR LONG TERM SOLUTION?

I. INTRODUCTION

On 31 May 2001, a seventeen-month insurgency by ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia ended when Yugoslav forces entered the south-eastern sector of the Ground Safety Zone (GSZ), a five kilometre-wide strip of land along the administrative border with Kosovo.

The GSZ had been created as part of the Military Technical Agreement in June 1999 in order to prevent an accidental clash between KFOR, the NATO-led Kosovo Protection Force, and the Yugoslav army (*Vojska Jugoslavije* or VJ). Ethnic Albanians under the banner of the self-styled UCPMB (*Ushtria Clirimtare e Presheves Medvexhes dhe Bujanovcit*, the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac) put the GSZ to a different purpose, however: as a haven for KLA-style attacks on Serbian targets.¹

The reoccupation of the GSZ was the culmination of a unique peacemaking process. It was the first time in the Balkans that NATO itself had played the central facilitating role. It was the first time in the frequently violent ten years since the old Yugoslavia broke up that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) had legally *gained* control over territory (albeit territory that had always been subject to its sovereignty). And it was the first time that NATO had decisively sided with Serbs against Albanians. The ensuing peace was

achieved, moreover, with a minimal use of force and loss of life. Understandably, the Presevo experience generated hope among Serbs and dread among Albanians that the NATO—FRY collaboration could provide a model for resolving other disputes in the region, including Kosovo itself.

Now that the FRY's reoccupation of the former Ground Safety Zone throughout the Presevo Valley is complete, the international community has limited leverage to influence events in the area. Despite KFOR's insistence that FRY forces would be forced to leave the GSZ in the event of serious misbehaviour, it is difficult to see how this would be achieved in practice; if the VJ or MUP [*Ministerstvo Unutrasnjih Poslova* or Interior Ministry] refused to yield, it is unlikely that NATO would use force against them. The international community does, however, still have cards to play, mainly in the form of diplomatic and economic carrots.² Using them to maximise the early promise of this landmark peace deal will require a clear-eyed view of the area's problems and of the reforms most urgently needed to address the underlying causes of estrangement and antagonism between ethnic Albanians and Serbs.

¹ The KLA was the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK in Albanian), which in 1999 successfully drew NATO into the struggle for mastery over Kosovo.

² For example, Aleksandra Joksimovic, foreign policy advisor to Serbian PM Zoran Djindjic, has said the Yugoslav army was eager to rebuild ties with NATO in southern Serbia with a view to entering the alliance's apprentice program, the Partnership for Peace.

II. CONTEXTS

A. LOCATION

The three municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja are situated in southern Serbia along the border with Kosovo. They cover an area of 1,249 square kilometres. Their geographical position gives them considerable strategic significance. As part of the corridor formed by the Morava and Vardar rivers, for centuries the Presevo Valley formed a link in the main trade and invasion route between Western Europe and the Levant. Today it connects central Europe and the northern Greek port of Thessalonika on the Aegean Sea. Serbia's main north-south highway begins in Belgrade and ends in Nis, just north of the Presevo Valley, where it gives way to a potholed two-lane road. Together with an adjacent railway line, this road represents Serbia's main link to Macedonia and Greece, two states with Orthodox majorities that sympathised with the Serbs during the 1990s. The Presevo Valley also lies at the centre of a newly important east-west corridor through which Western oil companies are considering building an oil pipeline from Bulgaria on the Black Sea to Albania on the Adriatic to transport oil from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

B. POPULATION

The population of these three municipalities is just over 100,000, of whom around 70,000 are ethnic Albanians concentrated along the administrative border with Kosovo. The population of Presevo municipality is around 95 per cent ethnic Albanian; Bujanovac is about 65 per cent Albanian, while in Medvedja Albanians represent just 35 per cent. The portion of the GSZ within the three municipalities extends 139 kilometres. Within the parts of the GSZ that include elements of Presevo and Bujanovac municipalities, there are just twenty Serbs out of a total population of some 22,000.³

C. A NOTE ON HISTORY

The roots of the troubles in this region can be traced back to the border settlements imposed in the decade after 1912, which divided territories inhabited by ethnic Albanians so that more ended outside the new national state than inside it. Serbian occupation of Kosovo and Macedonia in the first and second Balkan wars (1912 and 1913) was followed by what would now be called ethnic cleansing of Albanians. Many survivors retreated into the hills above the Presevo Valley, where they continued to nurse memories of brutal eviction from their homes. In Presevo and Bujanovac the Serb invasions left deep scars, the more so since neighbours in Medvedja had been subjected to the same process in 1878, following the Conference of Berlin. Oral histories of expulsion and atrocity can readily be found in households throughout the area on both sides of the administrative border that the Serbian government drew in 1947, splitting these municipalities from Kosovo. Interethnic relations never recovered.

D. RECENT CONFLICT

During the NATO bombing campaign against the FRY between March and June 1999, the Presevo Valley's Albanian population suffered arbitrary arrests and violent harassment at the hands of Serbian MUP (Ministry of Interior) police. They then found themselves under even greater pressure as Yugoslav forces, in particular the VJ's notorious Pristina Corps, relocated there from Kosovo in June 1999.

When uniformed men appeared at the funeral of two ethnic Albanian brothers, Isa Saqipi (36) and Shaip Saqipi (32), allegedly killed by Serbian police while operating a tractor in Dobrosin in January 2000, a guerrilla group calling itself the UCPMB declared its intention to protect the local people by driving Serbian security forces out of Albanian-majority parts of the Presevo Valley. Time soon revealed that the UCPMB was not a single group but a cluster of locally based and mustered forces, commanded by men such as Commander Lleshi (see below) who had gained extensive combat experience during the wars of the 1990s, from Croatia to Kosovo. The key political objective was autonomy for the three municipalities, leading to eventual unification

³ Many ethnic Albanians boycotted the census of 1991 and current estimates are based on its imperfect results.

with Kosovo. Some of the rebels, however, seemed less interested in politics than in gathering toll charges from traffic on the roads under their control.

The UCPMB's operations were vastly facilitated by the GSZ. Intended to prevent accidental clashes between the two armies, the rules of the GSZ barred all regular soldiers and allowed only police with light arms. During the winter of 2000, the UCPMB took advantage of this artificial haven to seize control of several villages in the GSZ centered on Dobrosin.

It is also possible that the UCPMB enjoyed some form of direct U.S. support at this time. Many international officials refer to training camps run for the rebels by Americans in the Presevo Valley, presumably as part of the broader campaign to bring down Slobodan Milosevic. Military observers claim to have noted strong signs – such as their choice of marching songs and sophisticated field tactics – that the guerrillas had received U.S. military training. Some former fighters, now feeling betrayed and bitter, claim to have enjoyed full U.S. support.

Concerned that the removal of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 would turn international opinion in favour of the new regime in Belgrade, the UCPMB, commanded by Shefket Musliu, launched a wider offensive on 22 November 2000. Using small arms and anti-tank mines, the UCPMB began a campaign to evict Serbian troops and police (MUP) from the Presevo Valley. The deaths of four policemen challenged the cohesion of the governing coalition in Belgrade, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). The nationalist faction in DOS, around FRY President Vojislav Kostunica, issued a 48-hour ultimatum for NATO to evict the militants from their new positions.⁴

DOS moderates, led by Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic and Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic, worked hard to convince sceptical colleagues to give them time to win NATO's support. In December 2000, Covic was appointed president of a new ad hoc body, the Coordinating Body for Southern Serbia.

Yugoslav,⁵ and Serbian officials held meetings with NATO officials in Bujanovac. This was the first step in forging a relationship that delivered great rewards when Covic led a delegation to Brussels in February 2001 and persuaded NATO's political governing body, the North Atlantic Council, to accept Belgrade's proposal – known ever since as the "Covic Plan" – for the VJ and MUP to reoccupy the GSZ.

According to Covic, the period between 21 June 1999 and 21 November 2000 had seen "296 terrorist attacks and incursions in the region of the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, in which eleven persons were killed (five policemen and six civilians), 38 injured (33 policemen, three civilians and two members of the UN Mission), two civilians were kidnapped, and state and private property was destroyed."⁶ On 16 February 2001, ethnic Albanian extremists possibly operating out of the GSZ attacked a convoy of buses carrying Serbs near Podujevo in Kosovo, leaving ten dead and over 40 injured. FRY authorities immediately claimed a connection with the UCPMB. These incidents were quickly followed by the deaths of three Serbian police who drove over a mine in the GSZ.

The UCPMB apparently expected the Yugoslav authorities to react harshly, sparking a flood of refugees into Kosovo and forcing NATO to intervene. In response to the bus attack, a meeting of the Serbian and FRY governments on 18 February 2001 decided on unspecified "measures for protection against terrorism". Serbian Minister of Justice Vladan Batic said afterwards that "the boundaries to [our] patience have disappeared",⁷ while Federal Minister of Defence Slobodan Krapovic added that if negotiations failed, "our forces will be forced to undertake anti-terrorist actions".⁸

⁴ "KFOR contains conflict in Presevo", *Jane's Europe News*, 8 January 2001.

⁵ Also known as the Coordinating Body for Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, or simply the Coordinating Body.

⁶ *Serbia After Milosevic: Program for Solution of the Crisis in the PCINJA District*, Ed. Milo Gligorijevic, 2001, Belgrade.

⁷ "Leks specijalis protiv korupcije", *Danas*, 20 February 2001.

⁸ "Ako do anti-teroristicke akcije dode, pacace se samo na naoruzane ljude", *Nedeljni Telegraf*, 21 February 2001.

Despite this tough rhetoric, the DOS moderates' emphasis on getting NATO on side prevailed. From December 2000, Yugoslav officials had asked NATO to bear the onus of negotiating with the UCPMB, which NATO duly did, mostly in the person of Shawn Sullivan, a political advisor to KFOR. In addition to using NATO to avoid potential political pitfalls, Covic employed Presevo to showcase the new moderate dispensation in Belgrade and accelerate the country's international rehabilitation.

Belgrade and the UCPMB competed to woo NATO, a competition that the UCPMB was bound to lose in the Presevo Valley. Based on the experience of the KLA, some UCPMB leaders apparently clung to the illusion that they enjoyed U.S. support until the final phase of the reoccupation of the GSZ in Presevo in late May. It is more likely that the U.S. felt betrayed by the UCPMB's use of the GSZ as a safe haven and was only deterred from inviting the VJ to dislodge the militants by fear of exposing the KFOR base at Camp Monteith in Gjilan, across the administrative border in Kosovo, to possible reprisals.

UCPMB leaders were slow to adjust to the new reality that from a regional perspective, good relations with the new government in Belgrade took precedence over southern Serbia. At the same time, NATO worked to persuade local Albanians that the UCPMB could never deliver on its political goals while the new government should be given a chance. Until February or March, the majority of ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia supported the insurgents, if only because compared to the government in Belgrade they appeared as the lesser of two evils. NATO's facilitation efforts created the appearance of a third alternative - a government presence constrained by international observation - that to most Albanian civilians appeared at least worth trying.

E. INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Beginning in February 2001, armed clashes between ethnic Albanian insurgents calling themselves the National Liberation Army ("UCK" in Albanian – the same acronym as

Kosovo's KLA) and government forces in Macedonia had become an urgent concern for NATO. The decision to allow the Serbs back into the GSZ was driven by NATO's need to shift resources from Kosovo's internal border with Serbia in order to tighten control of Kosovo's border with Macedonia, as urgently requested by the government in Skopje.

The overriding concern for KFOR remained force protection. As the threat from the VJ and MUP declined, the UCPMB insurgency came to appear the greater danger to the NATO-led force in Kosovo – particularly after NATO began clamping down on arms smuggling across the administrative border between Kosovo and Serbia. After the ethnic Albanian insurgency of the National Liberation Army erupted in Macedonia in February, NATO ambassadors became particularly alarmed at the prospect of rebellions raging on both KFOR's eastern and southern flanks.

On 8 March 2001, NATO accepted Belgrade's demands for a phased reduction of the GSZ, on conditions laid out in the so-called Covic Plan. The Serbian government signed an interim cease-fire agreement, witnessed by NATO, with one of several ethnic Albanian rebel groups on 12 March. Two days later, VJ border guards, MUP and regular army units entered the southernmost portion of the GSZ, abutting Macedonia, though only with light arms.

At the same time, KFOR worked over time to "convince, cajole and threaten" Kosovo Albanian leaders that continuing support for the UCPMB would be extremely prejudicial to their hopes for Kosovo's own future. The insurgents in southern Serbia soon found themselves isolated. Meanwhile, KFOR laboured to persuade the UCPMB not to do the bidding of hard-liners outside the valley, who might push for continued fighting but would be unable to help them when the insurgency was crushed, as it inevitably would be.

III. THE SETTLEMENT

A. THE "COVIC PLAN"

The proposal presented by Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic in February 2001 had two conceptual pillars. The first was that every inch of the three municipalities would remain an integral part of Serbia with no change in borders and no autonomy. The second was a raft of reforms intended to end official discrimination against ethnic Albanians by integrating them into Serbian institutions, such as the education system and the police, and to assure all citizens of their full civil rights. It also provided for a number of concrete confidence-building measures including the withdrawal of VJ units from population centres, aggressive disciplining of police and investigation of complaints about human rights abuses.

To quote from the Program and Plan for the Solution of the Crisis in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja Municipalities:

"The objectives of the solution of the crisis in the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja are:

1. The elimination of all kinds of threats against the constitutional-legal order and of violations of the state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia and of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at that part of the territory, with the assurance of complete normalization of the work of the organs of the state, of the local self-government and of other legal organs in that territory;
2. The establishment of full personal and property security of all citizens and of the undisturbed freedom of their movement in all parts of territory of those municipalities, which will be ensured by the complete disbanding and disarmament of the terrorists, by the demilitarisation of the region and by allowing the return of all refugees to their homes;
3. The development of a multiethnic and multi-confessional society, based on democratic principles, with respect for all human,

political and minority rights and the liberties of all citizens, according to the highest standards;

4. Prosperous and rapid economic and social development of those municipalities with international financial assistance in the best interests of all citizens who live in them."⁹

First mooted in the Belgrade newspapers, the entire program was later endorsed by Serbia's parliament. It does not, however, have the force of law, which could be a concern if Covic were to fall from favour. On the other hand, Covic is most likely to suffer only as part of a broader swing against moderates that would probably render the application of progressive legislation difficult in any case. Important elements of the plan are now on their way to codification in new laws on minorities and on devolution of greater power to municipal governments. The first piece of legislation was drafted by Rasim Ljajic, Federal Minister for Minority Affairs, and is intended to be compatible with European norms.¹⁰ The second involves increasing the authority of municipal assemblies. Both bills are expected to be adopted by the end of this year.

⁹ "Serbia After Milošević: Program for the Solution of the Crisis in the PCINGA District", Milo Gligorijevic, Ed., Belgrade, 2001

¹⁰ Hans Peter Furrer, Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, commented: "The [FRY] Government and in particular the Federal Minister for National and Ethnic Communities, Mr Rasim Ljajic, are to be highly commended for their strong impetus to bring about a radical political change in dealing with the multiethnic composition of the country, starting with the Conference on this question held in Belgrade on 2-3 February of this year. The draft law on the rights of national minorities, prepared in contact with Council of Europe experts, is considered by these experts to be fully in line with corresponding European standards. The assessment prompted the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to invite the FRY to become a Contracting Party to the Council's Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. In the same vein, the Ministry is preparing the ground for the country's accession to the European Charter on Minority Languages. A seminar on this Charter is to be held in Belgrade on 11-12 June next." See the *Bulletin of the FRY Ministry of National and Ethnic Minorities* (June 2001).

For many in the international community, the Covic plan represented a refreshing departure from the brutal, zero-sum tactics of the Milosevic era. The positive international reaction reflected Western determination to support the new authorities in Belgrade and also an undoubted sense of relief that Belgrade had finally proven itself capable of developing a rational, violence-free proposal to improve ethnic Serb-Albanian relations.

From the Albanian point of view, any virtues the plan may have contained were undermined by its having been presented as an ultimatum backed by thinly veiled threats of military force. The Belgrade newspapers that first publicised the plan in Serbia reported that Riza Halimi, the elected President of the Presevo Municipal Assembly and Chairman of the Democratic Albanian Party (DPA), had endorsed it. In Presevo newspapers, by contrast, he was quoted as having favoured “complete demilitarisation”¹¹ along with a locally recruited police force reflecting the local ethnic balance.

B. NEGOTIATED REOCCUPATION OF THE GSZ

On 14 May 2001, NATO announced that Yugoslav forces would be allowed to re-enter the rest of the GSZ in the Presevo Valley, known as Sector B, on 24 May. UCPMB guerrillas were urged to lay down their arms in exchange for a general amnesty, applicable both in southern Serbia and in Kosovo. This decision came against a background of intensified fighting that the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) warned could trigger a mass exodus of up to 60,000 ethnic Albanians, or even a spate of “ethnic cleansing” by FRY forces. NATO pointed out to FRY officials that large-scale abuses by the VJ or MUP in Presevo would likely invite brutal reprisals by ethnic Albanians against Serbs in Kosovo.

In the event, fears that the reentry of Serbs into the central sub sector of Sector B, the UCPMB’s stronghold, could spark human rights abuses or all-out war in the Presevo Valley were not borne

out. The government deployed some 15,000 soldiers and police throughout the GSZ and other parts of the Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja municipalities. This large number was based on fears of having to fight for every metre of ground. Given the apparent disappearance of the UCPMB as a fighting force, the Yugoslav security presence is being reduced toward the promised final number of about 1,800.

The final weeks of the reoccupation survived two grave setbacks. The first was a challenge mounted by a hard-line commander of the UCPMB. Around 12 May 2001, Mustafa Seqiri, known as Commander Shpetim (“Saviour”), moved his men into Oravica, north of Presevo, apparently in the hope of starting a domino effect of villages falling to the insurgents. The Joint Security Force (comprising VJ regular soldiers and MUP police) responded by surrounding the town while leaving an exit route for the militants. In an early clash two rebels were killed, one a sub sector commander. A child was also killed and another badly wounded, though it is not clear by whom.

With 100 to 150 UCPMB fighters holed up in the town, Riza Halimi negotiated a ceasefire. The deadline for the UCPMB to withdraw passed and was extended several times, to no effect. On 15 May 2001, the VJ moved into town in a manner described by the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) as “appropriately slow”. The UCPMB had poor communications. Some units that were not aware of their commanders’ order to withdraw shot at the VJ, who returned fire, killing seven or eight rebels. No civilians were hurt, and the village itself was untouched in this exchange.

At the time, this incident appeared to pose a grave threat to the peace process. Eventually, however, it served to confirm to all sides the lack of alternatives. The UCPMB could deduce that the FRY forces would not be deterred by acts of rebel bravado. International observers from the EUMM were satisfied that the VJ had abandoned the brutal tactics of the Milosevic era; it had shown its capability to mount a minimal but highly effective display of force and then quickly negotiate a ceasefire. On 16 May 2001, KFOR promised an amnesty to UCPMB fighters if they crossed into Kosovo and gave up their weapons. Covic confirmed the Serbian government’s offer

¹¹ Meaning the removal of Yugoslav military forces, as well as UCPMB, from the whole territory of the three communes .

of a general amnesty to the rebel fighters. At the same time, considerable international pressure was exerted on Kosovo Albanian leaders, including Ibrahim Rugova, Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj, to express loud support for “a political solution to the crisis”.¹²

On 21 May 2001, against this background, Shefket Musliu signed a NATO declaration promising to “demilitarise, demobilise and disband” his forces in the GSZ by 31 May at the latest.

The second serious incident occurred on 24 May 2001, the first day of the Serbian redeployment in the northern and southern sub sectors of Sector B. An UCPMB leader, a widely respected signatory of the ceasefire agreement named Rizvan Cazimi – known as Commander Lleshi – was shot by a VJ marksman. International observers present at the scene uniformly insist that Lleshi had not been specifically targeted. According to the EUMM, when the Joint Security Force entered the northern and southern sectors of Sector B, centred on Vranje and Presevo respectively, Lleshi believed that the northern boundary of the central sub sector that the UCPMB still occupied lay further north than it actually did. (Ethnic Albanian sources claim Lleshi had been misinformed by KFOR.) Lleshi was breakfasting with fellow officers when they heard that some of their men and a VJ unit had had a surprise encounter and engaged in a fire fight. Around the same time, Lleshi was informed that two young children who had been collecting mushrooms were missing in the vicinity.

Lleshi set off toward the scene of the clash. Rounding a bend, his vehicle came under fire from a startled VJ unit. He and his colleagues jumped into a ditch. After a few minutes, while the others kept low, Lleshi walked toward his jeep. He was shot in the head. (Ethnic Albanian sources say that at a range of 80 metres, Lleshi’s distinctive bushy beard would have made him unmistakable.) The following day, Covic expressed regret for the death: a civil gesture that would have been unimaginable a few months before.

When Serbian forces entered the final sub sector on 31 May 2001, three black armoured humvees with mounted machineguns and flying Serbian flags careened through the centre of Dobrosin, the birthplace of the Albanian insurgency. They parked briefly next to the mosque in the town centre before racing away through corn fields parallel to a tarmac road they pointedly chose not to use. International observers recognized the troops as members of a special anti-terrorist unit and surmised that someone in Belgrade had wanted to send a signal to any former rebels having second thoughts about the ceasefire.¹³

These incidents notwithstanding, senior international officials report that the week-long redeployment of government forces in Sector B went more smoothly than anyone had envisaged.

C. RECENT DESTABILISING INCIDENTS

At 10:30 on the evening of Friday, 3 August, the worst incidence of violence since the Yugoslav reoccupation of the GSZ occurred in the village of Muhovac when an unknown gunman opened fire at Serbian policemen standing outside their tent about 70 meters uphill. Two of the policemen were killed and two wounded, one seriously. International observers believe the gunman, along with one or two comrades, had entered Serbia proper from Kosovo. Responsibility was subsequently claimed by a previously unknown group calling itself the “Albanian National Army.”

Despite his denial of any involvement, suspicion immediately focused on former UCPMB commander Muhamet “Rebel” Xhemali. The shooting took place in an area Xhemali had controlled during the insurgency. Many who knew Xhemali as a passionate fighter for Albanian independence from Belgrade had been surprised that he acceded to the cease-fire in May 2001. He is believed to have made threatening phone calls recently to UCPMB leaders who seemed more committed to the peace process. Other ethnic Albanian sources reportedly pointed to former UCPMB commander Shefket Musliu, a

¹² Hashim Thaci, as quoted in Institute for War and Peace Reporting, “Presevo Peace Deal”, Balkan Crisis Report, No. 249, Part I, 23 May 2001.

¹³ An international observer present at the scene, to ICG, June 2001.

principal signatory of the cease-fire agreement. Musliu denies involvement.

The attack on the police was one of several destabilising incidents since the beginning of August. In Oravica, a crowd of protestors staged an angry protest on the construction site of new lodging for the incipient multiethnic police force. In Bresnica, a car with Kosovo license plates drove through a police check point. When the car returned along the same route, police stopped it and took the driver in for questioning. When he emerged, the driver complained he had been beaten. International observers on the scene, however, saw no signs of abuse. In Graznica local youths declared that they would no longer obey the municipal authorities. And in Veliko Trnovac ethnic Albanians hoisted an Albanian flag, purportedly in honour of Commander Lleshi. In an echo of the fatal February 2001 attack on Serb buses, on 7 August three Serb were injured when a convoy of civilians travelling from Kosovo to Serbia was ambushed.¹⁴ Though nominally separate, these several incidents appear coordinated and intended to derail the peace process. Observers say the security forces and state authorities have done nothing that would explain this surge of recalcitrance. It is possible that hardline militants, possibly with an eye on events in Macedonia, are trying to provoke a backlash that would justify re-starting the insurgency.

D. ETHNIC ALBANIAN ANXIETIES AND MOVEMENT

Since the NATO air campaign against FRY in 1999, some 15,000 to 17,000 Albanians have left Presevo for Kosovo.¹⁵ Peaks of movement can be correlated with four events: the NATO bombing campaign; the formation of the UCPMB; the heightened hostilities between the UCPMB and FRY forces; and the return of Yugoslav security forces to the Presevo portion of the Ground Safety Zone.

The first wave, in April and May 1999, came mostly from the Karadak area in south-western Serbia bordering Kosovo and Macedonia, where

VJ and MUP troops evacuated from Kosovo during the NATO air strikes took revenge by razing several hamlets. Ethnic Albanians claim that government forces likewise drove them out of Medvedja, in the north of the Presevo Valley, though it seems more likely that they left because the dispersed nature of villages in the area made them feel particularly vulnerable.

While the stories of intimidation are impossible to confirm in detail, their effect on the Albanian population is not. According to the UNHCR, some 4,000 ethnic Albanians have crossed into Kosovo since early May 2001. This represents a fraction of what many, including the UNHCR, had feared. Nevertheless, a graph of the outflow would show several spikes that reflect KFOR's failure to insist on adequate confidence-building measures before General Krstic's Joint Security Force, comprised of special police and regular army troops, moved in.

The outflow began on 13 May with 212 Albanians, mostly from Presevo, moving into Kosovo at the Mucibaba border crossing because they did not feel comfortable with the VJ's return and complained about tanks sitting in front of city hall.¹⁶ The next day the number of people leaving, again mostly from Presevo, jumped to 784.

On 15 May the fighting in Oravica sparked another jump to 1,454, with 510 entering Kosovo via illegal crossings in the mountains. The following day, 366 ethnic Albanians went to Kosovo, 283 of them via illegal points. The next surge came with at least 712 people entering Kosovo on 23 May and alleging intimidating behaviour by special police in Muhovac and Veliko Trnovo. The majority of these refugees came from the UCPMB strongholds of Konsul and Dobrosin, inside the GSZ itself, and were driven by fear of police retaliation. Many refugees apparently left Muhovac after a policeman in a bar made an ill-advised joke about marrying a local, sparking a rumour that the MUP were after Albanian girls. Others left Bresnica after MUP police scared them by appearing in the village wearing balaclavas and

¹⁴ UNMIK press release, August 7.

¹⁵ UNHCR estimate.

¹⁶ ICG analysts visiting Presevo on 30 May 2001 saw no military presence at all in the town, and only half a dozen armoured personnel carriers without mounted guns near the exit from the main north-south highway.

combat face paint on the day before the reoccupation by the JSF.

The killing of Commander Lleshi on 24 May provoked the final peak in outflow, with 833 entering Kosovo after the incident. On 25 May, General Krstic, commander of the JSF, asked KFOR to broadcast the message that it was safe for ethnic Albanians to remain in the area.

As in many situations where official information is regarded as suspect and news travels by word of mouth, stories about interactions between Yugoslav authorities and ethnic Albanians often become more sinister the further they are from the event. International observers, for example, relate an incident in which several young men in Bujanovac were alarmed when police asked to see their identity papers and invited one who had no papers to come to the station. Apparently the young man was served tea and chatted amiably with the police officers while completing paperwork to obtain identity documents. When this was done, the police told him to return a few days later to collect his papers. By the time the anecdote reached former UCPMB leader Shefket Musliu in Kosovo, it had been transformed into an account of police dragging the poor youth into the station and beating him severely.

Among the ethnic Albanians who entered Kosovo from Presevo were some 450 members of the various bands grouped together under the umbrella of the UCPMB who took advantage of KFOR's promise of amnesty for militants who crossed over and disarmed before 24 May. To secure an amnesty, KFOR required militants to sign a letter promising not to again take up arms. The vast majority of these fighters were taken in by relatives in Kosovo, while 32 who had nowhere to go were moved to a UNHCR base in Ferazaj, where they remain.

Since the final reoccupation of the GSZ on 31 May, 4,000 ethnic Albanians are estimated to have returned from Kosovo. The head of mission at the UNHCR office in Vranje states that the police are taking pains to facilitate the return of refugees – something rarely if ever seen before during a decade of Yugoslav conflict. In one instance, some 300 refugees being returned to the town of Zarbice with help from UNHCR objected to the presence of police, though these were lightly armed and behaving correctly. An EUMM

monitor passed on the complaint to the local commander, whereupon the police left. Those who choose not to return may have left because they felt discriminated against, but they remain away mostly because employment opportunities in the area are limited.

IV. THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTATION

A. FRY SECURITY FORCES

International observers generally agree that the behaviour of VJ and Serbian police during the reoccupation of the Presevo Valley was good. The unit previously garrisoned in Presevo was the VJ's notorious Pristina Corps. Recognizing the danger of having the Pristina Corps handle the reoccupation of the GSZ, the Coordinating Body for Southern Serbia created a Joint Security Force (JSF), comprising VJ brigades untainted by service in Kosovo and also MUP. During the reoccupation the JSF was commanded by General Ninoslav Krstic, who enjoys considerable esteem among NATO officials. One U.S. officer glowingly described Krstic as "consummately measured – exactly the sort of man one would want to see as a flag officer."¹⁷

EUMM regional commander Mike Frankland told ICG that the VJ troops had been "professional and correct", and any violations of the letter of the Military Technical Agreement were minor and accidental.¹⁸ Against these positive reports by international observers, there have been several complaints from Albanian sources of inappropriate and intimidating conduct by the VJ and police. Some Albanians who crossed into Kosovo on 13 May complained that VJ tanks had parked in front of Presevo City Hall. On 23 May another group of Albanians crossed into Kosovo complaining of Special Police close to the town being drunk and aggressive. In the spirit of the reforms spearheaded by Covic, since the end of May 2001 over 200 policemen have been sacked for mistreating civilians.

B. POLICE REFORM

International observers, local ethnic Albanian leaders and Belgrade officials have been unanimous that the single most urgent area of reform concerns the police force, which had no ethnic Albanians for the past eighteen months

and only a small handful before. Albanians called for the creation of a police force that reflects the ethnic composition of the area. Though the Covic plan did mention the government's intention to create "a multiethnic police force", its early interpretation of this commitment was merely to rehire a dozen ethnic Albanian police who had been fired due to their ethnicity. The OSCE scrambled to help produce a unit comprised of these twelve rehired officers and the same number of Serbs, bringing British police trainers to lead them through two week-long crash courses. While this length of training is clearly inadequate, the trainers themselves reported that relations among the policemen appeared quite friendly. Whereas Serbs and Albanians never sit together in the police academy in Kosovo, in Presevo they did so from day one.

Riza Halimi, the Presevo Municipal Assembly president and Chairman of the Democratic Albanian Party, argues that the insurgency arose in reaction to abuses by state security forces and that restoring those same forces, even under different commanders, would doom other efforts to reintegrate the Albanian population in political life. Covic agreed that all the police operating in Presevo should eventually come from a new multiethnic force numbering 450 officers. The first of four twelve-week classes of 100 cadets began training on 6 August 2001.

While Halimi proposed establishing a new police force to reflect the ethnic balance in the area, which is about two-thirds Albanian to one-third Serb, the Coordinating Body has settled on a 60:40 ratio including in the command structure. In Presevo, which is overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian, the commander will be Albanian and the deputy a Serb. In Bujanovac, which is about two-thirds Albanian, the commander will be a Serb and the deputy Albanian.¹⁹

One hiccup in discussions about the police force occurred when Halimi was informed that the training facility for the new multiethnic force would not be in Bujanovac, as he understood had been agreed, but in Mitrova Polje, a town with virtually no ethnic Albanian population 150 kilometres south of Belgrade (near the town of

¹⁷ Interview with ICG, June 2001.

¹⁸ Interview with ICG, June 2001.

¹⁹ ICG interview with Ivan Bender, July, 2001.

Kursumlija, west of Nis). The Belgrade authorities argued that there was already a facility in Mitrova Polje so recruits for the new multiethnic force could begin training immediately rather than wait for a facility to be built in Bujanovac. The new school will later train multiethnic police including members from all of Serbia's sixteen minorities.

There had initially been worry that Albanians would not want to join a force that required training so far from home. It seems, however, that recruits' concerns have been allayed by plans organized by the OSCE for a fortnightly bus from the academy to Bujanovac. Hundreds of people, mostly ethnic Albanians, have already applied for the vacancies.

Ethnic Albanians were also concerned because after leaving the academy new policemen are required to train for three months under experienced officers, which for now means Albanians would only train under Serbs. The OSCE has responded by assigning four international police instructors to Bujanovac to oversee on-the-job training as well as more advanced courses.

A final contentious issue has been police uniforms and insignia. For the Albanian population the regular purple camouflage uniforms of the MUP and the double-eagle crest of Serbia are "symbols of evil" that should be changed. This is being done. After the new 400-person multiethnic force has been trained, which will take a year, the Coordinating Body plans to withdraw MUP. The new multiethnic force will wear innocuous uniforms similar to those of local police in Belgrade.

C. POLITICAL REFORMS AND CONSULTATION

While the Covic plan stresses that "the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are strongly committed to solve the crisis in a peaceful way, by political-diplomatic means, that means by dialogue, with the participation of ... representatives of the Albanian ethnic community", ethnic Albanian accounts of the government's actual behaviour indicate a pattern closer to the benevolent despotism of an

enlightened colonial administration than a true collaboration of mutually respectful colleagues.

Neither the Serbian and FRY governments' Coordinating Body for the region nor international officials have organized any regular schedule of consultations between state authorities and local representatives. Reportedly the ethnic Albanian delegation had by early June 2001 met with Covic to discuss reforms just four times. On none of those occasions was it able to talk about the issues of most urgent concern to it for more than a few minutes.²⁰ Ivan Bender, Covic's chief of staff, says that the deputy prime minister is simply too busy to commit to a regular schedule of meetings, but is always available to talk with Halimi.²¹

Like their ethnic kin in Kosovo, Albanians in the Presevo Valley boycotted the parliamentary elections in December 2000, and for the first time there is not a single ethnic Albanian in the Serbian parliament. Albanians point out, realistically, that even had they participated, the result would be the same because Milosevic made Serbia a single electoral unit, guaranteeing that among six million voters Albanians would never be able to reach the 5 per cent threshold required for representation. In municipal elections in December 2000, too, Albanian voters were severely underrepresented. As a result, the mayors of both Bujanovac and Medvedja are Serbs (from the nationalist Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS and the pro-Milosevic Yugoslav Left, JUL, respectively) as are a grossly disproportionate number of Municipal Assembly members.

Halimi argues that these results should be nullified, as have been those in twelve municipalities in other parts of Serbia where outcomes were rigged. If not, he points out, local people will have to wait three and a half years to elect officials reflective of the improved political situation. A sincere effort to reintegrate

²⁰ ICG interview, June 2001, with Riza Halimi, who is a member of the delegation.

²¹ A certain imperiousness by the central government remains the norm throughout Serbia, and not just toward minorities. The (ethnic Serb) mayor of Bujanovac, Stojanka Arsic, for instance, has been thoroughly sidelined since the arrival of the Coordinating Body from Belgrade.

Albanians into public life obviously requires this imbalance to be urgently redressed.²² Fair elections, however, will require substantial preparatory work. Municipal electoral districts have been outrageously gerrymandered to benefit Serb voters. In Bujanovac, where the population of the town centre is about 40 per cent Albanian, 30 per cent Serb and 30 per cent Roma, the Municipal Assembly regularly ends up with eight Serb representatives, one Albanian and one Roma. Covic argues that a full census needs to be conducted in the area to prepare for redistricting and to protect the next election results from charges of unfairness, and that elections should follow passage of the new municipal law, expected by the end of the year.

On 7 August 2001 moderate Albanian political leaders declared that the Party of Democratic Action (DPA) is joining forces with the United Democratic Party of Albanians to form a "national assembly" including all political representatives of the ethnic Albanian community in southern Serbia. Behlul Nasufi, Deputy Chairman of the DPA and head of the Presevo Cultural Centre, explained that they were forced to launch this initiative because of the slow pace at which political reforms are being implemented. Apart from the opening of Radio Prizren, he said, none of the promised initiatives has progressed beyond rhetoric.

The creation of the multiethnic police force is also a significant achievement. However, Nasufi is essentially correct about the pace of movement on political reforms, and there has been inadequate investment to date by Belgrade or international aid agencies in economic development, roads, electricity or water. Ethnic Albanian moderates undoubtedly fear, with some justification, that with Covic's appointment to head Serbia's committee for dealing with Kosovo issues, Presevo could be forgotten and momentum for implementing reforms lost. Complaints that police have been harassing ethnic Albanian civilians can not be verified by international observers but the creation of the Albanian "National Assembly" underscores the urgency of implementing the reforms outlined in the Covic Plan.

Riza Halimi's prominence in this report reflects the outsized importance he is accorded by Serbian and international officials and by members of the now moribund Political Council of the UCPMB. At present he is also the highest-ranking ethnic Albanian elected official in Serbia. While some young ethnic Albanians in Presevo describe him as an overly cautious man of the regime, ethnic Albanians greet him almost rapturously as "President Halimi" when he travels about the region. The U.S. State Department is sending five local Albanian leaders to the U.S. for a one-month program on local government. Halimi is not one of them because he is considered to have enough exposure already; but he is slated to become a deputy president of the Coordinating Body.

D. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the economic sphere, urgent reforms by the Federal and Serbian governments are needed to ensure that development aid reaches ethnic Albanian-inhabited areas, which continue to suffer from a legacy of Yugoslav neglect. Impartial observation corroborates the ethnic Albanian complaint that Belgrade's investment in the region never goes into Albanian areas. The main road through the Serb part of Bujanovac, for example, was recently repaved, despite the fact that it had not been in particularly poor condition. The streets in the Albanian part of town, not to mention the main highway south to the Macedonian border, remain riddled with enormous potholes. The main highway from Bujanovac to Presevo has similarly axle-bending hazards.

The Coordinating Body has published a wish-list of hundreds of infrastructure projects, based on consultations with local authorities, totalling over U.S.\$50 million. This year the U.S. has earmarked U.S. 5\$ million for the area. In February 2001, meaning in the context of ongoing peace negotiations, the EU earmarked Euro 900,000 for the region. Most of this has been allocated to a range of small-scale, high-employment projects intended to boost ethnic reconciliation and related to developing infrastructure and utilities. A much larger, multimillion Euro package for the area is currently under consideration, and will probably

²² Halimi has called for new elections as early as October 2001.

be announced in October 2001 if progress on political reintegration remains good.

Given the scarcity of resources, it is too much to expect the government to effect a redirection of money without outside pressure. A substantial portion of foreign development aid to the FRY, therefore, should be specifically targeted at this volatile and strategically important area. Some in Belgrade understandably resist this, concerned about giving the impression that investment is rewarding the violence of the UCPMB. Donors could handle this problem, however, by ensuring that their projects benefit both communities. Concretely, foreign donors should ensure that projects are located in both ethnic-Albanian and Serb-majority areas. At least half the workers employed in infrastructure projects in southern Serbia should be Albanians.

E. BUREAUCRACY

Another set of problems derives from Yugoslavia's rather rigid and heavy-handed bureaucracy. Albanians returning to their homes in southern Serbia after being refugees in Kosovo face daunting administrative hurdles. Specifically, they are required to pay all state debts – including property taxes, vehicle registration and so forth – before they can collect the identity documents they require to be eligible for state services. Some debts are so high that they entail automatic imprisonment until the debtor is able to pay. Even if they wanted to, local authorities are not empowered to waive many of these administrative fees – particularly those owed to Serbian republic or Yugoslav federal ministries in Belgrade.

Though Albanians in the region have formally renounced their erstwhile calls for autonomy, many observers on the ground believe that real stability will remain elusive until significant power is devolved from Belgrade so local people feel more in control of their own destinies and administrators can adapt to local conditions. This should improve with passage of the municipal administration law later this year.

F. EDUCATION

Though Albanians represent at least two-thirds of the total population of the three municipalities, virtually no Albanians are employed by the state in the region. One reason is that they went to school in Kosovo, and Serbia does not recognise Kosovo credentials. Since only persons with a high school diploma qualify for the police and other civil service jobs, and virtually no Albanians from southern Serbia have attended high school or university in Serbia in the past ten years, currently almost no Albanians are qualified for professional positions in the state sector. Because teachers are now required to have four-year degrees, as opposed to the two-year degree needed before 1991, even veteran Albanian teachers in state schools are now only able to work on a part-time substitute basis. The problem extends to private sector employment as well. Infrastructure projects funded by foreign aid still have to be contracted with companies approved by the state, which entails employing a certain number of engineers certified by a recognised Serbian university as opposed to the unrecognised engineering faculty in Pristina where many ethnic Albanians from southern Serbia trained during the 1990s.

Solving this issue is of the utmost urgency for integrating Albanians into state structures, as the Covic plan calls for. Halimi urged Serbian authorities to expand the pool of recruits for state service by recognizing diplomas from the unofficial schools and the university that operated in Kosovo from 1991 until 1999. Instead, the Serbian Minister for Education, Gaso Knezevic, has approved a regulation awarding the equivalent of academic recognition to certifications of competency to be granted by UNMIK.

Schools in the area are in a deplorable condition and will open this autumn with almost no textbooks.

G. THE INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE

Observers from many international organizations – the EUMM, UNHCR, OSCE and KFOR among them – were on hand to observe the Yugoslav deployment in Sector B on 31 May. Until recently, the absence of violence appeared to

have diminished the need to maintain a strong presence in the region and undermined the rationale for NATO and other foreign officials to make trips to southern Serbia from Belgrade. The EUMM, which received its Presevo mandate, of indefinite duration, in January 2001 had 27 men on the ground throughout the Presevo Valley by late May. By July 2001, however, leave and redeployments to Macedonia had reduced this number by half. The U.S. closed its office in Vranje on 15 June 2001, intending to signal confidence that reforms were going well and would continue. In view of the recent instability and in order to give reforms the best chance of succeeding, however, the international presence should be maintained at current levels until the bulk of political reforms, and particularly creation of a multiethnic police force, are complete.

V. THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION

A. JOINT SECURITY FORCE (JSF)

Both constituent elements of the JSF – the police from the Serbian Ministry of the Interior (MUP) and the VJ – are being dramatically drawn down. All MUP elements should be withdrawn when the fourth class of the multiethnic police force completes the academy and the force reaches its full strength of about 450. The Coordinating Body has undertaken to reduce the VJ presence to about 1,800 in the entire Ground Security Zone, mostly in Presevo.

The current commander of the Joint Security Force is General Momcilo Momcilovic, formerly chief of staff to General Krstic, who remains the deputy president of the Coordinating Body with special responsibility for security. This new arrangement follows a power struggle in early June 2001, when General Nebojsa Pavkovic, VJ Chief of Staff, dismissed Krstic from his post as commander of the JSF. The dismissal was approved by FRY President Kostunica. Covic then threatened to resign unless Krstic were appointed as deputy president of the Coordinating Body with special responsibility for security. The appointment was made on 2 July – an apparent victory for reformists in DOS.

Some ethnic Albanians have been alarmed by news that the government intends to build a new VJ base near the administrative border with Kosovo. Here, too, information may have been distorted by ethnic distrust. According to Ivan Bender, Covic's chief of staff, the new base would house the planned strength of 1,800 troops away from population centres. In this light, the building and siting of the base are positive decisions.

B. UCPMB

Earlier this summer the EUMM asserted that the UCPMB was completely finished as a fighting force. Some 2,000 ex-UCPMB fighters – 50 to 60 per cent of the former total – however, are estimated to remain in the old Ground Safety Zone, where they still have access to large weapons caches. The 3 August shooting of four

Serbian policemen described above raises the possibility that the UCPMB is back in action.²³

There have been rumours of a new armed secessionist group calling itself the Liberation Army of Kosovo East” or “LAKE”. LAKE may be the same as the self-proclaimed Albanian National Army, and either or both may be a new force or merely a reincarnation of the briefly moribund UCPMB. How the attackers choose to identify themselves, however, is beside the point; in light of the recent events, Yugoslav forces and their NATO interlocutors must brace themselves for the possibility of further violence.

C. KOSOVO

Following the reoccupation of the GSZ, Covic publicly suggested that the formula that had worked for Presevo could also work for Kosovo. This idea showed the direction in which the more pragmatic element in the DOS coalition may try to move in order to break the stasis over Kosovo and preempt any attempt to grant it some form of independence. Covic’s subsequent appointment as the head of the Yugoslav state coordination team for Kosovo indicates that his strategic thinking on the issue is taken seriously by his DOS colleagues.

Given the obvious impossibility of applying the Presevo formula to the whole province in light of the overwhelming numbers of ethnic Albanians, Covic presumably had in mind the reintroduction of FRY security forces to the major Serb-controlled enclave in the north and perhaps also

²³ Goran Petrovic, the chief of state security, says the newly formed Liberation Army of Eastern Kosovo is merely the old UCPMB under a new name. “The majority of the UCPMB, which disbanded and disarmed in name only, withdrew to Kosovo, but are still very close to these three municipalities in southern Serbia where they try to maintain their influence and military presence by forming a variety of political organizations, agitating among the local population, and block the deployment of the multiethnic police. They are playing for time, to see what will happen in Macedonia and in the Kosovo elections. Their strategy is to keep up the tension in the region with terrorist attacks, the harassment of the remaining Serbian population, and every type of provocation going, and we can expect to see this develop into a trend in the coming period.” B92 News, August 7.

to the smaller enclaves in the centre and south. Conceivably this idea could strike certain Western governments and military leaders as a viable means to reduce international commitments in Kosovo while also acknowledging harsh realities (UNMIK’s and KFOR’s writ hardly runs in the north of the province). In fact, any attempt to reintroduce the authority of FRY security forces in certain portions of Kosovo without an overall agreement on the province’s final status would be both prejudicial and highly inflammatory. In sum, Covic’s intriguing suggestion offers no navigable short cut to final status discussions.

D. MACEDONIA

One reason the rumours about LAKE are taken seriously is that an area which some ethnic Albanian nationalists refer to as “Eastern Kosovo” includes part of Kosovo proper as well as territory in northern Macedonia. Serbian officials claim that the area is now well on the way toward becoming exclusively inhabited by Albanians. Former UCPMB fighters regularly smuggle arms from caches in southern Serbia over the border with Kosovo and thence to the NLA in Macedonia.

FRY officials believe that in the minds of pan-Albanian nationalists, Presevo and Bujanovac – along with northern Macedonia between Kumanovo and the border – belong within a purely Albanian “Greater Kosovo”. This is why, these officials allege, the areas are being ethnically cleansed of non-Albanians. So far the guerrillas have not pushed for border changes, the theory goes, because they intend to create ethnically cleansed “liberated territories” before demanding a conference on the model of the Dayton talks in November 1995 where they would present these facts on the ground as a fait accompli.

On this view, which probably has wide currency in Serbia and Macedonia, the March 2001 ceasefire in southern Serbia produced the simultaneous eruption of fighting around Tetovo in Macedonia. “We had an illness in the stomach and we simply moved it to the head”²⁴ is how one

²⁴ FRY Ambassador to FYROM, Biserka Matic-Spasojevic, speaking to ICG, July 2001. The

Yugoslav diplomat put it. FRY officials fault KFOR for offering amnesty to UCPMB fighters,²⁵ but their larger criticism is that the international community responds to Albanian militancy on an ad hoc basis while the Albanians themselves pursue a regional agenda to cleanse territories in preparation for joining them to a "Greater Kosovo". Circumstantial evidence for close connections between ethnic Albanian leaders in Presevo, Kosovo and Macedonia is not hard to find. Former UCPMB commanders Shpetim and Xhemali, both with reputations as true believers in pan-Albanian nationalism, have reportedly been operating with the NLA in Macedonia, as has Davut Haradinaj, the brother of Ramush Haradinaj, the ex-KLA commander and president of the Alliance for Kosova coalition.²⁷

EUMM observers say, however, that while the NLA has coerced Macedonians into leaving ethnically mixed villages, it has not targeted purely Macedonian villages in the region between Kumanovo and the Serbian border. NATO officials believe, moreover, that the insurgencies in Presevo and Macedonia are linked less by fighters moving from one territory to another than by common financial and political supporters in the Albanian diaspora. Once it became clear to these sponsors that the UCPMB could no longer defy NATO and the VJ in southern Serbia, they may well have decided to shift their resources to a target that in military and political terms was far more vulnerable – Macedonia.

Reliable sources claim that throughout the Macedonian army's abortive assault in June 2001

Ambassador was making causal linkages frequently argued by Serbs, stretching from alleged Western mistakes over Kosovo, through the Presevo Valley situation, to the current Macedonia crisis. As she put it: "The international community behaves like firemen putting out fires in Kosovo, southern Serbia, Macedonia. ... but the flame of Albanian nationalism – irredentism – still burns."

²⁵ In mid July 2001, however, an international prosecutor in Kosovo charged seven former UCPMB fighters with arms smuggling.

²⁷ FRY officials to ICG. Davut Haradinaj is on the list of eleven NLA leaders whom the Macedonian Ministry of Interior announced on 26 July 2001 the Skopje government seeks to prosecute for crimes against humanity, international law and the state.

on NLA fighters in Aracinovo, a few kilometres from Skopje, VJ Chief of Staff General Nebojsa Pavkovic was on the telephone with his Macedonian counterpart, Pande Petrovski.²⁸ (General Petrovski was also in hourly contact with NATO and with KFOR's U.S. command in Macedonia.) A number of theories have been spun around this and other reports and speculation about Serbian influence in Macedonia.

Among the most alarming is based on the notion that General Pavkovic's effort to oust General Krstic from southern Serbia in early June was in preparation for the VJ to intervene in Macedonia if full scale civil war developed. A variant has Krstic telling Petrovski, who was his contemporary in the old Yugoslav army, that the VJ would be ready to help Macedonia.²⁹ Yet a third interpretation is that the motivation for such military aid could be the desire on the part of some officials in the Federal government to reconstitute the Yugoslav Federation as a union of Serbia and Macedonia – something that Milosevic himself sought in the early 1990s. Desirable as such a union might still be in the eyes of certain officials in Belgrade and perhaps some in Skopje, it is almost certainly a non-starter for the foreseeable future. Observers in Belgrade and Skopje point out that an effort to establish a union with Serbia would automatically propel Macedonia into civil war, as ethnic Albanians would, understandably, never tolerate it. Such a move would destroy international goodwill that Serbia in particular has been striving to cultivate. The last thing that the vast majority of people in both countries want as they struggle to find their footing is a link to another entity with a recent history of political turmoil.

²⁸ A Macedonian journalist who told ICG he was present at a press conference where this was reportedly announced.

²⁹ Conversely, a diplomat close to the Serbian leadership in southern Serbia told ICG that General Krstic has rejected any thought of intervening to help the Macedonian army precisely because he and Petrovski were once colleagues, and he considers the Macedonian to be thoroughly incompetent.

E. SERBIA

By reoccupying the Ground Security Zone in southern Serbia, the FRY peacefully regained control of 1,200 square kilometres. The achievement came, moreover, through negotiations involving the international community – the NATO alliance, no less, that had been demonised in Serbia since the 1999 bombing campaign. Deputy Prime Minister Covic, the popular former mayor of Belgrade, deserves and receives great credit for the achievement. His success will attract the envy of political rivals. Indeed, some have speculated that his recent appointment as the head of the Yugoslav state coordination team for Kosovo was intended to set him up for inevitable failure. Perhaps more likely, his appointment reflected the fact that nobody among Covic's DOS colleagues could rival his creative thinking on Kosovo.

For the time being, Covic's position appears strong. Ironically, perhaps the greatest threat to his career – and his ability to maintain pressure for reforms in southern Serbia – would be if he achieved a success in Kosovo impressive enough to make him a potential rival to Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. But the scope for success on any such scale in Kosovo could hardly be more limited.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Belgrade authorities and NATO deserve credit for a landmark achievement in the Presevo Valley. Until the deadly attack on policemen in Muhovac, the process that was completed on 31 May 2001 appeared to have resolved the immediate problem of armed conflict in southern Serbia. However, that attack and other recent signs of unrest underscore the fragility of the peace.

As leading actors in the peace process emphasise, it is precisely that – a process, and one that has only begun. Its success so far has depended on several factors. First, the new authorities in Belgrade were determined to break with Serbia's long tradition of subjecting ethnic Albanians to arbitrary and brutal treatment. The DOS coalition was prepared to devise a showcase example of peacemaking in the Presevo Valley, partly motivated by the wider purpose of improving Serbia's prospects of influencing international community strategies for nearby Kosovo. The Covic plan provides a genuine foundation for addressing the material causes of ethnic discontent, at least in southern Serbia.

Second, despite Belgrade's welcome new reliance on peaceful methods of addressing ethnic discontent, the Yugoslav army (VJ) remained a powerful and credible means of imposing order in a small area. Ranged in an informal alliance with KFOR, the VJ posed a formidable threat to the UCPMB. (The relevant comparison is with Macedonia, whose smaller security forces are incapable of applying very effective pressure on ethnic Albanian rebels in the much larger territory at issue.)

Third, the international community was ready to trust Belgrade, and Nebojsa Covic in particular, to reoccupy the Ground Safety Zone in a responsible way. This approach reflected a general wish to cooperate with the post-Milosevic government. It also reflected a wish to narrow KFOR responsibilities (by shedding the GSZ) as well as general impatience with the ethnic Albanian rebels for having exploited the GSZ in ways that destabilised the area and made life more dangerous for international civilian and military personnel in Kosovo.

Fourth, the Kosovo Albanian leaders in Pristina could be prevailed on to encourage the rebels of the UCPMB to renounce the armed struggle. The public messages sent by Rugova, Thaci and Haradinaj were of key importance in persuading the rebels to lay down their arms or retreat into Kosovo and, in some cases, on into Macedonia.

Finally, the explosive situation in Macedonia, across Serbia's southern border, is likely to have influenced the more strategically minded among ethnic Albanian leaders around the region. By yielding to a political solution in southern Serbia, they may have hoped to gain international sympathy for ethnic Albanian rebels who since mid-March 2001 had been fighting for (ostensibly at least) greater rights for ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.

These factors point towards several conclusions:

- The circumstances of peacemaking in Presevo were too specific for a 'model' to be extrapolated and applied elsewhere. To say this is, of course, to take nothing away from an episode that represents a valuable precedent for cooperation among NATO, the EU, UN and OSCE and political leaders in Belgrade and Pristina, and a demonstration of the benefits of peaceful diplomacy.
- The rebels of the Presevo Valley may have formally renounced force and their demand for autonomy, but this was more a tactical retreat under duress than a conversion.
- The fate of the Presevo Valley may ultimately depend on a number of major developments in the broader region, including the outcome of the crisis in Macedonia, the final status of Kosovo, and the reform process in Serbia. Here and now, however, it depends on the effective implementation of liberal measures promised under the Covic plan.

The government should persevere with and accelerate the reforms that were essential to clinching a settlement in May 2001. At present, the underlying causes of the conflict have not been addressed, much less solved. This is hardly surprising, given that the entire peace process began only six months ago. In this short period some progress has been made. But to achieve the

changes necessary for peace to put down durable roots will require sustained attention and investment of political and economic capital. In particular, reforms have to continue in creation of the multiethnic police force, recognition of educational credentials from Kosovo (through UNMIK certification), economic development and devolution of power.

Currently, the steepest obstacle to ethnic Albanians' integration in the political and economic life of the Presevo Valley is that Albanians in Serbia lost all trust in government by Serbian officials long ago. Overcoming this legacy will require exceptional efforts on all sides. Ethnic Albanians must be allowed to enjoy the tangible fruits of peace and integration in a multiethnic state. At the same time, their representatives will have to become more flexible and adept in dealing with Serbian officials. If it were not for the predictably disruptive influence across the internal border from Kosovo and the international border from Macedonia, as well as the presence of hundreds of former insurgents who may never have reconciled themselves to the peace process, there would be much reason for optimism after a promising start. Instead, such optimism must be both cautious and vigilant.

Pristina/Belgrade/Brussels, 10 August 2001

APPENDIX A

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a private, multinational organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts, based on the ground in countries at risk of conflict, gather information from a wide range of sources, assess local conditions and produce regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports are distributed widely to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's internet site, www.crisisweb.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analysis and to generate support for its policy prescriptions. The ICG Board - which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media - is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans has been President and Chief Executive since January 2000.

ICG's international headquarters are at Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris. The organisation currently operates or is planning field projects in nineteen crisis-affected countries and regions across four continents: Algeria, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Zimbabwe in Africa; Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in Asia; Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in Europe; and Colombia in Latin America.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors. The following governments currently provide funding: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Foundation and private sector donors include the Ansary Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Open Society Institute, the Ploughshares Fund, the Sasakawa Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Institute of Peace.

July 2001

APPENDIX B

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