



HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA

ALBANIAN MINORITY ON HOLD

*Preševo, Bujanovac and
Medveđa as hostages of the
Serbia and Kosovo relations*



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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Albanian community in Southern Serbia is one of three minority communities (the other two being Bosniaks and Hungarians) and is territorially compact and located along the border (with North Macedonia and Kosovo). All three communities, especially the Bosniak and Albanian ones, have been subjected to various administrative measures (structural discrimination) aimed at reducing their numbers, as well as stifling demands for territorial autonomy. When it comes to the Albanian community, its position and actual status is closely linked to the status of Kosovo and the Serb community in Northern Kosovo.

Although various concrete or fictitious concepts of partition, territorial exchange or redrawing borders in the Balkans are still being thrown around (as a result of real political aspirations, or as forms of pressure), this pathway is no longer a part of the agenda of the US, EU and NATO. However, it is still present in the thinking of Serbian elites and nearly came to fruition in the period between 2015 and 2019. Nationalist circles in Serbia are convinced that such agreements still remain possible and that it is only a matter of time before the international community caves in. This is also evident from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's behavior at the summit of the Western Balkan countries in Slovenia, known as the Brdo-Brioni Summit, on 18 May 2021, when he refused to include the wording related to the immutability of borders.

Serbia is still striving to carry out the idea of an ethno-national state and unite all Serbs through a systematic marginalization of all minorities. The legal framework, the Constitution, the Law on Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, the Anti-Discrimination Law, as well as numerous strategies and action plans that guarantee equality and integration of all citizens of Serbia,

are insufficiently applied in practice. Regardless of the presence of numerous embassies, the OSCE and other organizations in Southern Serbia, the Albanian community is living in limbo and in expectation of their status finally being resolved as part of the resolution of the Kosovo question.

In order to reduce the number of Albanians living in the south as much as possible, the state is conducting the process of so-called “Passivation of residence of Albanians” working abroad, either in Western Europe or in Kosovo. This “passivation” also targets citizens who permanently reside at their addresses. This measure is, in essence, a form of ethnic cleansing through administrative means.

“Passivation” (mass and selective passivation of residence) leads to individuals losing their status of being a citizen of Serbia and, accordingly, all civil rights – the rights to vote, property, health insurance, pension, employment, etc. Since citizens are not informed about “passivation”, they usually lose their right to appeal, the deadline for which is eight days.

There is no real ethnic or religious tension between local Serbs and Albanians. Serbs and Albanians in Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa point that out. Albanians have shown a desire for integration, but Belgrade has not demonstrated the political will to do so. Although there is no palpable tension among the citizens, there is growing distrust towards institutions – the police, the prosecution and the courts – due to the systematic and continuous “passivation”, and an impossibility to stop this process and annul the actions carried out thus far. The Helsinki Committee has spoken to people from Southern Serbia who believe that tensions are being generated by the central government (Belgrade), and have expressed feeling helpless because ministries can do whatever they want, appoint and replace officials overnight. Of particular concern is the hate speech of certain government officials.

The Albanian community in Southern Serbia is completely isolated, and neither the government nor the opposition have shown interest in the problems it

is facing. Opposition party leaders are only interested in electoral coalitions and the support of Albanian voters.

One particular problem is the non-recognition of diplomas, which prompts the departure of the most educated people belonging to the Albanian elite, who have no possibility of employment in state and public institutions.

Albanians who are temporarily working abroad do not have the opportunity to invest in these three municipalities, both due to “passivation” and an unreliable legal framework.

Albanians in the south, especially the young, feel isolated, social mobility is low, and due to the impossibility of employment and the absence of social and cultural content, everyday life is practically reduced to mere existence.

Based on the values and standards to which the Republic of Serbia has committed itself, as well as the fact that it has officially applied for EU membership, the Helsinki Committee considers that:

- In order to create conditions for the restoration of trust between the majority and minority community, it is necessary for Government and state institutions, the media and other actors to demonstrate political will and to seriously engage in integrating the Albanian community into the broader political community, to which the Republic of Serbia has committed itself under three agreements relating to Southern Serbia;
- When it comes to confronting the past, the opportunity to prosecute cases of murder, abuse, violence and abduction of civilians in the period between 1996 and 2002 has been missed;
- As “passivation” serves to reduce the number of Albanians in these three municipalities, it is necessary to immediately put a stop to this process and to restore the civil rights of Albanians. What is indicative is that this measure applies exclusively to Albanians, and not to Serbs who are temporarily working abroad;

- The judiciary is a major integration issue in light of proportional representation, since the actual number of Albanians is not being taken into account, but the fact that Albanians boycotted the 2011 census is being taken advantage of.
- It is necessary to economically renew the region through the construction of infrastructure as a key factor in attracting investments; the Albanian diaspora can also contribute to the reconstruction of this region and is ready to do so, but it is necessary to provide equal conditions that will guarantee the security of such investments; the Government should use subsidies to help the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in municipalities in Southern Serbia.
- Belgrade must resolve the issue of textbooks and nostrification of diplomas in a satisfactory way that will provide the Albanian community with regular education and employment; substantial implementation of the Brussels Agreement is the only precondition for creating an atmosphere of trust between the two communities (Albanian and Serbian) in a broader sense;
- Decentralization of Serbia is necessary in order for minorities to be properly included in political life. Belgrade officials must keep in mind that it is logical and legitimate for the Albanian community in Serbia to ask for the same status that Serbia wants for Serbs in Northern Kosovo.
- ‘Institutionalized’ hate speech against Albanians is growing, and negative media coverage of Kosovo inevitably spills over to Albanians in Southern Serbia. It is necessary to deconstruct stereotypes about Albanians as a disruptive, criminal and terrorist factor. For this reason, media engagement and a different approach to the education system are necessary. Only in this way will it be possible to create the preconditions for the normalization of relations.

- Serbia has a Constitution, laws, and other mechanisms that guarantee the rights of minorities. Serbia should commit itself to fully adhering to them in practice. For this reason, constant dialogue between minorities and majorities is needed to promote these rights.
- It is necessary to support the development of culture at the local level within the framework of institutional assistance, in order to create conditions for community development and prevent young people from leaving Southern Serbia.

SOUTHERN SERBIA: A STRATEGIC POINT



Southern Serbia is one of the least developed regions in Serbia. The region consists of three municipalities (total area of 1,249 square kilometers) in which the Albanian population has traditionally been dominant. These are Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa. According to the 2002 census, 89 percent of the Preševo population were Albanians, while Bujanovac has 55 percent of Albanians, 34 percent of Serbs and about 10 percent of Roma living there. Medveđa is predominantly populated by Serbs (67 percent). Albanians boycotted the 2011 census because, as pointed out by the then Deputy Speaker of the Preševo Assembly Orhan Rexhepi, the previous two censuses in Southern Serbia had been manipulated by constantly reducing the number of Albanians.¹ In the meantime, there has actually been a significant reduction in the number of Albanians in those municipalities: many have gone to the West in search of work or have emigrated to Kosovo. Due to the economic situation and poverty, Serbs are also emigrating from there.

Southern Serbia is of strategic importance for Serbia, because it is located on the corridor towards the Vardar river valley. Serbian nationalists consider the territory of Southern Serbia to be an important geostrategic point. They point out that it is not a coincidence that the US has set up their military base Bondsteel in Kosovo, and that Russia wants the same in Nis, because it is a key geopolitical region in the wider Balkan area. They believe that “whoever controls the Morava-Vardar route controls the main geostrategic pillar of the Balkans, hence the exceptional importance of Southern Serbia”. They also point out that Morava is the “soft belly” of Serbia and that Serbia, which is cut off from the sea, is in an unfavorable geostrategic position. If Serbia wants to preserve its central role in

1 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/albanci_na_jugu_srbije_bojkotuju_popis/24344652.html.

the Balkans, it must invest far greater resources in the development of Southern Serbia.²

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Bujanovac-Preševo area gained even greater geostrategic significance for Serbia because, as Serbian geostrategists point out, it is on an important route which connects Serbia with North Macedonia and Greece. Also, Serbia's connection with Serbs from the Kosovo Pomoravlje valley leads through Bujanovac and Preševo.³

Albanians in Southern Serbia have never been integrated into the local administration – the police, the judiciary, public companies. During the Milošević regime, they were a particularly vulnerable group and exposed to repression, as were Albanians in Kosovo.

The Preševo Valley has been part of the Kosovo question since the beginning of the crisis in Yugoslavia. The homogenization of Albanians in the 1980s included Albanians in Southern Serbia as well. After the break-up of Yugoslavia began, all republics, including Kosovo, submitted a request to the Badinter Commission for recognition of their independence. Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia received it, while Kosovo's request was not even considered. Albanians in Southern Serbia held a referendum on autonomy in 1992.

Southern Serbia became a problematic region with the opening of the issue of Kosovo's status. Following the NATO intervention (1999), the stability of the three municipalities (Preševo, Bujanovac, Medveđa) became directly related to resolving Kosovo's status. Both the Serbian and Albanian sides were waiting for a partition that would put these three municipalities in a completely different context. As this region is of strategic importance for the Serbian side, Belgrade's priority after the intervention was to reduce the number of Albanians in those

2 Igić, Slobodan. *Srbi i Makedonci*. Geopolitika, April 2012.

3 Proroković, Dušan. *Geopolitika Srbije*. Službeni glasnik, 2018.

three municipalities. It succeeded only partially (except in Medveđa). The reaction to that was the Albanian insurgency of 2000–2001.

For this reason, the region received special treatment after the NATO intervention, when the Serbian state withdrew from Kosovo, and after the Kosovo declaration of independence, which has been internationally recognized by a large number of countries. The specific position of Albanians in those municipalities therefore needs to be considered in light of all this, because official Belgrade perceives them as an “undesirable” minority. The stabilization of this region is viewed through constant attempts to relativize or marginalize any possibility of the Albanian factor becoming dominant.

THE BEGINNING OF POLITICAL PLURALISM IN 1990

At the beginning of political pluralism in Serbia, Albanians in Southern Serbia founded the Albanian Democratic Association in Preševo on 5 August, 1990, which later grew into the Democratic Party of Albania (DPA). Ali Ahmeti, professor of biology at the “Skënderbeu” Education Center in Preševo, was appointed President. Because of his commitment to defending the name change of this educational center, Ahmeti was fired a year before becoming head of the DPA. Because of his activities, Ahmeti came under attack from the Milošević regime, which is why he left Preševo and went to Germany.

The Party for Democratic Action (PDD) was also founded in Preševo, headed by Riza Halimi until 2018. Halimi and 10 other professors of Albanian nationality lost their jobs because they opposed changing the name of the “Skënderbeu” Education Center.

Both Ahmeti and Halimi were in constant communication with academician Rexhep Qosja, Adem Demaçi and the leadership of the Democratic League of

Kosovo (usually with Fehmi Agani and Ali Aliu), in order to “coordinate national activities with the general national movement in the former Yugoslavia”.⁴

The Party for Democratic Action (PDD) was widely accepted as a branch of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). Halimi points out that the PDD “has had direct cooperation with the LDK since its formation, but that they have tried to establish close contacts with other political entities in Kosovo as well”.⁵ Riza Halimi warned that “it must not be forgotten that they are also part of the territory where Albanians are indigenous!”⁶ Albanian parties in Southern Serbia demanded to be part of the Kosovo government, but the LDK would not agree to this.

Inter-Albanian tensions led to a rift between the two Albanian parties, especially over the first multi-party elections in Serbia in December 1990. The PDD participated in the elections, while the DPA was against it. The PDD took over local government in Preševo and secured one seat in the Serbian Parliament. Behlul Nasufi thus became the only Albanian MP at the level of the republic who represented Albanians until 1997.

REFERENDUM ON AUTONOMY

After the failure of the Hague Conference (1991), at which Serbia rejected a document that largely met its interests, the Badinter Commission declared the republic’s borders were international. The establishment of a “hard” border between Serbia and Macedonia greatly changed the status of Albanians in the municipality of Preševo.⁷ In fact, Preševo and Bujanovac then became an

4 Latifi, Skënder. *Rrugëtimi nëpër Luginë të Preshvës*. Prishtina, 2006. (Eng. *A Journey through the Preševo Valley*).

5 Ibid.

6 ZËRI weekly, 15 January, 2005, Prishtina.

7 With the establishment of border crossings, two villages in the municipality of

important geopolitical point, but at the same time, with the newly established international borders, the territorial integrity of Albanians, which they used to have in the SFRY, was gone. Albanians in Southern Serbia also lost direct support in Kosovo, where a kind of state of emergency was declared.

During the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia, Albanians in Southern Serbia decided to organize a referendum for the territorial political autonomy of “Eastern Kosovo” (which later became known as the “Preševo Valley”). Ali Ahmeti points out that “the idea of autonomy for the three Albanian municipalities was the product of political circumstances and the political strategy of the Albanian factor in the former Yugoslavia”. The Coordination Council of Albanian Parties was led by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), headed by Ibrahim Rugova. Ahmeti believed that “the issue of autonomy was envisaged as a transitional phase in the establishment of the political identity of ‘Eastern Kosovo’, which would eventually end with the reunification of these territories with the Republic of Kosovo”.⁸

After the referendum on 22 March, 1992, a meeting was convened at which “the Referendum Assembly was to be transformed into an Assembly for Political and Territorial Autonomy with the right to unite with Kosovo”. However, Riza Halimi’s PDD did not accept the Assembly for Autonomy.⁹ Halimi believed that

Preševo – Miratovac inhabited by Albanians, and Slavujevac inhabited by Serbs – gained “importance” at that time and became the two most popular settlements in this part of Serbia. The life of Albanians in Miratovac became more difficult, primarily due to the impossibility of free movement, but also because of the property that remained as part of the territory of another state. However, for Serbs from Slavujevac, crossing the border was not a problem, and their children continued to attend school in the village of Tatarinoc, which remained in Macedonia.

8 Latifi, Skënder. *Rrugëtimi nëpër Luginë të Preshvës*. Prishtina, 2006. (Eng. *A Journey through the Preševo Valley*).

9 Ibid.

the Assembly for Autonomy would not succeed, since it had not succeeded in Sandžak, and that parallel organizations, such as those in Kosovo, would have catastrophic consequences, because there would be a total cleansing of Albanians from Southern Serbia.¹⁰

The political will of Albanians, expressed in the 1992 referendum, remained as political capital used by Albanian political actors in every local election in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa, while the Assembly for Autonomy was dissolved.¹¹

Despite the participation of Albanians in the political life of Serbia, the functioning of local self-governments in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa was difficult because no cooperation between the Government of Serbia and local self-government could be established.

The monopoly of local government in the Preševo Valley in the 1990s was in the hands of two or three Serbian leaders. It was unthinkable for Albanians to take over local government in Bujanovac, even though they were the majority. In fact, the electoral machinery created such mechanisms in that municipality that an Albanian candidate could not win a council seat with several thousand votes, while Serbian candidates won seats with only a few hundred votes.

The PDD always participated in elections, while the DPA remained faithful to their boycott of the parliamentary elections. However, in 1993, at the December elections, the PDD and the DPA managed to form a joint coalition that proved to be “productive”, because Albanians from Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa managed to secure two Albanian MPs in the Serbian Parliament.

However, Serb citizens in those municipalities, especially in Preševo, declared themselves “victims” and boycotted the 1993 local elections. One Serb councilor explained this with the following argument: “During our last term, we often

10 Ibid.

11 Latifi, Skënder. *Rrugëtimi nëpër Luginë të Preshvës*. Prishtina, 2006. (Eng. A *Journey through the Preševo Valley*)

wondered why we were in this assembly, where a foreign language is spoken, a language we do not understand!"¹²

The leader of the local socialists, Randjel Veljković, stood out with his anti-Albanian sentiment and was the instigator of an attack on education in the Albanian language. When he became the head of the local government in the 1990s, he started a campaign to expel the few Albanians from the municipal administration, but also from other organizations where Albanians were employed in very small numbers.

In the meantime, the Yugoslav United Left (JUL) appointed as its local leader Stojanča Arsić, a doctor from Bujanovac, who was more acceptable to Albanian councilors, but who also had a good reputation in Bujanovac. Taking advantage of divisions and disagreements between Serb parties, local PDD leaders began to look for a way out of the closed circle created by the Serbian state in the municipality. In the January 1997 elections in Bujanovac, Riza Haljimi's PDD, with 10 councilors, and the local branch of JUL, with 13 councilors, constituted the local government. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) won 14 council seats, and the alliance of PDD and JUL was meant to remove the unpopular SPS candidate.

PARTITION AS AN OPTION SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE DISINTEGRATION OF YUGOSLAVIA

Already in the 1990s, much was said and written about the partition of Kosovo, including the possibility of exchanging territories. Information on this topic was put forward with caution. Dobrica Ćosić, writer and ideologue of Serbian nationalism, was the first to speak about it. Ivan Mrkić, who was the head of Ćosić's

¹² Ibid.

cabinet, stated that the former President of the FRY, Dobrica Ćosić, had agreed with Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova in 1993 on the partition of Kosovo and Metohija, but that Slobodan Milošević had prevented this. Mrkić revealed that the Serbian side would own about 30 percent of Kosovo and a part of Metohija. He points out: “When Ćosić was President, the idea of dividing Kosovo and Metohija began to develop. Ćosić managed to reach some preliminary agreements with Rugova. But status was not discussed. It explored all the possibilities and then there was progress. Rugova wanted an agreement, but everything was prevented by a political clash between Milošević and Ćosić.”¹³

And then the President of SANU, Aleksandar Despić (1996), came out with a proposal for partition. In those years, the Bishop of Raška and Prizren, Artemije, together with Dušan Bataković, visited world capitals with elaborate maps on the partition of Kosovo and the demarcation between Serbs and Albanians.

However, most Kosovo leaders at that time publicly supported broad autonomy for Southern Serbia, avoiding comments on the exchange of territories. However, the ice was broken by academician Rexhep Qosja, who stated: “Why not include the problem of Eastern Kosovo in resolving the Kosovo question? Why solve the problem of Albanians in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa separately? I am sure it would be better for Serbia to solve this problem in its entirety. Perhaps you think that ‘the question of Albanians in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa does not exist at all’”¹⁴

On the other hand, the opinion of professor Fehmi Agani, who was the most influential politician speaking on behalf of Kosovo in discreet talks with the Serbian side, was that “the Kosovo side is not thinking about borders, unless Albania,

13 <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/politika/dobrica-cosic-je-jos-1993-dogovorio-podelu-kosova/>.

14 Latifi, Skënder. *Rrugëtimi nëpër Luginë të Preshvës*. Prishtina, 2006. (Eng. A *Journey through the Preševo Valley*).



A village near Medveđa

Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia want something like that, then our concept for resolving the question of Albanians in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa and other territories would change... we supported the referendum of Albanians living there and of course we support the potential merging of those territories with Kosovo”.¹⁵

In the meantime, Albanian politicians in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa have commented on the idea of exchanging territories in various ways. “All these ideas are essentially disorienting, and the more time passes, the greater the deviation from the national question of liberation and the inevitable and territorial

15 Petrović, Momčilo. *Pitao sam Albance*. Belgrade: 1996, p. 120.

unification of ethnic Albanians,”¹⁶ said Khalil Selimi, expressing his skepticism in the summer of 1996.

Ali Ahmeti, DPA leader at the time, was hoping for a final solution to Kosovo’s status, in which case “Kosovo’s independence would lead to the reunification of the territories of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa with Kosovo, which would automatically mean a rejection of the option of exchanging territories”.¹⁷ For the President of the Assembly for Autonomy, Ibrahim Kadriu, the idea of exchanging territories is unacceptable: “The exchange of Preševo and Bujanovac for Zubin Potok and Leposavić is a false hypothesis. First of all, Preševo and Bujanovac have about 80,000 inhabitants, while Zubin Potok and Leposavić have about 17,000 inhabitants!”¹⁸

The leader of the local Albanians who did not reject the idea of exchanging territories was the President of the Albanian Democratic Party, Zeqirja Fazliu. “In my opinion, the idea of exchanging territories is possible, but depends on how it is understood. If it implies handing over Zubin Potok and Leposavić to Serbia in exchange for Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa, without creating the problem of forced relocation of the population, then the idea would probably be quite possible and realistic.”¹⁹

Answering a question about the possibility of exchanging the municipalities of Leposavić and Zubin Potok for the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa, the then President of Kosovo Ibrahim Rugova, said (only seven months after the referendum): “The resolution of the Albanian question in ‘Eastern Kosovo’ is postponed for the future, because at the moment, the logic of war and the

16 Ibid, conversation with Halil Selimi, 29 August, 1996.

17 Latifi, Skënder. *Rrugëtimi nëpër Luginë të Preshvës*. Prishtina, 2006. (Eng. *A Journey through the Preševo Valley*).

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

logic of force are prevalent in Serbia. What Serbs want for for their own people involves applying a double standard, and if it applies to them, it will also apply to us. Various options for the partition of Kosovo are being discussed in Belgrade, but have not yet been formalized.”²⁰

NATO INTERVENTION: PERSECUTION, KILLINGS, DAMAGES

During the NATO intervention, a mass ethnic cleansing of Albanians was carried out (about a million). The anti-Albanian atmosphere escalated during the intervention. Albanians living in other parts of Serbia (Vojvodina, Belgrade, Southern Serbia) were subjected to abuse, intimidation and expulsion.

At the start of the NATO bombing, Albanians in Southern Serbia were in a very difficult situation. Preševo and Bujanovac were still able to maintain mutual contact, while ties with Medveđa were severed. In the first days of the bombing, Albanians from Preševo and Bujanovac helped Kosovo Albanians to flee to Macedonia through these municipalities.

It is estimated that after 24 March, 1999, about 25,000 Albanians left Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa and went to Kosovo, Macedonia, and through Sandžak to BiH and Western Europe. The army was particularly active in Preševo. Albanian property was looted, demolished and burned: 44 houses and 20 other buildings were set on fire and many were looted. The primary school in Cervjak was demolished. The local center was set on fire, and five shops were destroyed and looted in Ranatovac. In mid-April, the Yugoslav Army (YA) set fire to 16 out of a total of 18 houses in the village of Bujić. Mosques in the villages of Miratovac and Trnava were demolished and looted. A large number of houses were looted in the villages of Trnava, Miratovac, Buštranje and Norča. The Yugoslav Army forcibly

20 Jehona weekly, October–November, Trnovac, 1992.

and illegally confiscated a large number of private houses in Miratovac, Trnava, Buštranje and Norča. Cars were also confiscated without any authorizing military documents.²¹

In the early spring of 1999, Serbian military forces mined a large part of the roads connecting the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa with Kosovo. Prior to the intervention, members of various units of the Serbian army were housed in empty houses of Albanian citizens, who had already been temporarily working in European countries for years.

Although Albanians in Southern Serbia did not put up any resistance during the intervention, Serb forces and paramilitary gangs killed 11 Albanians, a series of villages in the area of the Preševo Karadak along the Kosovo border were set fire to. The damage done to private facilities is estimated at around 3 million euros. Prior to the NATO intervention, 5,181 inhabitants lived in the municipality of Medveđa, together with the surrounding villages, while after the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement on 12 June, 1999, only 333 Albanians remained. After the signing of the agreement, about 3,000 citizens of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa could not return to their homes.

A large number of schools were completely or partially destroyed. Many schools lost their pupils. The school in Zarbince, which had 360 pupils until March 1999, had none after the intervention. The number of students in Preševo was reduced from 240 before the war to 45. An additional problem was the lack of professional staff. Albanians (30 of them) who had been employed in the Preševo health system either left or were fired during the war.

21 Albanians fleeing in mass numbers ensued after phone calls, killings of civilians, confiscation of property, restrictions on freedom of movement, intimidation and abuse.

SOUTHERN SERBIA AFTER THE NATO INTERVENTION

After the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement between the Government of Serbia and NATO (June 1999), the Serbian army withdrew from Kosovo. According to the Agreement, a 5-kilometer-wide demilitarized zone was formed on the territory of Serbia in order to prevent incidents. The border zone, called the Ground Security Zone (KZB), was accessible only to lightly armed Serbian police. The presence of military and police units in the region has led to increased tensions and antagonism between Serbs and Albanians, as well as a number of incidents and human rights violations.

Farmers who owned land, meadows and forests had to have special permits (valid only for one day, issued by the YA) in order to cultivate their land. Smaller groups of soldiers raided properties and villages. All this restricted freedom of movement, and thus the cultivation of land. Albanians living in villages in hilly areas continued to emigrate.

The Albanian insurgency in Southern Serbia (2000–2001) was a reaction to the repression by the Serbian army and police after the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement, as well as an attempt by the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (UÇPMB) to internationalize the situation in Southern Serbia. The UÇPMB²² (numbering between 700 and 1,000 guerrilla fighters) operated within the Ground Security Zone (KZB) established by the Military Technical Agreement signed by NATO and Belgrade in June 1999. The conflict escalated in the spring

22 The UÇPMB's goal of annexing the Preševo Valley to Kosovo was a reaction to an attempt by Serbs in Northern Kosovo to force the partition of Kosovo. Since Albanians from the Preševo Valley have always feared being sidelined in future talks on Kosovo's final status, they have sought to link the valley's future to a final solution for Kosovo. At the same time, they have also played a role in balancing Serbian efforts to divide Kosovo.

of 2001 as both sides were provoking each other, so it threatened to escalate into armed conflict. During the conflict, 60 lives were lost (30 members of the army and police were killed on the Serbian side, while 30 members of the UÇPMB were killed on the Albanian side).

The armed insurgency was successfully halted by a joint action of the then Belgrade authorities (Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić and Deputy Prime Minister Nebojša Čović, who was directly in charge of the operation) in cooperation with UNMIK, KFOR, NATO and other international actors. These efforts were crowned by the Demilitarization Statement (signed by the Albanians), while the Government of the FRY and Serbia adopted information on the entry of the Joint Security Forces into the Ground Security Zone, as well as the public statement “Amnesty is the way out”. These two documents colloquially became familiar as the *Končulj Agreement*.

Albanians from the Preševo Valley feared they would be excluded from talks on the final status of Kosovo. Faced with the fact that dividing and/or exchanging territories was an option the entire time, the Albanian population of Southern Serbia lived in a political vacuum until Kosovo’s independence (2008). Since Belgrade never even considered exchanging territories, the Albanians in the Preševo Valley tried to impose their problem as a counterweight to Belgrade’s efforts to divide Kosovo. Most of the armed incidents that took place in the Preševo Valley in the following years were part of the Albanians’ efforts to put Preševo on the agenda of negotiations on the final status of Kosovo.

Belgrade, however, continued its strategy of dividing Kosovo. Thus, in May 2001,²³ Nebojša Čović, who had skillfully led negotiations in Southern Serbia, outlined a plan of dividing Kosovo into two entities: the Serbian entity, which would include the majority of Serbian historical, religious and cultural monuments, and the Albanian entity with a majority Albanian population. The Serbian entity would be under the

23 At the international conference “Security in Southeast Europe on the Threshold of the 21st Century” in Belgrade.

protection of the Yugoslav army and police. The Albanian entity, which would have the highest degree of autonomy, would remain under the protection of international forces. Yugoslav border forces and KFOR border troops would focus on preventing incursions from one entity to another. This proposal, as Čović said, implied “renouncing maximalist demands, meaning that both the Albanian and Serbian side need to give up on the illusion that the whole of Kosovo belongs to them”.²⁴

SOUTHERN SERBIA THROUGH THE LENS OF SERBIA, NORTH MACEDONIA AND KOSOVO

Serbia and Macedonia viewed the conflict in Southern Serbia and Macedonia (2001) almost exclusively as an outpouring of violence from Kosovo and as part of the Greater Kosovo/Albania project. Serbian Deputy Prime Minister and President of the Coordinating Body of the Federal Government and Government of Serbia for Southern Serbia Nebojša Čović said in 2001 that Kosovo Albanians made up about 60 percent of members of armed formations in Southern Serbia and were “probably obsessed with the idea of Greater Albania”.²⁵

The media generally pointed out that Albanians took advantage of a historic opportunity to initiate the realization of the concept of “all Albanians living in one state”. Macedonia stressed that “the unstable situation in Kosovo is leading to the export of terrorism... into the Macedonian state” and that “if the international community does not resolve the Kosovo crisis, if there is no final and decisive impact, militant extremism will continue and the Balkans will continue to face the destabilizing factor of Kosovo for a long time”.²⁶

24 Danas, 21 May 2001.

25 NIN, 8 March 2001.

26 President of Macedonia Boris Trajkovski at a meeting of the Secretaries of Defense of the Countries of Southeast Europe, held on 5 April, 2001, in Skopje.

Albanian leaders in Kosovo had a different approach to the crisis in Southern Serbia and Macedonia. They saw it as a consequence of repression and discrimination against Albanians. Long-standing frustration over the unresolved issues of Albanian communities in Serbia and Macedonia, as well as a lack of political will to address them, had led to violence as the only way to resolve the status of Albanians. Kosovo leaders condemned the violence, but considered Albanian demands in Southern Serbia and Macedonia to be legitimate and advocated a political solution. In addition, they opposed the changing of the borders of Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, and called for respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia and Macedonia. They also opposed the territorial autonomy of Albanians in Serbia and the federalization of Macedonia. They believed that the anti-Albanian lobby had put forward the idea of Greater Albania and Kosovo in order to discredit Albanians and thus influence the final status of Kosovo.

SERBIAN GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM FOR RESOLVING THE CRISIS BY PEACEFUL MEANS ("ČOVIĆ'S PLAN")

Intensive NATO and US activities resulted in a peace agreement between Albanians and Serbs, the dissolution of the UÇPMB (*Končulj Agreement*) and the return of Serbian security forces to the Ground Security Zone (KZB). At the same time, the so-called *Čović's Plan* was adopted (aimed at resolving the crisis in the municipalities of Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa)²⁷. The implementation of the plan began with the participation of the international community, i.e. international organizations (such as the OSCE) and individual governments, especially the US government.

27 Čović presented his plan at a seminar of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and the United States Institute of Peace on 30 January in Belgrade.

The plan aimed to address institutional discrimination and integrate Albanians into the Serbian state and force them to give up “Eastern Kosovo”. The main four provisions of the plan were the removal of any threat to Serbia’s sovereignty, the security, freedom of movement and right of Albanians to return to the Preševo Valley provided that “terrorists” be disarmed and “the region demilitarized”, the development of a multicultural and multi-religious society and social development. The plan envisaged the integration of Albanians into the social, economic and political community over a three-year period.

The Coordinating Body was established to implement the policy of the Government of Serbia and of security structures. The OSCE played an important role in implementing the plan. Particular attention was paid to the police, which had been harassing the Albanian population for years. The state maintained its presence in Southern Serbia through the regional police administration in charge of supervising the multiethnic police, together with the Serbian Army and the special forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP), i.e. the Gendarmerie.

Initially, the plan brought about progress in all three municipalities, especially in Bujanovac. Local elections were held and an Albanian-language TV channel and print media were established. Progress was also made in integrating Albanians into the judiciary, local police and other services.

However, the multiethnic police was operating under the shadow of the Gendarmerie, which used every opportunity (depending on the political situation) to arbitrarily arrest Albanians, detain them on various charges and harass them in other ways. The Vice-President of the Coordinating Body, Sima Gazikalović, claimed at the time that the Gendarmerie “was competing” with local police forces in the security sector and that the Coordinating Body of the Government of Serbia was not functioning. In his opinion, “the Serbian state has not solved a single problem in Southern Serbia in a systematic way... and is making the same mistakes it made in Kosovo, that is, it is not doing anything useful in the field”. As

an illustration, Gazikalović pointed out that no Albanian from the three municipalities had received a loan from the Development Fund of Serbia and that no Albanian could participate in a privatization process.²⁸

Despite Čović's *Plan* and the investments of the international community, the economic situation in Southern Serbia has not improved. Although there have been a number of international donations aimed towards building institutions, very little has been done to revive the economy, which remains the main cause of all the problems faced by both Albanians and Serbs.

BELGRADE'S WISHES: GREATER ALBANIA

Belgrade has always sought to find a partner in Albania to divide Kosovo. Theses about Albania's ambition to create Greater Kosovo/Albania have always been in Serbia's interest in order to preserve its own aspirations towards its neighbors. In early March 2001, Serbian print media, in an attempt to portray Albanians as a key destabilizing factor in the Balkans, published a series of articles on the emergence of Albanian armed groups in Montenegro and maps of Greater Kosovo/Albania covering parts of Eastern Montenegro, Southern Serbia, Kosovo, Western Macedonia and Albania.

Professor Slavenko Terzić, former Director of the Historical Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, stated that "following a peaceful phase of creating Greater Albania by ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija during the SFRY, the Albanian mafia has entered a new phase, backed by the United States and NATO, and the armed struggle is now spreading to the Vranje basin, the western part of Macedonia and in the foreseeable future possibly to Montenegro, and perhaps even to the Greek Epirus".²⁹

28 Ibid.

29 Svedok, 3 April 2001.

Dobrica Ćosić had long advocated the partition of Kosovo between Serbia and Albania. He presented his position on several occasions, especially during the Belgrade-Prishtina talks on the status of Kosovo. His position can be summarized as follows: “To put it briefly, the solution to the centuries-old antagonism between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija was, in my opinion, a compromise between historical and ethnic law. This compromise implies the right of Albanians to unite with their native Albania, with the territories in which they represent the majority. The territorial partition of Kosovo and Metohija and the demarcation of Serbs and Albanians should be achieved without striving for ethnically clean territories, and with reciprocity in the contents and forms of guaranteed national and civil rights for minorities. Kosovo in Serbia, which is in biological decline and in demographic depression, would turn Serbia into a federation of two nations with permanent differences within two decades. Life in such a society would be difficult, and progress would be slow.”³⁰

During his visit to Macedonia (2012), Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic³¹ reiterated the thesis on the Greater Albania project. He said that “an Albanian state is being created on the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, which will not be developed like Macedonia and Serbia for another 30 years, and in those 30 years a lot of things will happen”. He warned his Macedonian hosts that “when they [Albanians] exercise their rights within the territory of Serbia, they will invoke those rights in all other countries. How could anyone claim that they have the right to their own state in Kosovo, but not in Macedonia, how could anyone claim that they have the right to a state on the territory of Kosovo, but that they do not have the right to autonomy in Greece or Montenegro?”³²

30 Večernje novosti interview with Dobrica Ćosić, 20 March 2008.

31 Served as the President of Serbia from 2012 to 2017.

32 <http://arhiva.alo.rs/vesti/politika/nikolic-prave-albansku-drzavu-od-balkana/2307>.

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN SERBIA

When it comes to the security of Serbia, municipalities in Southern Serbia (Preševo, Medveđa, Bujanovac) are perceived as an area of instability, primarily due to the possibility of instability in Kosovo spilling over. The migrant crisis and the conflict in Kumanovo (2015)³³ strengthened official Serbia's fears that the region is a red-flag in terms of security. Especially because the area is inhabited by an Albanian population which is socially, politically and economically gravitating towards Kosovo.

After the conflict in Kumanovo (Macedonia) in 2015, the issue of security came to the fore once again. Belgrade reacted promptly by taking the side of official Macedonia. Taking advantage of the conflict, the thesis on the creation of Greater Albania was put forward once again, to which the media paid great attention. Serbian media reported in a biased manner on the conflict, avoiding the fact that both Macedonians and Albanians rebelled against the government, and that an Albanian party was a participant of the then government. Such theses also affect the treatment of Albanians in all countries in the region and consistently suggest that they have a destructive role. This also applies to Southern Serbia.

Most of the comments in the Serbian media dealt with the possibility of the conflict spilling over into Serbia through Albanians in Kosovo and Southern

33 In 2015, there was an armed conflict in the town of Kumanovo, between an armed group of Albanians and the police, considered to be the bloodiest incident since the 2001 conflict, between security forces and Albanian rebels, but did not lead to broader ethnically motivated conflicts. Many believe that the government was involved in this conflict in order to divert attention from the political blow inflicted on Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The conflict erupted amid a political crisis sparked by opposition claims that Gruevski had ordered the illegal wiretapping of about 20,000 citizens.

Serbia, while Serbian security services informed the public that Serbia was safe and that there was no indication that the crisis could spread from Macedonia into their country. Chairman of the Committee on Kosovo-Metohija Milovan Drecun said at the time that the army in the south of the country had increased its level of combat readiness and was capable of maintaining stability. He assessed that “the formation of armed Albanian terrorist groups in the territories of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa has not been noticed and the Albanians are behaving very responsibly, about 700 Albanians from the area of Kumanovo were in the south of Central Serbia for a while and there were no incidents.”³⁴

The migrant crisis further raised the security surveillance of that region. According to some data, between 5,000 and 7,000 people used to enter Serbia through Preševo for some time.

The Military Base “South” near Bujanovac was opened in 2009 and is perceived as an important point for maintaining security in Serbia itself, especially in the context of the “Greater Albania project”. The base was built in agreement with the North Atlantic Alliance. Albanians from Preševo and Bujanovac had complained at one time about the construction of this base, arguing that the funds invested in the base would have been more profitable had they been invested in the economy of the region. In the territory of the municipality of Preševo, the first line of defense of the administrative line consists of the bases: Cvore, Mučibaba, Ukmemet, Debelo brdo, Kozjak, Pečeno brdo and Madjere. In their background are Ševarske livade and police stations Depce, Oraovica, Reljan and Miratovac. On the territory of Bujanovac: Golema čuka, Dobrosin, Devojačka čuka and Kadrova čuka, with Tašlak and Guri Gata in the background and police checkpoints: Končulj, Dobrosin and Breznica. From the territory of Vranje, the administrative line is protected by the bases: Ornice, Jezerska mahala, Debela glava, Trstena and Vrtegoš.

34 <http://rs.n1info.com/a60798/Vesti/Nema-prelivanja-krize-iz-Makedonije-na-jug-Srbije.html>.

The Center for Simulations for the Training of Multinational Units was opened within the base, in the presence of Lieutenant General Frederick Ben Hodges, Commander of US Army Europe, which donated equipment worth 2.1 million dollars to the Serbian Army.³⁵ Members of multinational forces from all over Europe, who are trained here for complex operations in various countries of the world, are helped by the Center to first get acquainted with what awaits them in the field by means of simulation in cabinets.³⁶

NATO's decision led to Serbia also signing an agreement on the abolition of the no-fly zone in Southern Serbia, thus regaining its territorial integrity over a part of its airspace. This means that Belgrade can use that part of the airspace without the prior consent of KFOR, which was the case until recently. Such a decision also implies Serbian military patrols and police aviation monitoring the area along the border with North Macedonia, Kosovo, as well as the borders with Montenegro and Albania.

SOUTHERN SERBIA, THE FINAL STATUS AND KOSOVO'S INDEPENDENCE

Negotiations on the final status of Kosovo began in February 2005. Shortly before that, 61 of the 66 members of the Council from Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa adopted a statement defining the Preševo Valley “as a constitutional and territorial region”. The document clearly calls for decentralization in the fields of local government, education, health, justice, culture and economy. It also calls for the withdrawal of the Serbian army and police from the region and exemption from military service in the Serbian army. Councilors demanded proportional representation in the local government, the use of national symbols and a special

35 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/otvoren-centar-za-simulacije-u-vojnoj-bazi-jug/lplsc94>.

36 Ibid.

relationship with Kosovo (including the possibility of unification with Kosovo in accordance with the 1992 referendum). The message contained in the document was clear enough: if Serbia does not take action regarding their demands, Albanians from Southern Serbia will make the same demands within the negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina. The then President of Serbia Boris Tadić rejected this because, as he said, the negotiations referred only to the status of Kosovo.

Politicians from Prishtina and Preševo have made themselves quite clear: “Our demands will be more radical if only Kosovo is divided.” The coordinator of the Kosovo Albanian negotiating team Blerim Shala said: “If Kosovo is divided, which means the annexation of its northern part by Serbia, Eastern Kosovo, i.e. Bujanovac and Preševo must belong to Kosovo.”

After its declaration of independence, Kosovo entered a phase of consolidating its statehood, which Serbia wanted to prevent at all costs. For this reason, Belgrade focused its diplomatic efforts on lobbying against the recognition of Kosovo. The decision to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice in The Hague on the independence decision was part of that effort.

However, Belgrade’s real goal was to renew dialogue with Prishtina, with pressure towards the partition of Kosovo, which would mean that Serbia would retain Northern Kosovo.

STRATEGY FOR THE INTEGRATION OF NORTHERN KOSOVO AS OPPOSED TO THE PARTITION OF KOSOVO

After the declaration of the independence of Kosovo, the Kosovo government, together with the International Civilian Office made a plan for the integration of the northern part of Kosovo into the institutions of the Republic of Kosovo. The document entitled “Strategy for Northern Kosovo”, states among other things that

decentralization, i.e. the establishment of a separate municipality of North Kosovska Mitrovica, is the most important step in Prishtina's efforts to take control of the north. The intention of the author was to show Serbs living in that part of Kosovo that decentralization would be in their best interest, i.e. to emphasize the "practical benefits" of decentralization, in order to overcome the biggest problem – "the feeling that the establishment of a new North Mitrovica municipality also means the acceptance of Kosovo's independence".³⁷

Belgrade's rejection of the Strategy for the Integration of Northern Kosovo encouraged Albanians in Southern Serbia to reiterate their position from the beginning of 2000. Kosovo Assembly Speaker Jakup Krasniqi said that if Serbs wanted to secede, they needed to be aware that Albanians in Preševo and Bujanovac were ready to unite with Kosovo. He said that the exchange of territories "should be carried out by mutual agreement and in cooperation not only with local Serbs, but also with politicians in Belgrade". The statement indicates that Belgrade, which is keeping Southern Serbia under constant "surveillance",³⁸ could face new pressure on territories that it has always considered to be of strategic importance.

37 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/strategija_sever_kosova_podrska/1941337.html.

38 www.B92.net, 10 February 2010.

REAL PROBLEMS OF THE THREE MUNICIPALITIES



Preševo

In seeking their civil rights, Albanians in Southern Serbia rely on the Plan for the peaceful resolution of the crisis in the area of south-central Serbia, or, as Albanians call it, the so-called “Končulj Agreement” (2001),³⁹ by which the federal government (FRY) undertook to establish the rights of Albanians, the 2007 agreement on the reorganization of the Coordinating Body for Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa for integrating Albanians into state and public institutions, and the “Seven Points Plan” from 2013.

The situation in Southern Serbia may be peaceful at the moment, but the problems surrounding the region still exist in the long-term, making the region unstable.

Serbia is the first in Europe in terms of the number of poor citizens; the average poverty rate of 25 percent conceals huge differences between different parts of the country. The Poverty Map, a publication of produced by the World Bank in cooperation with the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia,⁴⁰ shows that poverty is most prevalent in the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, where three of the four poorest districts (Jablanica, Pčinja and Toplica) are located, with poverty rates above 40 percent.

Southern Serbia is one of the most underdeveloped regions in Serbia, with poor infrastructure and low prospects for serious investments that would revive this region. In addition, those municipalities, above all Bujanovac and Preševo – where the share of the population working abroad back in 1981, and in 1991, was noticeably higher than the national average – are among the poorest municipalities.

Both Albanians and Serbs are looking for work. The region is also burdened by unresolved relations from the past. Tensions between Albanians and Belgrade

39 Demilitarization Statement signed only by the UÇPMB.

40 *Poverty Map of Serbia. Method and Key Findings*. Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and World Bank Group, 2016.

are constant, regardless of the promises coming from Belgrade. In addition, both Albanians and Serbs in Northern Kosovo are hostages to unresolved relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. Although the Brussels Agreement should be a stabilizing factor for the status of both, the situation on the ground is changing very slowly or not at all. The life problems that Albanians face (nostrification of diplomas, textbooks, etc.) indicate that a true normalization of relations between Prishtina and Belgrade has not yet been achieved.

Albanians have complained about frequent arrests when they hoist the Albanian flag at celebrations. Young men who were celebrating the victory of the Albanian national football team were arrested. They have complained that they do not have access to IPA funds, that their names are being written in Cyrillic, that all court proceedings are conducted only in Serbian, although the law also guarantees the use of the Albanian language. They demand that Serbia start respecting its own Constitution and human rights guaranteed by European and other international acts. Albanians from Southern Serbia who work in Kosovo are also scrutinized, the police keep them at border crossings for a long time or turn them away from the border.

The President of the Municipality of Preševo Ragmi Mustafa points out that between 2000 and 2021, no Serbian government has done anything to solve the largest number of issues in Southern Serbia, especially political ones, and that the current government in particular is not doing anything. He says that not a single one of the 13 points from the agreement on the cessation of the conflict in Southern Serbia has been resolved.⁴¹

Albanians in Bujanovac and Preševo are not satisfied with their position in Serbia even almost 20 years after the conflict. They blame official Belgrade for the slow integration into state institutions, problems with the exercise of collective

41 <http://www.naslovi.net/2015-12-16/akter/mustafa-ova-vlada-ne-resava-probleme/17718507>.

human rights and economic backwardness. During his tenure as President of the Municipality of Bujanovac, Shaip Kamberi once pointed out that sometimes, “I have the impression that Belgrade treats us as a foreign element, as if we were unwanted in Serbia.”⁴²

In the municipality of Preševo, the unemployment rate is approaching the figure of 60 percent, and in Bujanovac it has exceeded 40 percent. The number of inhabitants in these two municipalities has been declining since 1991 due to the departure of the able-bodied population to other countries and the largest cities in Serbia, but also due to low population growth.

Nexhat Behluli, a businessman from the village of Lučani, says the situation is similar in other villages along the Kosovo border. “Young people are leaving in great numbers for Western Europe, primarily to Germany. They are mostly drivers, car mechanics, builders... They first get a visa for six months and then return with 10,000 euros in savings, and that is money that they cannot earn in Serbia.”⁴³

As many problems have not been solved, Albanians are increasingly turning to international actors, the EU and the United States for help, and are asking for their problems to be solved within the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue. They believe that Belgrade-Prishtina relations cannot be normalized without the Preševo Valley and that the Albanian question in Southern Serbia is identical to the Serbian question in Northern Kosovo.⁴⁴ By ignoring their problems, Belgrade prevents them from being legitimate citizens of Serbia.⁴⁵ “Everything is at a standstill in

42 <https://javno.rs/istrazivanja/srbi-i-albanci-na-putu-za-zapadnu-evropu>.

43 <https://javno.rs/istrazivanja/srbi-i-albanci-na-putu-za-zapadnu-evropu>.

44 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mustafi-zloupotreba-zakona-u-srbiji-za-politi%C4%8Dki-progon-albanaca/31129112.html>.

45 Shqiprim Arifi, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mustafi-zloupotreba-zakona-u-srbiji-za-politi%C4%8Dki-progon-albanaca/31129112.html>.

Southern Serbia because it remains unknown what will happen in the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo,” people have told the Helsinki Committee.

Western embassies are monitoring the situation in Southern Serbia, hence the frequent visits of their representatives to this region. During his visit to these municipalities, German Ambassador Thomas Schieb pointed out that the state of the economy there was unsatisfactory, “unlike the political situation, which is stable”.⁴⁶ He also indicated that he would do everything to bring as many investors from his country as possible to Southern Serbia and help reduce unemployment, primarily of young people, which is the most difficult issue in this area.⁴⁷

During his visit to the region, US Ambassador Anthony Godfrey also said: “We insist on the improvement of the economic situation in Southern Serbia and preventing people from leaving the area.”⁴⁸

The Government of Kosovo has announced the establishment of an Office for Assistance to the Citizens of the Municipalities of Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa in Prishtina, which would deal with the issues of the people living there. Prime Minister Albin Kurti is expected to establish it. A large number of Albanians who left Preševo for Kosovo after 2001 have not returned, are not registered and are legally invisible citizens in Kosovo.

That office should help the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa, just as the Kosovo Government helped during the pandemic with 500,000 euros (200,000 euros was allocated for Preševo, 200,000 for Bujanovac and 100,000 for

46 <https://www.infovranjske.rs/info/ambasador-nema%C4%8Dke-te%C5%A1ka-ekonomska-situacija-na-jugu-srbije>.

47 Ibid.

48 <https://www.infovranjske.rs/info/godfri-zaustaviti-iseljavanje-sa-juga?fbclid=IwAR1-ncAfvAI43ky5RLePoZgNGIFw9TQlqEXKepVd7ntzQBfE4kdQNssgWCA#.XilpI83oiPo.facebook>.

Medveđa).⁴⁹ They also expect help from the Government of Serbia. The pandemic has emphasized the need for a hospital. That project, as a request of the Albanians, is in the “Seven Points Plan”, which was agreed with the Government of Serbia. The Helsinki Committee has spoken to people who claim that there is fear of going to health institutions in Nis or Belgrade, and that health workers often tell them “why don’t you go to Kosovo for treatment”. Many go to Gjilane for treatment, where they pay for healthcare services. In fact, the seventh point refers to the organization of the system of secondary healthcare for the residents of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa. In 2015, a maternity hospital was opened in Preševo, envisaged by “Čović’s plan”. The maternity hospital employs Serbian doctors, while Albanians who have completed their studies in Macedonia have to have their diplomas nostrified, a procedure that takes a long time to complete.

The daily campaign of the Serbian media against Kosovo and Kosovo Albanians is also reflected in the situation in Southern Serbia. Shaip Kamberi estimates that the smear campaign that is often carried out by the media and state officials towards Kosovo also affects Albanians in Serbia.⁵⁰ The biggest ethnic distance in Serbia is in relation to Albanians, and has been for decades. Kamberi points out that nothing has been done to address this issue: “We live here, we strive to exercise our rights within the institutions of the system. We have tried multiple times to participate in the dialogue with the Government, but a political solution is only possible if there is political will in Belgrade. We have not seen such a will displayed so far.”⁵¹

49 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Ekonomija/Kosovska-Vlada-uplatila-pola-miliona-evra-za-Presevsku-dolinu.sr.html>.

50 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a547948-kamberi-poruku-srpske-desnice-u-bujanovcu-shvatio-sam-kao-poruku-vucica/>

51 Ibid.

POLITICAL LIFE

The political scene in the south has consolidated in recent years. Shqiprim Arifi, former President of the Municipality of Preševo, points out that the new leadership “has been strengthened not only in Preševo, but has also helped to simplify the political spectrum, so since 2015 the number of parties has halved, so we now only have four”. This is not only a great success for the political system, but also for the population that voted for those parties, and it has contributed to better cooperation between the parties. And we know that it is always a challenge to cooperate and to work together.”⁵² He also points out that “as a minority in Parliament with only three representatives, we do not have significant influence, although we have done a really good job so far.”⁵³

In the current convocation of the National Assembly of Serbia, three Albanian deputies with representatives of the Bosniak minority make up the parliamentary caucus that is also the only opposition to what is practically a one-party parliament (the majority of opposition parties did not participate in the 2020 elections). Shaip Kamberi, MP from the list “Albanian Democratic Alternative – United Valley” (DAAUD), held several very important speeches – in one he called for “recognition of war crimes”, but was warned during the speech against using terminology that the President of the Assembly Ivica Dačić labelled as “inappropriate”.⁵⁴

52 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/%C5%A1%C4%87iprim-arifi-politika-brisanja-prebivali%C5%A1ta-albancima-u-srbiji-moralni-zlo%C4%8Din/31069346.html>.

53 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/%C5%A1%C4%87iprim-arifi-politika-brisanja-prebivali%C5%A1ta-albancima-u-srbiji-moralni-zlo%C4%8Din/31069346.html>.

54 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30925752.html>.

Kamberi estimates that the minimum norm is for the state to have a moral and political obligation to shed light on the cases of mass graves in the process of European integration and approach that issue from a civilizational perspective.

His speech in the Assembly of Serbia, on 28 October, 2020, caused a large number of reactions in the public and on social networks. In it, he pointed out that not even Slobodan Milošević could have produced such a parliament, and assessed that it was a sad day for democracy. He began his speech with the words “Mirdita, good day!”, in order to remind Prime Minister Ana Brnabić of the threats right-wingers made to the organizers of the eponymous festival and to provide support to the festival in that way.⁵⁵ On that occasion, he also pointed to “the everyday language of hatred, sexism and the smear campaign against the opposition”.⁵⁶

Kamberi very convincingly highlighted all the weaknesses of the regime and pointed out that President Vučić was in Bujanovac twice, once while he was Prime Minister, once as President, but that he never visited the local self-government. He only met with people from the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in a cafe. He did not gather Albanians, he did not come to the local self-government to hear what key people have to say regarding the problems that the population of that municipality is facing. Kamberi says he does not believe that the position of Albanians will improve if an Albanian becomes minister. “I believe that the position of Albanians will improve when this state decides to employ Albanians in government institutions, in proportion to the population in these municipalities.”⁵⁷

At the latest local elections, Albanians formed a government in Bujanovac and Preševo, while in Medveđa, the President of the Municipality is a Serb. After the last elections, Albanians won a majority for the first time in Bujanovac and are a part of the government themselves, while in Medveđa, for the first time, only

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30925752.html>.

Serbs are part of the government. Serbs in Bujanovac are boycotting all parliamentary committees because they are not part of the local government.

There has been no agreement on the multiethnic composition of the municipal government because Belgrade does not respect its obligation to integrate Albanians into state and public institutions. Local Albanians in all three municipalities have no objections to relations with local Serbs. These relations are fair and friendly, although the local police and state institutions are pursuing Belgrade's policy, which discriminates against Albanians.⁵⁸

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

There has been no significant economic recovery or development over the last two decades in these three municipalities. Most state-owned/socially-owned enterprises have been closed down. The privatization of several of them did not yield the expected results. As these companies have been in the process of liquidation for years, they are now failing. The company Gumoplastika in Bujanovac, for example, has been in bankruptcy proceedings for 20 years. The Tobacco Industry has been sold, but tobacco production has also stopped, which endangered about 300 families who were living from it. The JUGKOP meat processing factory was also shut down.

For a long time, there has been talk about spa tourism and great potentials, but many spas and rehabilitation centers have become dilapidated in recent years, overgrown with weeds, closed to tourists and patients, because of a dispute between the state and the Pension Fund, which had allocated money for their construction in previous decades. The special hospital Geysler, i.e. Sijarinska Banja near Medveđa, is on the list of facilities that are to be sold. On an annual

58 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee with citizens in Medveđa, Bujanovac and Preševo.

level, this institution hosts several thousand tourists, and is one of the spas that have the most springs and natural geysers.

Albanians have not had access to the privatization. They live off the remittances of the diaspora, which still shows great solidarity. Albanians from the diaspora would like to invest in these municipalities, but they are highly distrustful due to various restrictions and discrimination. Passivation of residence is also a limiting factor.

Muharem Salihu (pictured on the right), a businessman originally from the village of Tupale in the municipality of Medveđa, who lives and works in Italy, bought an old factory for the production of socks which will allegedly be put into operation in June 2021.⁵⁹ The factory will employ both Albanians and Serbs, a total of 400 workers. The machines have already been installed, and the training of workers has been completed. The President of the Municipality of Medveđa has never visited this factory. Salihu bought several houses in Sijarinska Banja, and was planning to buy a hotel complex in Sijarinska Banja and the Lece mine. However, some



59 He was not able to participate in the process of privatization, it was later resold to him by the new owner.

Serbian media are campaigning against Salihu, who they say is in charge of implementing Albanian plans in Medveđa.

The Helsinki Committee has learned from one of its interlocutors that there is the impression that the central government in Serbia is in control of the economy in Southern Serbia, and that “it has made sure that nothing is produced in the south”.⁶⁰

The infrastructure, and thus the connection of this region with central Serbia and Kosovo, would significantly contribute to the interest of foreign investors, especially from Germany. Preševo Mayor Ardita Sinani says the state does not subsidize small and medium-sized businesses in Preševo, even though the municipality is in a highly favorable location – on Corridor X, on the border with North Macedonia and Kosovo – and has a railway station.⁶¹

Albanians are engaged in agriculture, livestock and trade, but have difficulty accessing the market, both in Kosovo and in Serbia. The consequence of the spread of hate speech, prejudice and stereotypes regarding Albanians is a below-par willingness to purchase products that have a label in the Albanian language, which is why Preševo producers are not in the market in other cities in Serbia.

Employment of Albanians in public enterprises and institutions remains very low. It is particularly noticeable that no Albanians are employed at the Public Company “Roads of Serbia”. The toll booth in Bujanovac employs citizens from Niš and other cities in Serbia, but no Albanians from Bujanovac. No Albanians work at the cadaster in Bujanovac, nor does anyone at that institution speak Albanian. Out of a total of 15 judges in Bujanovac, 3 are Albanians, while two deputy prosecutors and only one notary public is Albanian. At the police station in Bujanovac, only one Albanian is the deputy commander, and there are no inspectors of Albanian origin. The Preševo court was moved to Vranje, and only hearings can be conducted in Preševo.⁶²

60 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

61 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

62 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

ALBANIAN NATIONAL MINORITY COUNCIL

In 2009, the two most important laws for the exercise of minority rights were adopted: the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and the Law on National Councils of National Minorities. The former is crucial for establishing civil equality, while the latter establishes the basis for bridging the legal gap faced by national councils after the expiration of the majority of their terms of office. The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination was also one of the preconditions for putting Serbia on the Schengen White List, while the Law on National Councils of National Minorities enables the implementation of local minority self-government.

The Albanian National Minority Council was established in 2010. Riza Halimi's list won the majority of votes for the National Council. Some Albanian politicians believe that national councils cannot solve problems. However, others think that a directly elected national council provides greater legitimacy and can thus contribute to more efficient solution to many problems in talks with the Government. They see the role of the national council mainly in preserving the identity of the Albanian minority.

The Albanian National Minority Council is financed by the Government of Serbia. As Albanians boycotted the 2011 census, the Serbian government is funding the council, taking into account the figure of 5,800, which corresponds to the number of Albanians recorded. The Albanian National Minority Council filed a lawsuit with the Administrative Court, requesting the annulment of the decision on determining the funds for the work of that Council for 2017, stating that they were denied the funds that belong to them by law. Director of the Office for Human and Minority Rights Suzana Paunović reminded at the time that the Government Decree on the procedure of distribution of funds from the budget of Serbia for the financing and work of national councils, which has been in force since 2010, stipulates that in the procedure of distribution of funds from the

budget to national councils of national minorities, the number of members of a national minority is determined by the results of the latest census.⁶³

The Government's rigid attitude towards the financing of the Council greatly limits its activities. The budget mainly comes down to covering the salaries of employees. In the meantime, the Albanian government has made a decision "on regular funding of the Albanian National Minority Council", demonstrating its readiness to help Albanians.⁶⁴

Minister for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue Gordana Čović said that the ministry's goal is to improve the rights of national minorities, which she said "will be visible in improving poor assessments from relevant international reports and, more importantly, in accepting critical remarks made by national minority councils on what the ministry is obliged to do in order for them to function normally".⁶⁵

All national minority councils reacted to the possibility of reducing the budget for national councils by 20%.⁶⁶ Ragmi Mustafa has pointed out that national councils receive funds from the state for the implementation of program activities and operational costs, but the problem is that those funds are insufficient and irregular, which is why an initiative has been launched towards doubling them next year.⁶⁷

63 <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201705161111191927-albanci-savet-srbija-tuzba/>

64 <https://beta.rs/politika/112014-mustafa-nacionalni-savet-albanaca-ce-se-finansirati-i-iz-budzeta-albanije>.

65 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/finansije-zajedni%C4%8Dki-problem-nacionalnih-saveta-u-srbiji/30968206.html>.

66 According to Jasna Vojnić, President of the National Council of the Croatian National Minority, Serbia allocates 2.1 million euros for 908,297 members of national minorities, while Croatia allocates 5.7 million euros for 328,738 members of national minorities.

67 Ibid.

Albanians in Southern Serbia also have problems displaying national symbols. The President of the National Council, Ragmi Mustafa, points out that the legal pressure of the Government on Albanians is increasing day by day. He was summoned to a hearing at the Magistrates Court in Vranje, because he was accused of violating the law relating to the flag of Serbia – more precisely, the article that prohibits displaying the flag of a foreign country unless it is accompanied by the flag of Serbia. In fact, on 28 November, 2020, as in previous years, on Albanian Flag Day (the national holiday that marks Albania’s independence), the Albanian flag was displayed at the headquarters of the Albanian National Council in Bujanovac.⁶⁸

The Council made the decision that it is precisely that flag (the flag of Albania) that is the flag of the Albanians that they display every 28 November. Mustafa believes that this does not violate the Law on the Design and Use of the Coat of Arms, Flag and Anthem of the Republic of Serbia. What is problematic, as he states, is that “it is a politically motivated persecution through that law, that is, through that article of the law”.⁶⁹ He notes that the Constitution of Serbia prescribes in Article 79 that national minorities determine their own symbols and have the right to display them in public places.⁷⁰

Mustafa also emphasizes that only he received a summons to the Magistrates Court, primarily because he filed a lawsuit with the Higher Court in Belgrade against the Minister of Police Aleksandar Vulin for hate speech and discrimination due his the use of the word “Shqiptar”.⁷¹ The court dismissed the lawsuit.

68 *<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mustafi-zloupotreba-zakona-u-srbiji-za-politi%C4%8Dki-progon-albanaca/31129112.html>*.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

Six and a half years ago, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality of Serbia Brankica Janković gave an opinion that such a way of referring to members of the Albanian people was offensive, and the first final court verdict in which the word “Shqiptar” was characterized as hate speech was passed in 2018. There have been three court decisions (Higher Court in Belgrade) according to which the word “Shqiptar” is offensive in nature and which encourages discrimination against the Albanian national minority.⁷²

On the occasion of Vulin’s statement, Shaip Kamberi, MP in the National Assembly of Serbia and President of the Party for Democratic Action (PDD), assessed that the Serbian judicial system was politicized, because it gave legal and institutional power to hate speech, intolerance and xenophobia against Albanians in general, especially those living in Serbia.⁷³

However, it is not just the Minister of Police, but also the majority of MPs, as well as the media. It is noticeable how much the problems of Albanians are ignored in general. At every opportunity, Albanians point to the problems and the need to resolve the vital issues of Albanians living in Serbia, especially in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa.

Ragmi Mustafi believes that “above all, Albanians in the Preševo Valley expect integration into the institutions of the system and representation in state bodies in proportional to the population in the region, but also resolving the issue of hoisting the national flag, using the mother tongue in state institutions, as well as issues in the fields of information, education and culture”.⁷⁴

Ragmi Mustafa underlines that “the Preševo Valley is still hostage to the relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. This is best shown by the measures and counter-measures taken by the Republic of Kosovo as well as the Republic of

72 Ibid.

73 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31092398.html>.

74 Ibid.

Serbia, which have mostly brought harm to Albanians living in the Preševo Valley. According to him, extreme centralization of power naturally results in institutional and social disintegration. For all principals of Albanian-language schools, centers for social work, cadaster, tax and all other institutions that should be accountable to citizens, they are forced to favor the central government. Because the decisions on dismissal and appointment are made by the line ministers, without any consultations with the local self-government or any political party.⁷⁵

In its work strategy for 2020–2025, the National Council envisages, among other things, printing a catalog of the most common Albanian names and surnames, writing the names of institutions and streets bilingually and the use of the Albanian language in public institutions, improving the access to information of the Albanian minority by supporting the production of media in Albanian and professionalization of media workers. In the field of education, three topics were singled out – providing textbooks for primary and secondary schools, professional development of teachers who teach in the Albanian language and recognition of diplomas. In the field of culture, the following topics were singled out: setting up the online platform “Digital Museum”, enriching the book fund in the Albanian language in public libraries in the three municipalities and the establishment of a cultural institute.⁷⁶

In the meantime, the catalog has been completed and contains 3,134 Albanian names and 530 Albanian surnames, which have been correctly written in Albanian and Serbian and in Cyrillic. It was prepared by the Ministry of State

75 Danas interview with Ragmi Mustafa, *Albanians in the south still hostage to relations between Belgrade and Prishtina*, 24 May.

76 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mediji-manjina-kao-propagandno-orudje/30837638.html>.
<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/424833/nacionalni-savet-albanske-nacionalne-manjine-predstavio-nacrt-strategije-rada.php>.

Administration and Local Self-Government in cooperation with the Coordinating Body of the Government of the Republic of Serbia for the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa, the Albanian National Minority Council and the OSCE Mission to Serbia. The catalog will help employees in hospitals, maternity hospitals and registry offices, who are in direct contact with representatives of the Albanian community, in the correct spelling of their names in official documents in Albanian and Serbian, which will contribute to more effective application of the right to a personal name and it being written in the language of a national minority.⁷⁷

The National Council considers that the new law on national councils does not clearly define their role and field of authority. They have also complained that their opinion is not taken into account, for example, when school principals are appointed. Out of 23 councils in Serbia, only four are not under the control of the SNS.

Interlocutors from the National Council also point to the fact that a large number of murders, enforced disappearances, damages to property and tortures, committed by members of the Serbian police (MUP) and the Yugoslav Army, as well as paramilitary formations, in the period before the crisis in Southern Serbia (1999–2000), has remained unsolved until now, which also applies to human rights violations on both sides in the conflict from 2000 to 2001. The Committee for Human Rights in Bujanovac and the Humanitarian Law Center worked on documenting human rights violations, both in the period during 2000 (prior to the conflict), during the conflict (2000–2001) and in the period after May 31, 2001 (after the conflict).

The judicial authorities of the Republic of Serbia have not prosecuted a single case of human rights violations that occurred during the armed conflict in Southern Serbia. This has left lasting consequences when it comes to trust in the courts

77 <https://www.osce.org/sr/mission-to-serbia/444103>.

and the prosecution. In addition, social dialogue on the causes and consequences of the armed conflict has not been enabled, nor has enough been done on the reintegration of former UÇPMB fighters into society. As much as 20 years after the conflict, there have been no initiatives to resolve mutual relations, which is one of the reasons for the tendency towards demarcation.

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND MEDIA

ALBANIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA

Although Albanians have traditionally made up the majority of the population, there were no Albanian-language media in the three municipalities prior to the intervention. In early 1997, a broadcast license for a local television was sought, and was granted only after the *Končulj Agreement*. At that time, the distribution of Albanian media was prohibited, and only state-controlled media were allowed.

The agreement on the reorganization of local media (2002) enabled the formation of an Albanian-language newsroom within the already existing Radio Bujanovac, and immediately after that TV Bujanovac was established, also on the model of two newsrooms. Also established were Radio-Television Preševo (which also has a Serbian-language newsroom) and Radio Medveđa, where in 2004 an Albanian-language newsroom was formed. The radio in Medveđa broadcasts 5 minutes of programs in Albanian every day, and one 60-minute show per week.

The media in the languages of national minorities in Serbia face numerous problems, the most pronounced of which are those related to funding, political pressure and the influence of the Council of National Minorities on their editorial policy. This is evidenced by a report presented by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Serbia. According to the report, entitled “Media Outlets in the Languages of National Minorities – Research and Analysis”, political parties of national minorities still do not view the media as a means of informing the citizens of minority communities, but as a tool for their own propaganda.⁷⁸

78 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mediji-manjina-kao-propagandno-orudje/30837638.html>

The analysis points out that the Albanian-language media in the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa are in an extremely difficult financial, personnel and program situation, and that they are not addressing the needs of Albanians. Moreover, economic and political pressures have led to the closure of almost all independent media, and the privatization carried out five years ago has not yielded the expected results in terms of economic and political independence.⁷⁹

Ragmi Mustafa points out that “the privatization process, which promised to improve the media situation and program content in Albanian-language media, has not brought about any improvement. It is more difficult and worse now than it was then, and the program contents are in the negative, in terms of both quantity and quality”.⁸⁰

In the municipalities of Bujanovac and Preševo, all media were privatized, but the relationship between the media and the government has not changed. Nexhat Beluli, owner of the Albanian-language private television Spektri in Bujanovac, says that “their editorial policies directly depend on the municipality, the Coordinating Body for Southern Serbia, or some ministry. The portals here are mostly run by people close to local authorities. For example, in the municipality of Bujanovac, the owners of five portals are people from the local self-government”.⁸¹

Jeton Ismaili, owner of the Folonline portal from Preševo, highlights the problem of discrimination against Albanian-language media at the competitions of the Ministry of Culture and Information, as well as discrimination at media competitions announced by the local self-governments.⁸²

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

Out of a total of 80 projects that passed the competition of the Ministry of Media in minority languages, six are in Albanian. One organization from Medveđa, four from Bujanovac and one from Belgrade, received a total of 3.3 million dinars (around 28,000 euros). However, in the opinion of Jeton Ismaili, part of the responsibility for the situation in Albanian-language media also falls on the National Council,⁸³ whose information boards do not include media professionals.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Ragmi Mustafa, President of the Albanian National Minority Council (NSA), states that this body does not have the financial means to help the media.⁸⁵

Albanians in Southern Serbia are dissatisfied with the program in Albanian, which is broadcast on RTS 2 once a week, as well as the one on Radio Belgrade, because they do not contain any news about the Albanian community. Ragmi Mustafa suggests that the program for RTS be prepared by a media house from the Preševo Valley.⁸⁶

83 According to Article 19 of the Law on Local Self-Government, the National Council may establish institutions and companies for the purpose of exercising the right to public information in the language of a national minority. This article gives national councils the right to nominate a member to the Council of the regulatory body for electronic media.

Article 21 of the same law states that the National Council adopts a strategy for the development of information in the language of a national minority, in accordance with the strategy in the field of public information in Serbia. The Council makes a proposal for the allocation of funds for projects, as well as proposals and recommendations to the management boards and program councils of public media services regarding programs in the languages of national minorities. The Council also gives its opinion on candidates for editors-in-chief of minority language programs in public media services.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

No daily or weekly newspaper is sold in Albanian in Preševo, as there is no interest in the press. Serbian print media can be obtained only in the part of the municipality where Serbs live (near the railway station).⁸⁷

RECOGNITION OF DIPLOMAS

Although an agreement on the recognition of university degrees obtained in Kosovo was reached in dialogue with Prishtina, it is not being implemented. About 1,000 young Albanians from Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa are studying at the University of Prishtina, and want to stay in the three local municipalities. Non-recognition of their diplomas prevents their employment in the state administration, health service and judiciary, which is also one of the reasons why young Albanians leave for Western European countries.⁸⁸ Apart from the University of Prishtina, Albanians from Southern Serbia are studying in Albania and at the University of Tetova in North Macedonia. Without young educated members, the Albanian community is threatened with marginalization and disappearance.

Albanian politicians blame the authorities for ignoring problems and failing to meet the educational needs of the Albanian community. During the December protest (2010) in Preševo, Albanian pupils and students demanded that Brussels mediate between Belgrade and Prishtina in order to speed up the resolution of

87 Ibid.

88 According to Riza Halimi, "the number of Albanians in those three municipalities in Southern Serbia has almost halved since 2001, and many villages in the Ground Security Zone along the line with Kosovo have been completely deserted". He said it was estimated that between 25,000 and 30,000 Albanians had emigrated from the three municipalities. Halimi estimates that unemployment is as high as 70 percent.

the diploma issue. The protest, organized by the Human Rights Committee, was attended by about 3,000 pupils and students and ended without any incidents.⁸⁹

Chairman of the Bujanovac Committee for Human Rights Belgzim Kamberi said at the time that the aim of the protest was to point out the problem with diplomas: “The government is violating human rights in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa... We believe,” says Kamberi, “that we should not be held hostage to politics in relation to Kosovo or the relations between Serbia and Kosovo.”⁹⁰ The demands of young Albanians were supported by 37 non-governmental organizations from Serbia, which pointed out in their statement that “solving the problem of diplomas should be a priority of the Government of Serbia, regardless of negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina, because the right to education is not a political issue. It is a basic human right and one of the minority rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Serbia and international standards.”⁹¹

The implementation of the agreement on the recognition of diplomas is often opposed by academic circles in Serbia. Serbia has always underestimated the diplomas obtained in Prishtina and viewed Kosovo professors as incompetent. The Dean of the Belgrade Faculty of Law, Mirko Vasiljević, said that Serbia would not benefit from the recognition of diplomas. “It is my opinion and general belief that the quality of work at the University of Prishtina is far below the level practiced at universities in Serbia,” he said. Professor of the University of Kragujevac, Mileta Poskurica, politicizes the issue and claims that Serbia should not recognize

89 During the protest, its participants passed by large billboards showing the “diploma” of the Minister of Local Self-Government and the head of the Coordinating Body, Milan Marković, and where it was written that he successfully completed his studies at the University on 5 October (grade 10).

90 *Albanians demand that the Government of Serbia recognize their diplomas*, Kurir, 10 December, 2010.

91 *NGOs demand recognition of diplomas*, www.jugpress.com.

the diplomas of the University of Prishtina, explaining that “such a capitulatory act would lead to the next move that could imply the final recognition of the Republic of Kosovo, and I think the state should not get involved in that”.⁹²

Recognition of diplomas was also part of the Washington Agreement (2020), as well as the initiative on the so-called “Mini Schengen”. The Albanian National Minority Council (NSA) welcomed the signing of the agreement, especially the part on the recognition of Kosovo diplomas, i.e. point 6 of the Agreement, which states that “both sides will recognize diplomas and professional certificates”.⁹³ On the occasion of the agreement from Washington, Mladen Šarčević, the Minister of Education, stated that the problem of diplomas had been overcome and that it would mean signing various protocols. However, as he pointed out, “we will not allow our jurisdiction over the educational part that belongs to us to be called into question”.⁹⁴ This refers to the University of Prishtina, which has been relocated to Kosovska Mitrovica and which Prishtina does not recognize.

In the Serbian Parliament, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić answered a question about diplomas and, among other things, said that “as soon as Serbia has an adequate interlocutor in the temporary institutions in Prishtina who is ready to talk about it seriously, it will make compromises in order to reach a solution that will be in the interest of young people”. She also pointed out that “the Association of Serb Municipalities is a precondition for better talks.”⁹⁵

92 http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/183907/Najvise-koristi-ce-imati-Albanci-iz-Preseva-i-Bujanovca?_

93 <https://bujanovacke.co.rs/2020/09/04/nsa-srbija-u-vasingtonu-priznala-kosovske-diplome/>

94 <https://www.vesti.rs/Va%C5%A1ington/Sarcevic-Priznavanje-diploma-dobra-vest-i-za-Srbe-i-Albance.html>

95 <https://www.tvmost.info/post/brnabic-priznavanje-diploma-sa-kim-cekamo-sagovornika-iz-pristinki>

THE TEXTBOOK ISSUE

The issue with textbooks arose when Kosovo declared independence, and Serbia banned the import of Albanian-language textbooks, so children in those territories could not receive an education in their mother tongue. This primarily refers to the curricula for geography and history. Milan Markovic, one of the former education ministers, said in 2011 that Albanians were justifiably frustrated with textbooks for primary and secondary schools, and that “the education system is the weakest link in the government’s policy in Bujanovac and Preševo” because “for almost 20 years, Albanian children have been learning from lecture summaries, illegal textbooks that deviate from the curriculum or from what they have written down” and that “it is high time that the Ministry of Education took a more serious approach to solving that problem in accordance with Serbian law and the practice that applies to other national minorities”.⁹⁶ Primary school students received a primer and workbooks in Albanian in 2011, which is in accordance with the Law on Textbooks of the Republic of Serbia. The textbook was imported from Albania on the basis of the approval of the Ministry of Education and Science, and on the recommendation of the National Council of Albanians. It was printed in Serbia with the support of the OSCE.

This actual solving of this problem started only recently. After 20 years, primary school students in Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa, who attend classes in the Albanian language, started the school year 2020 with new textbooks. Ragmi Mustafa, President of the Albanian National Minority Council, has pointed out that students (4,052 in total) will be able to learn from the same books as their peers from Tirana, Shkodra, Vlorë. In addition to the Albanian Ministry of

96 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/albanci_trazili_udzbenike_na_maternjem_i_priznavanje_diploma/24327328.html

Education, where the books came from, Kosovo authorities allocated around 140,000 euros for the textbooks, which were handed out free of charge.⁹⁷

The history textbook is the most controversial one, because in it, among other things, the leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army, Adem Jashari, is described as a hero who fought against the security services of Serbia. More than 100,000 textbooks sent by the Ministry of Education from Kosovo to Serbia were detained at Serbian customs. Albanians asked the then Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić for help, but he turned a deaf ear to the issue.

Albanian educators say “classes are conducted using textbooks approved by the ministry and translated into Albanian”. They believe that the problem is not urgent and that it requires thorough coordination between the educational authorities of Serbia and the work of the Albanian National Minority Council, which deals with education, in order to harmonize the content of textbooks, primarily in social sciences. Another problem occurs when translating textbooks. In fact, the textbooks must be translated from Albanian into Serbian, and then translated back into Albanian. The translation into Albanian is quite poor, often riddled with absurd mistakes.

Following the adoption of the Law on Textbooks in 2018, the Ministry of Education believes that great progress has been made in providing textbooks in the languages of national minorities. All approved textbooks and textbook sets are in the Catalog of Textbooks in the Languages of National Minorities for the 2020/21 school year and are available on the website of the Ministry.⁹⁸ A total of 86 textbooks are available to students attending classes in the Albanian language, 46 of which are part of the new curriculum. The commission approved 31 textbooks for

97 <https://bujanovacke.co.rs/2020/09/08/>

[albanski-osnovci-prvi-put-posle-20-godina-imaju-udzbenike/](https://bujanovacke.co.rs/2020/09/08/albanski-osnovci-prvi-put-posle-20-godina-imaju-udzbenike/).

98 [http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/KATALOG-](http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/KATALOG-UD%C5%BDBENIKA-NA-JEZICIMA-NACIONALNIH-MANJINA-2020-21.pdf)

[UD%C5%BDBENIKA-NA-JEZICIMA-NACIONALNIH-MANJINA-2020-21.pdf](http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/KATALOG-UD%C5%BDBENIKA-NA-JEZICIMA-NACIONALNIH-MANJINA-2020-21.pdf).

grades 1–8. Of that number, the Commission reviewed and approved 24 new textbooks in Albanian that were published in the new catalog for the 2021/22 school year in minority languages.⁹⁹

Professors in Preševo point out that the state is not even attempting to teach students Serbian, even though there is a need for Albanians to know that language. Schools in Preševo do not have electronic gradebooks, and for two years now they have not even had a hard-copy gradebook in Albanian. There has been no Education Inspector for seven years, which is why many teachers are working without a license.¹⁰⁰ All this illustrates the conditions in which the teachers are working.

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS IN BUJANOVAC

Taking into account the fact that education can play a key role in conflict prevention, immediately after 2000, the High Commissioner on National Minorities made significant efforts to improve the status of minorities, including their education. As education can foster a sense of opportunity and belonging, bridge gaps in diversity and between languages, and enable multiple different views of history. These were also the main motives of the High Commissioner on National Minorities to support the opening of the Faculty of Economics in Bujanovac.

The Faculty of Economics in Subotica opened a department in Bujanovac in 2011, while it moved into the new building in 2015, with the then Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić also in attendance at the opening. This project was supported by the EU, Switzerland and the OSCE Mission. The construction of the faculty building cost close to 1 million euros, of which the European Union donated 615,000 euros, the Swiss Government 185,000 euros, while the Government of

99 <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/novi-udzbenici-na-albanskom-jeziku/>.

100 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

the Republic of Serbia allocated a total of 208,000 euros for participation and equipping the building. This project was supported by the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). The department in Bujanovac is the first truly multilingual and multiethnic institution of higher education in Southern Serbia. The first generation of students graduated in November 2015.

Classes are conducted in Serbian and Albanian, the total facility area is 2,350 square meters, and includes an amphitheater, modern classrooms, student parliament rooms, a library, a reading room and an Internet cafe. Professors from the Faculty of Economics give lectures in Serbian, while professors from the University of Tetova in North Macedonia teach in Albanian.

The initiative to open the Department of Albanology in Bujanovac was initiated by the President of the National Council Ragmi Mustafa, who addressed the Rectorate after consultations with the Head of the Department of Albanology at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, Professor Naila Imami, and according to Mustafa, they reached the joint conclusion that the department would be “more than beneficial”. The request is justified by the fact that young Albanians from three municipalities from Southern Serbia would like to study Albanology, but that for numerous reasons this will not be carried out in Belgrade, primarily because of the geographical distance.

The Faculty of Economics, however, has not met the expectations of young Albanians. There are fewer and fewer of them studying there. Classes in Albanian language have also declined. In addition, the employment of Albanians, even with that degree, is problematic.¹⁰¹ In the ten years of its existence, the faculty has not appointed a single assistant professor from Southern Serbia. Classes in Albanian cover less than 30 percent of the curriculum.¹⁰²

101 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

102 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

CULTURE

Cultural activities include the protection of cultural goods, the development of cultural activities and institutions (libraries, cultural centers, theaters, cinemas, etc.), festivals, literature, the use of new technologies. The legal framework for this field is the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 79, which states that “members of national minorities shall have a right to: expression, preservation, fostering, developing and public expression of national, ethnic, cultural, religious specificity”. The Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Article 5, paragraph 1) “obliges countries to promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture, and to preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage”.

The National Council is an institution that has a mandate for this field, which is defined in its strategic work plan. However, the President of the National Council, Ragmi Mustafa, says that the institution has no influence on the election of directors of cultural institutions in Southern Serbia.¹⁰³

According to people who have spoken to the Helsinki Committee, the existing capacities (technical and program-wise) are outdated and do not meet the modern needs of the population, especially young people. There are very few cultural events due to limited financial resources. The funds allocated by the competent ministry are meager.¹⁰⁴

The most significant events include “Cultural Summer Bujanovac”, “Days of Albanian Comedy”, “Painting Colony Preševo”, as well as the activities of the Center for Youth Promotion.

103 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

104 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

Significant cultural institutions in this region are the Vuk Karadžić Cultural Center in Bujanovac, the Bujanovac Library (it has about 10,000 books in Albanian), the Preševo Cultural Center, the Ibrahim Kelmendi Library in Preševo and the Medveđa Library (with 40,000 books, 3,000 of which are in Albanian).

The issue of the right to express one's national identity is most often mentioned in relation to displaying the Albanian flag. "Everything is fine until you declare yourself as an Albanian," according to one of HC's interlocutors.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN YOUNG SERBS AND ALBANIANS

Young Albanians participate in projects that are multiethnic, but after the projects are finished, communication is mostly private and away from the public eye. They have better communication with Belgrade and other cities than with local Serbs. The NGO *Civic Initiatives* from Belgrade has been implementing projects for years that aim to build the capacity of local NGOs (primarily writing projects) and the integration of young people. For a while, they also had a permanent office in Bujanovac (until 2016). Young people are gathered around several local NGOs, but without the possibility for continuous action due to low funding.¹⁰⁵ In Preševo, the municipality also has an Office for Youth whose activities are related to education, culture and art. However, young people do not see a perspective for their survival, primarily due to discrimination, non-recognition of diplomas, economic conditions and poor living standards.¹⁰⁶

105 Beyond, Veliki Trnovac Čag, Center for the Advancement of Youth and Women Bujanovac, Alvet, The Future, Livret, BeActiv – these organizations organize cultural activities, assistance for vulnerable persons, Serbian and Albanian language courses...

106 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

Young active Albanians have not cooperated with organizations at the local level made up of Serbs, but participate in projects from Nis and other cities. Unfortunately, as they point out, these multiethnic projects lack sustainability. Young Albanians and Serbs do not hang out together in cafes, because each group sticks with their own. Albanians are more open to crossing the “ethnic line”, which some of them do.¹⁰⁷

Schools are bilingual (under one roof, but due to previous incidents, they have different schedules so that they do not overlap, and there have been no more incidents). A small number of them study in Novi Sad with scholarships from the Coordinating Body.

“PASSIVATION” OF ALBANIANS WORKING ABROAD

One of the acute problems that Albanians have been pointing out for years, and which is now being reported by international organizations, is the massive and selective passivation of residence (practically, the annulment of addresses). For more than four thousand Albanians, their residence in Medveđa¹⁰⁸ was passivized, and the passivation in that municipality led to the number of Albanians being reduced to 400–500 people. Recently, passivation has intensified in Bujano-

107 Ibid.

108 Shqiprim Arifi, former Mayor of Preševo, points out that since 2011, 4,700 residential addresses have been annulled in Medveđa, which is a very large number. Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani says that according to the 2011 census, there were 7,438 Albanians living in Medveđa, and that now, as she claims, it is estimated that there are only 600 Albanians, although there are no official statistics. (<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/osmani-optuzila-srbiju-za-etnicko-ciscenje-albanaca-u-medvedi-bujanovcu-i-presevu/rre3r9j>)

vac (about a thousand people were left without an address)¹⁰⁹ and in Preševo. Not only does this suspend the civil rights of Albanians, but it is a very specific measure of administrative ethnic cleansing.

One of the explanations for the passivation that the authorities put forward is that these Albanians do not have good living conditions, which is a form of taking over of the competences of the Center for Social Work. And, in some cases, that becomes absurd, because the HC also spoke to families who not only have the conditions, but are also ready to invest in this area. Also, similar checks on living conditions do not happen to non-Albanians. The procedure of changing the name of the street is also used for passivation. Some citizens have asked for an explanation from the Republic Geodetic Authority, as well as documents of the decision on renaming streets, because the local self-government does not possess it. However, the damaged citizens avoid complaining, because they are afraid of being exposed to vindictiveness, which would make the damage even greater.¹¹⁰

Former Mayor of Preševo Shqiprim Arifi says that the process of systematically erasing Albanians' residences has been ongoing since 2011, and continues to this day. "A critical point has been reached in Medveđa, because we have very few Albanians whose address is registered in that municipality. If we compare the statistical data on the population living in the municipalities in the Preševo Valley and its surroundings, it is obvious that we have a larger number of suspended addresses than in all other villages and towns in the whole of Serbia. It is evident from this that the area is being targeted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and that the policy of deleting residences is directed against the population, whose members do not stay in their homes during the week because they work in Kosovo."¹¹¹ Arifi points out that everyone knows about this problem –

109 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

110 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

111 <https://www.slobodnaevropa>.

the Government, the International Community, the Government of Kosovo and the EU – because they presented this problem to everyone, but, as he points out, “a solution needs to be found” and expects that this problem will be “part of the negotiations”.¹¹²

Dr. Flora Ferati-Sachsenmaier, a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, estimates that “this removal is systematic, politically motivated and accomplished by abusing the Law on the Residence of Citizens, which Serbia adopted in 2011. Known also as the ‘passivation of residential addresses’, this discriminatory measure is disproportionately applied against the Albanian minority in Serbia, particularly in the three municipalities where Albanians vastly outnumber ethnic Serbs.”¹¹³

According to the Law on Residence of Citizens in Serbia, Article 18 provides the legal basis for the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia to check whether a citizen is living at the officially marked address of residence. The law is somewhat vague regarding the justification of the control of permanent residence, but the consequences are clear if a citizen does not prove that he/she is living at the registered address. Police visits to verify residential addresses are usually unannounced, and if they conclude during such visits that the citizen no longer lives there, they automatically “passivize” that address. There have been cases of passivation without any control on the ground, but this is carried out arbitrarily. Hence, the passivation of residences of citizens who live at the given addresses is also possible.¹¹⁴

org/a/%C5%A1%C4%87iprim-arifi-politika-brisanja-prebivali%C5%A1ta-albancima-u-srbiji-moralni-zlo%C4%8Din/31069346.html.

112 Ibid.

113 *<https://exit.al/en/2020/05/10/serbia-is-depopulating-albanians-in-the-presevo-valley-at-alarming-levels/>*

114 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

When the permanent residential address is “passivized” and removed from the registry book in Serbia, that person virtually ceases to exist. They cannot renew their expired ID card or passport, register a car, have access to healthcare or social services, buy or sell property, or vote in local or general elections. The village of Tupale, for example, is the largest constituency in the municipality of Medveđa. In 2015, there were 1,086 voters, while in the 2019 elections, that number was reduced to 307.¹¹⁵

Once the permanent address is “passivized” and the information is entered in the Civil Records registry, “passivized” citizens are considered to no longer be residing in Serbia. The Civil Records registry then forwards this information to the Election Commission of the Republic of Serbia, the institution responsible for generating electoral lists, which then deletes all “passivized Albanians” from the electoral lists. This step completes the process of transforming domestic Albanian citizens into foreign citizens.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs does not issue a written decision that the address of an Albanian has been deactivated. In most cases, the information is given orally, or placed on a bulletin board, making it virtually impossible for Albanians to initiate legal proceedings. The deadline for appeal is 8 days. Most learn without warning that they have been “passivized”, usually when they needed medical care, when they renewed their ID card or passport, or when paying property taxes. “Passivized” citizens have the possibility of complaining to the Police Directorate – Department for Administrative Affairs in Belgrade. It can happen, however, that the Directorate responds positively to the complaint, but that the local police avoids enforcing the decision on registering the residence. (Interlocutors of the HC in Medveđa).¹¹⁶

115 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

116 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

According to people interviewed by the HC's, "passivized" citizens also have problems with Interpol. In fact, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia sends information about invalid documents to Interpol, which prevents citizens from coming to Serbia, and Interpol deports them to Kosovo. The problem is that the Albanians whose address have been passivized are not informed about it, and they usually find out only at the border that their documents are invalid.

The confession of an Albanian man from Medveđa that he recorded (AFEDS)¹¹⁷ is typical of many cases:

I started renovating my house this year. They turned off my electricity 10 years ago and they are not coming to install it again. When I go to complain, I have to deal with the whole process of 'passivation'. As I no longer have valid documents or an active permanent address, there is nothing I can do about it. We are under constant pressure.

My wife is an Albanian from Kosovo, and all three of my girls were born in Prishtina. I work there on certain days of the week, because I could never find a job in Serbia. However, I never managed to get any document for my Kosovo Albanian wife or for my three daughters. As a result of passivation, I was forced to find a different residence in Kosovo (more precisely in Kosovo Polje). He also states that there is no institution to which an appeal can be filed. No institution takes into account the complaints of Albanians. The entire state apparatus is working together to remove the last remaining Albanians in Serbia, from areas where they have lived for centuries. My family line comes from my great-grandfather from Medveđa, and today I am not sure whether my daughters will be able to claim my property in Medveđa.

117 Albanian Forum for Economic Development in Serbia (AFEDS). Survey with the Passivized Albanians in Serbia: the Case of Medveđa, 2020–2021.

Another testimony is symptomatic:

I had a meeting with my doctor at the main clinic in Medveđa. I had to do a blood test that day, which means I had an appointment. Later, when I returned home, my neighbor told me that while I was visiting the doctor, the police came and inquired about me. I would like to emphasize that at that time I still had a valid ID card and passport. After they passivized me, Serbian state authorities deleted me from the list of voters. So, they took away my fundamental political right – the right to vote. In the meantime, my passport expired and the authorities refused to issue me a new one. They refused to issue me a travel document at this age. I am 75 years old and in poor health. I'm afraid that if I can't renew my ID, if this happens, I will not be able to receive a pension in the future. Without a valid ID card, one cannot receive a pension from the appropriate institutions in Serbia.¹¹⁸

Third testimony:

I found out that I was passivized when I personally went to the Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia in Medveđa to renew my passport. They told me “your address has been passivized”, but they refused to give me any written statement, in spite of my insistence. From (kkk 2019 to kkk 2019), the period during which I knew for sure that I had been passivized, I submitted a request for the reactivation of my permanent address. Chief of Police Saša Jakšić insisted that there was only one way: instead of filing a complaint, he said that I should fill out a form and pay a certain tax, and that they would return my address after the local elections. District police officer Danilo Doderović told me the exact same thing. He later spoke to his colleague Saša Jakšić, and since they both knew me well personally and professionally, they

118 Statement given to AFEDS.

just wanted to show good will or find a way for me to leave their office. I didn't leave their office until I got an answer. That's when I started legal proceedings. As part of my appeal, I submitted a request for the reactivation of the address, proof of inheritance with my father's name, proof of regular payment of electricity bills, proof of residence in Switzerland and that they had issued me a passport twice at the Serbian Embassy in Bern, Switzerland. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia asked me to stay at home for 4 weeks, allegedly to check if I really live at that address. I did that from July to August 2019 (a period of isolation that resulted in financial, professional and family expenses), just so I could get my permanent address back. I have a valid ID card that will expire in 2025, but I no longer have a passport due to the passivation.¹¹⁹

Fourth testimony:

I went to renew my passport in Medveda, and an officer working at the local police station told me that my address had been passivized. There was nothing I could do because I was not informed about what I needed to do in order to activate my address. Passivation of an address represents, above all, selective and collective discrimination of the Albanian minority in Serbia. In this context, this violates our basic rights and freedoms, such as the right to access and receive public services, equality with the majority population, the right to preserve identity and maintain a connection with cultural and spiritual heritage, the right to access and use property, etc. At the same time, the passivation of my permanent address deprives me of my freedom of movement in the country in which I was born and raised and where the graves of my ancestors are still located. In addition, passivation deprived me of my right to vote, and with it the right to elect my political representatives at

¹¹⁹ Statement given to AFEDS.

the local and parliamentary/state level. As a result, no one can represent my interests as a member of the indigenous minority in municipal or parliamentary assemblies.¹²⁰

There are numerous other testimonies that point to the systematic discrimination against Albanians in order to reduce their numbers in Southern Serbia. This form of discrimination against Albanians in Medveđa has led to a serious crisis in the Albanian community: all of this increases the feeling of personal insecurity. One of the consequences of passivation may be the loss of the right to bilingualism in a municipality, if the number of Albanians living in it falls below 15 percent. Passivation has intensified since 2016, when the topic of the partition of Kosovo, i.e. the exchange of territories, was imposed.¹²¹

Also indicative is the behavior of the police, which, according to the citizens of Medveđa, on the order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) of Serbia, is more frequently calling in citizens of Albanian nationality for questioning. In this way, the Ministry of Internal Affairs checks the place of residence of those who are temporarily working abroad. According to the information forwarded to the HC, about 1,000 citizens were called in for questioning and everyone was ordered to register their residence within eight days.¹²² These actions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs take place prior to elections, which raises doubts about possible manipulation of voter lists. Albanians have also complained that the Ministry of Internal Affairs, based on a subjective assessment, determines whether a party intends to live at a certain address.

Albanians working in Medveđa do not want to speak out about their addresses having been passivized, because they are afraid that they will lose their jobs.

120 Ibid.

121 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

122 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

During the previous elections, many Albanians were barred from entering the country and thus denied the right to vote. On 23 July, 2015, Ramadan Jakupi, a resident of Medveđa of Albanian nationality, went to the local police station to get a new ID card. He then learned that, according to police records, he was not in fact a resident at the address where he had spent most of his life and where he still lives today.¹²³

According to the testimony of Jakupi himself, the officers of the Medveđa police station told him that an inspection of the central records of that police station found that the address in his old ID card was allegedly fictitious, which is why his residence was taken away and why he will not be issued a new ID card. When he asked how it was possible to take away his residence at the address where he has lived all his life and from which he had never, even temporarily, moved, the police officers from Medveđa answered that it was possible that it was a mistake, but that the burden of proving that error was on him, as he is the injured party.¹²⁴

Zeqir Simani (78) from the village of Tupale in the municipality of Medveđa committed suicide after Serbian police illegally deprived him of his Serbian citizenship, and thus his right to a pension, which he had acquired in Serbia. With his desperate act, Simani once again drew attention to the problem of the erased citizens of Medveđa of Albanian ethnicity, whose residences and citizenships were taken away after the security forces of the Milošević regime expelled them from that area in the summer of 1999.¹²⁵

123 <http://www.e-novine.com/srbija/vesti/124612-Nastavak-terora-odmetnutih-dravnih-struktura.html>.

124 Ibid.

125 <http://www.e-novine.com/srbija/vesti/122628-smrt-zbog-oduzetog-dravljanstva.html>.

Simani's residence and citizenship were taken away during his recent short-term hospital treatment in Prishtina, where his sons are also living, having also fled Medveđa due to the terror of Milosevic's security forces after the end of the 1999 war and the withdrawal of military police forces from Kosovo.

Considering that the deprivation of citizenship entailed the suspension of his right to a pension realized in Serbia, Simani felt that his only alternative was to take his own life.¹²⁶

The regime did everything to ensure a convincing victory at the local elections in Medveđa in 2019, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). After the election results were announced, Nebojša Stefanović, then Minister of Internal Affairs, stated: "It turns out that Medveđa is a Serbian municipality, that it is in Serbia and that Serbian national interests have been protected."¹²⁷ The importance given to the local elections in Medveđa can be seen by the fact that President Vučić personally attended the pre-election rally, during which he stated: "This was and will be Serbia" and announced that a lot of money would be invested in the local self-government for infrastructure, construction of water supply and sewerage, as well as local roads.¹²⁸ People interviewed by the HC have said that the President of Serbia is not interested in Albanians in Medveđa and that he only mentions Albanians in Bujanovac.

The Movement for the Development of Medveđa demanded the annulment of the elections, because residents testified that black SUVs and cars without license plates had been circulating around town, which was confirmed by MP

126 Ibid.

127 <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/srbija/1930779/lokalni-izbori-sns-ubedljiv-u-medvedi>.

128 <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/uzivo-video-vucic-stigao-u-leskovac-na-stadionu-ga-sacekao-ogroman-transparent-2019-09-03>.

Dragan Šormaz, who said that these were SNS officials working like a machine and “crushing the opposition”.¹²⁹

Vjosa Osmani, the current President of Kosovo, said in 2020 that “the systematic reduction of the Albanian population in Medveđa is no accident” and that due to “the denial of basic human rights to language, education, the right to work and constant pressure from the Serbian regime, without the right to complain”, Albanians were forced to seek better living conditions for their families.¹³⁰

After a meeting with Kosovo Minister of Internal Affairs Xhelal Sfeçla, President of the Albanian National Minority Council (NSA) Ragmi Mustafa stated that “Kosovo should take responsibility and institutional care for Albanians in the Preševo Valley.”¹³¹

Nenad Mitrović, MP from Bujanovac, shifts the responsibility for the passivation of residences in Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa to the Albanians, because they did not want to participate in the regular census in 2011.¹³² He stated that international experts estimated that there are 38,300 residents in Bujanovac, 28,000 in Preševo, and in 7,800 in Medveđa. “At the same time, we have 43,000 voters registered in the voter list of the municipality of Bujanovac, and 41,000 in Preševo.”¹³³

129 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Konacni-rezultati-u-Medvedi-Koalicija-oko-SNS-moze-sama-da-formira-vlast.sr.html>.

130 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/osmani-optuzila-srbiju-za-etnicko-ciscenje-albanaca-u-medvedi-bujanovcu-i-presevu/rre3r9j>.

131 <https://bujanovacke.co.rs/2021/04/08/mustafa-kosovo-treba-da-brine-o-nama/>

132 <https://bujanovacke.co.rs/2021/03/31/mitrovic-u-skupstini-albanci-bojkotovali-popis-a-sada-se-zale-na-pasivizaciju-adresa/>

133 Ibid.

The Serbian side claims through the local media that Albanians have been trying for years to gain ownership of land in Southern Serbia, in order to more easily implement their “extermination” ideologies and have an advantage over the Serb population in the region. It is pointed out that the Serbian population is affected by Albanian immigrants who are trying to turn those places into their “mahalas” and centers through which they will then spread the idea of “Greater Albania”.¹³⁴

Opposition councilor in the Leskovac city assembly, Nenad Zdravković, expressed his fear that Albanians would quickly start buying properties and building houses in Oruglica, a village on the territory of Leskovac near the border with Kosovo: “They will build houses for us on the border in Oruglica ...! And that is why the budget of Leskovac must always plan ahead regarding this issue, because we are facing a serious problem.”¹³⁵ Goran Cvetanović, on the other hand, points out that Albanians from Kosovo are already buying plots on the border between Medveđa and Lebane, in order to build mosques on them.¹³⁶ Such statements by Serbian politicians, which spread fear due to the alleged purchase of land by Albanians, influence the arousal of hostility towards the Albanian community in Serbia.

THE ACTIONS OF THE SERBIAN RIGHT

The Serbian Right party, led by Miša Vacić, became abruptly active in Southern Serbia after local elections were scheduled in Medveđa (2019). It came to power in several municipalities in Southern Serbia, such as Medveđa, Vranje and Niška Banja, and in addition to Bujanovac, the party also formed committees in Lebane, Bojnik, Svrljig and the Niš municipalities of Pantelej, Mediana and the Crveni krst.

134 <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/jug-srbije-na-vecitom-udaru-albanaca-vijore-se-zastave-gradi-dzamija-i-sve-pred-vratima-srpskog-2020-08-28>.

135 <https://jugmedia.rs/o-kosovu-i-u-leskovackoj-skupstini-mi-smo-sledeci-albanci-vec-kupuju-parcele-u-lebanu-da-grade-dzamije/>

136 Ibid.

For more than ten years, Miša Vacić has been associated with various extremist organizations whose activities border on fascism. Since returning to Serbia from Germany “for patriotic reasons” in 2004, Vacić has often had problems with the law, and has been convicted in court.¹³⁷

The rhetoric of the leader of the Serbian Right Miša Vacić during the election campaign was aimed at intimidating Albanians in this region. Vacić brought unrest among the citizens of Southern Serbia, as Shaip Kamberi points out, and fear was caused by the possibility that the state was behind this ultra-right figure.¹³⁸ Vacić threatened to expel local Serbs in power in Bujanovac, advertised himself as a “cure for traitors” in Svrlijig, and in Šabac he spoke of drowning his political opponents.¹³⁹ He called the media that reported Kamberi’s statement anti-Serbian, labelled some Serbian citizens as chauvinists, and told Kamberi that the Albanians who support him wear uniforms of the “terrorist” UÇPMB. He added that the only people who could believe their manipulations are politically small-minded Serbian mercenaries, and they the Serbian Right will be their eternal enemies. “And when we become part of the government,” as he pointed out,

137 In 2013, Vacić was sentenced to a one-year suspended sentence for three criminal offenses: spreading discrimination against the LGBT population, illegal possession of weapons and obstruction of performance of public duty. Although his suspended sentence had not yet expired, the Serbian government offered him a job in the Office for Kosovo and Metohija. The public found out about this during 2017, when a proud Miša was among the passengers in the icon-painted train, when he was handing out to his companions and journalists business cards, where it was inscribed that he was employed as an advisor in the Office for Kosovo and Metohija.

138 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Strah-na-jugu-da-je-Vacic-projekat-drzave-SNS-negira-vezu-sa-Srpskom-desnicom.sr.html>.

139 Ibid.

“we will fight for the complete destruction of international Islamic terrorism, along with our allies from the East and the West.”¹⁴⁰

Due to his inflammatory statements, the Prosecutor’s Office in Vranje initiated proceedings against him, which Vacić called “idiotic”, and said it was political pressure against him and the Serbian people in Bujanovac, but also in Serbia.¹⁴¹

Shaip Kamberi points out that the extremists, even though they are on the political margins, were sent on the orders of one part of the authorities. “It is a bad message that is being sent to all citizens of Bujanovac.” As he says, he understood the message of the Serbian Right as if it were coming from Aleksandar Vučić. “Wherever the SNS is not in power, they are attempting to come to power by any means necessary, even if that means creating a new conflict between Serbs and Albanians here.”¹⁴²

CENSUS

The behavior of the Government of Serbia towards the Albanians in Southern Serbia (primarily due to the passivation of residences) calls into question their participation in the upcoming census, and in turn its validity. People interviewed by the HC have said that, if the situation persists, they will not participate in the census.

Albanians did not participate in the 1991 census. However, the Albanian community did participate in the 2002 census, which enabled Albanians to integrate proportionately into local government structures in Bujanovac. The Albanian

140 Ibid.

141 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Hronika/Tuzilastvo-trazi-od-policije-da-obavi-razgovor-sa-Vacicem-zbog-pretnji-u-Bujanovcu.sr.html>.

142 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a547948-kamberi-poruku-srpske-desnice-u-bujanovcu-shvatio-sam-kao-poruku-vucica/>.

community boycotted the 2011 census again. According to the 2011 census, there are officially 5,805 Albanians in the three municipalities.

According to the President of the Albanian National Minority Council Ragmi Mustafa, the Albanian community receives a budget for about 5,000 Albanians, while it is estimated that there are 52,000 of them.¹⁴³

After the population estimate following the 2011 census, international experts came out with statistics that determine the number of citizens in Southern Serbia. According to the data, 38,300 people live in Bujanovac, 29,650 in Preševo and 7,442 in Medveđa. The President of the Coordinating Body, Zoran Stanković, points out that these numbers are very close to the estimates of the state authorities of Serbia. Albanians believe that the numbers are higher and that there are about 25,000 more.

ASSOCIATION OF ALBANIAN MUNICIPALITIES

During its internal elections, the Albanian National Minority Council announced that it would advocate for the establishment of an association of Albanian municipalities. Albanians in Southern Serbia are seeking the same rights as Serbs in Northern Kosovo. This initiative has not been met with approval from official Belgrade. The proclamation of an association of Albanian municipalities was not supported by all Albanians or all Albanian parties.

A poor economic situation, constant police surveillance of the Albanian population, an inability to display national symbols, not permitting the use of the Albanian language in judicial and other institutions at the state level – these are all reasons, as Bujanovac Mayor Nagip Arifi points out, for which Albanian councilors from the municipalities of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac made a decision on the establishment of an association of Municipalities inhabited by

¹⁴³ Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

Albanians in the Preševo Valley. They are asking only for reciprocity, that is, “the same thing that Serbs living in Kosovo have, and what was agreed in Brussels.”¹⁴⁴

Jonuz Musliu, former President of the Municipality of Bujanovac, and Ragmi Mustafa, Mayor of Preševo, claim to have the support of “Tirana and Prishtina” for the act. Neither Prishtina nor Tirana have denied this. During his visit to Serbia on the way through Bujanovac and Preševo (2014), Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama stated that Albanians in the Preševo Valley should have the same rights as Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, including the political framework of the Association of Serb Municipalities, established by the Brussels Agreement.¹⁴⁵ There has also been no reaction from the Western community thus far.

Belgrade fears that this could put additional geopolitical pressure on finally resolving the Kosovo question in line with a full acceptance of “reality”, i.e. as a condition for the final recognition of Serbia’s borders.¹⁴⁶ Milovan Drecun, Chairman of the Committee on Kosovo-Metohija, believes that the formation of an association of Albanian municipalities is extreme and unacceptable and that no parallel can be drawn with the Association of Serb Municipalities. He points out that the main goal is the implementation of the Brussels Agreement.¹⁴⁷ During his tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić warned Albanians in Preševo against drawing any parallels with the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo and Metohija and told them not to play with fire and to respect the Constitution and abide by the legal system of the Republic of Serbia.¹⁴⁸

144 <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/albanci-presevske-doline-zrtve-pristine-i-beograda>.

145 <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/338540/Zasto-Zapad-cuti-o-ZAO>.

146 Ibid.

147 <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Politika/2034557/Drecun%3A+Neprihvatljivo+formiranje+zajednice+albanskih+op%C5%A1tina+.html>.

148 <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Politika/2034433/Da%C4%8Di%C4%87%3A+Upozoravam+Albance+sa+juga+da+se+ne+igraju+vatrom.html>.

THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

With the disintegration of the SFR Yugoslavia, the once unified Islamic community in Yugoslavia turned into several independent Islamic communities. The Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia consists of four organizational units: the Mufti of Sandžak (Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Rožaje, Bijelo Polje, Prijepolje, Priboj, Nova Varoš, Petnjica and Berane, Plav, Gusinje), the Mufti of Preševo (Preševo, Bujanovac, Medveđa), the Mufti of Belgrade (Zemun, Niš, Smederevo, Loznica, Krupanj, Kostolac) and the Mufti of Novi Sad (Novi Sad, Beočin, Subotica, Zrenjanin).

Muslims in the municipalities of Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa, among which, in addition to the majority comprised of Albanians, there is also a significant Roma community, have been organized since 1971 as the Council of the Islamic Community of Kosovo for Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa. However, in 2003, the independent Islamic Community of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa was established, which operates independently of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Kosovo and was registered with the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Serbia. The Council of the Islamic Community of Kosovo for Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa joined the Islamic Community in Serbia, headquartered in Novi Pazar, while the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa is part of the Islamic Community of Serbia, headquartered in Belgrade.¹⁴⁹

The influence on 60 mosques with about 70 imams in Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa is divided between Prishtina, Novi Pazar, Belgrade and Riyadh. Thus, the influence of the Islamic community is quite limited and insignificant. Despite the fact that Albanians have not “exported terrorism” to Serbia during or after the Kosovo crisis, any increase in tensions in the region has been accompanied by speculation about a “terrorist threat”.

The “terrorist threat” is mostly talked about by certain military commentators and security experts, who thus create a stereotype about Albanian terrorists and

149 https://ifdt.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Srdjan_Barasic-2-2008.pdf.

mafia members. In essence, this constantly justifies state repression of Albanians before the intervention, and indicates that they are still a potential danger. This particularly refers to the period when Wahhabis began to appear in the region and the departure of some of them to the front in Syria. Several young men from these three municipalities also went to the front. Albanians are reluctant to talk about it and it is believed that Wahhabi cells no longer exist and that the police have reliable information in that regard.¹⁵⁰

When Serbian politicians like Nebojša Stefanović, the former Minister of Internal Affairs, visit the region, they often point out that “given the complex multiethnic environment, the region is at risk of potential extremism and organized crime, and there are always potential threats of terrorism and extremism”.¹⁵¹

A memorial complex is being built for Ridvan Qazimi, better known as Commander Lleshi, one of the commanders of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa (killed in 2001). The initiators of the construction of the complex are his family and the Association of War Veterans of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa. There is already a museum room within the local stadium in Veliki Trnovac dedicated to Qazimi, and the grave is located at the place of his death, where former members of the UÇPMB gather on the anniversary of his murder as part of the “Commander Lleshi’s Days” event.¹⁵² Nenad Mitrović, councilor in the Municipal Assembly of Bujanovac and MP in the Assembly of Serbia, says that the construction of this complex is a deliberate provocation by Albanians from Southern Serbia, the aim of which is to raise tensions.¹⁵³

150 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

151 <https://bujanovacke.co.rs/2019/09/28/ministar-stefanovic-jug-srbije-je-stalno-izlozen-pretnjama-od-terorizma/>.

152 <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/drustvo/u-srbiji-dizu-spomenik-vodi-ovk-terorista/404611/vest>.

153 Ibid.

VELIKI TRNOVAC



Veliki Trnovac is often mentioned as a “notorious” place without convincing evidence, but it feeds the stereotype of Albanians as a mafia that controls organized crime in the region. Serbian media have been reporting for years that Veliki Trnovac was the center of drug distribution throughout the Balkans. According to the media, it is believed that at least 6,000 Albanians in this place are involved in drug smuggling, and that they have between 1.5 and 3 tons of marijuana and heroin “in stock” at any given time. According to the same estimates, they sell up to 60 tons of drugs per year. Apparently, all the world’s police know what is happening in this place, but cannot act on it.¹⁵⁴

Alluding to that very stereotype, Dragan Marković Palma told the National Assembly of Serbia on 11 February, 2021 that the police should “deal with Trnovac”. Shaip Kamberi, who asked for the right to reply, but did not get the floor, sent a letter to the President of the National Assembly, pointing to “an attempt to criminalize as many as 10,000 inhabitants of Veliki Trnovac”.¹⁵⁵

The constant presence of the police and the army in Trnovac is noticeable. Many of the people interviewed have pointed out that there are no indications of “significant problems” that differ from any other place. Also, prosecutors covering these municipalities have not had significant cases related to organized crime. The claim that there are drug depots is unrealistic given the presence of the police. It is possible, as they claim, that there is transit, though this in no way implies that the residents of Trnovac are criminals.¹⁵⁶

According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the Western Balkans is a crossroads of trade in many illegal goods and is a

154 <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/860564-narko-raj-usred-srbije-zasto-je-veliki-trnovac-decenijama-drzava-u-drzavi>

155 The Helsinki Committee had insight into the letter of Shaip Kamberi sent to the National Assembly on 11 February, 2021.

156 From an interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

geographical hub for smuggling migrants trying to enter Western Europe.¹⁵⁷ This mostly involves transit. However, people interviewed by the Helsinki Committee point out that prosecutors and judges (of the misdemeanor court) in this region do not have a significant number of cases – apart from those related to the E75 highway and border crossings. This also refers to the reports of various media in Serbia, which regularly and systematically exaggerate the scale of organized crime in this region. No cases of shooting at the police by drug gangs or smugglers (who are certainly hiding from the authorities and the police) have been reported. One case was reported, but not in Albanian municipalities but in a neighboring district.¹⁵⁸

In its report “Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the impact of terrorism”, the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) states that Croatia, Kosovo and Slovenia, along with Iceland, Portugal and Romania, are the best ranked countries in Europe and among the safest countries in the world, where the impact of terrorism is minimal. They are followed by Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania.¹⁵⁹

157 <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/western-balkans-crime-hotspots-3/>

158 Interview conducted by the Helsinki Committee.

159 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/u-bih-najve%C4%87i-pad-teroristi%C4%8Dkog-utjecaja-kosovo-me%C4%91u-najsigurnijim-na-svijetu/30980157.html>.

