

**Forum:** Historical Security Council

**Issue:** The situation in Southern Serbia: Responding to the Preševo Valley Crisis and preventing escalation of ethnic violence - March 2002

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## Introduction

Following 10 June 1999, peace was expected within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Kumanovo Agreement had been signed, marking the end of the Kosovo War. A component of the agreement was a 5-kilometer-wide safety zone, known as the Ground Safety Zone (GSZ), surrounding the Kosovo-Serbia border. Although intended to act as a buffer zone and stabilizing measure, the GSZ was soon used by Albanian guerrilla groups to attack Serbian forces. This fighting erupted shortly after this agreement, marking the beginning of the current crisis in the Preševo Valley.

The Preševo Valley first became a part of Serbia after the First Balkan War in 1913. Although administratively unified for almost a century, its predominantly Albanian population maintained strong cultural and political ties with the autonomous state of Kosovo, setting the stage for later conflict. Within the Preševo Valley, there are 3 municipalities, Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa. Each of these municipalities contains a significant Albanian population: 95% in Preševo, 63% in Bujanovac and 26% in Medveđa. Ethnic tensions between the Serbian government and the Albanian-majority population in the valley were a root cause of the conflict.

On 1-2 March 1992, in the midst of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Preševo Valley held a referendum. In it, 97% of the population expressed support for autonomy and the possibility of joining Kosovo. This referendum was short lived, being rejected and deemed illegal by the Serbian government.

These unresolved grievances and ethnic marginalisation culminated in the formation of an armed resistance group known as the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac (UÇPMB). The UÇPMB drew many of its fighters from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), an ethnic Albanian guerrilla group that fought Serbian forces in Kosovo during the 1998–1999 war. The UÇPMB continued the struggle for Albanian rights and autonomy in the Preševo Valley, with the ultimate goal of secession of the three municipalities from Serbia and an annexation to Kosovo.

On 21 November 1999, the first fatalities were attributed to the UÇPMB, when two Serbian policemen were killed by a landmine. Serbian forces responded by attacks, increasing patrols, and establishing more checkpoints. Throughout 1999, fighting did not include open conflict. Instead, UÇPMB fighters launched sporadic mortar attacks within the Ground Safety Zone, preventing Serbs from responding.

In 2000, the conflict escalated. The UÇPMB increased their guerrilla attacks against Serbian police, checkpoints, and villages, ultimately forcing many civilians to flee into Kosovo. The UÇPMB's growing strength led to intensified fighting near Bujanovac and surrounding villages in July and November, prompting intervention by KFOR, a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo, and by the GSZ in hopes of mediating a ceasefire and securing the GSZ.

The climax of fighting occurred on 5 February, 2001, when the Yugoslav Army and UÇPMB exchanged heavy fire across the GSZ for several hours. Guerrilla attacks from the UÇPMB continued in the following weeks, leading KFOR on 7 March 2001 to approve a phased re-entry of Yugoslav forces to begin reoccupying the GSZ, sector by sector. This reoccupation eventually led to the signing of the Končulj Agreement on 21 May, 2001. Fighting still continued, until the last section of the GSZ was reoccupied near Preševo. On 24 May, the Serbian army re-entered the town. While these forces were not welcomed, they

were also not met by active attacks. Consequently, the Serb forces were able to regain control and the UÇPMB agreed to disarm, effectively bringing an end to the armed conflict in the Preševo Valley.

It is now March 2002, and the Preševo Valley has remained largely peaceful since May 2001. The Serbian government is in the process of reasserting its authority, while ethnic Albanians are being integrated into local political structures. This situation is now before the Security Council to ensure that further measures are taken to meet the needs of both the Serbian government and ethnic Albanian population of the Preševo Valley.

During the height of the crisis, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) warned that this conflict had the potential of triggering “ethnic cleansing” of Albanians in the Preševo Valley by forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Although the armed conflict has subsided, the potential for ethnic violence is still very present. It is therefore the responsibility of the Security Council to develop strategies to prevent the escalation of ethnic violence, promote long-term stability, and ensure protection of all communities within the region.



*Maps of the Ground Safety Zone with the Preševo Valley highlighted*

## Definition of Key Terms

### Preševo Valley

Acquired by Serbia during the First Balkan War in 1913, the Preševo Valley includes the three municipalities of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanova. This region is home to a large ethnic Albanian population, which has contributed to longstanding tensions and conflicts between the Serbian

government and ethnic Albanians. The Preševo Valley Crisis occurs within this area.

### Kumanovo Agreement

The Kumanovo Agreement ended the Kosovo War (1998-1999). Signed on 9 June 1999, it established the terms for Yugoslav forces to withdraw. Furthermore, it authorized the KFOR to be deployed in order to ensure security and to provide the framework for UN administration of the region. It established two zones surrounding Kosovo's border: a 25-kilometer Air Safety Zone and a 5-kilometer Ground Safety Zone.

### Ground Safety Zone (GSZ)

Included in the Kumanovo Agreement, the Ground Safety Zone was a KFOR-run zone surrounding Kosovo's border to ensure that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's (FRY) forces would not enter without permission. The Ground Safety Zone included parts of the Preševo Valley, where the UÇPMB carried out most of its attacks.

### Končulj Agreement

The Končulj Agreement, also known as the Demilitarization Statement, marked the official end of the Preševo Valley Crisis in May 2001. It was supported by representatives of local Albanians, Serbia, and Kosovo. The Agreement called for the disarmament of the UCPMB and for integration of ethnic Albanians into political, civic, police, and economic institutions within southern Serbia.

### Čović Plan

The Čović Plan was introduced in February 2001 by Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic. It proposed a resolution to the Preševo Valley Crisis, ultimately becoming a backbone of the Končulj Agreement. It did not provide the Preševo Valley with autonomy or a change in borders, but it emphasized the need to end discrimination against ethnic Albanians through integration into Serbian institutions.

## Background Information

The Balkan Wars began long before the Preševo Valley Crisis. Following World War II, Josip Broz Tito consolidated control over the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, first as Prime Minister and head of state, then as President from 1953 until his death in 1980. Within Yugoslavia, there was a federation of six nominally equal republics: Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia. Serbia included two autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina. Tito held power firmly over these six provinces, with the ability to balance regional interest, and he was able to keep the Soviet Union at arm's length, thus preventing the USSR from exerting excessive influence or control.

After Tito's death in 1980, Yugoslavia entered a period of political instability. Without a strong successor, Yugoslavia shifted to a rotating collective presidency representing the republics and autonomous

provinces. This system struggled to manage the rising economic difficulties, the deepening political divisions and increasing aggressive waves of nationalist sentiment from different ethnic groups. Eventually, these pressures led to the breakup of Yugoslavia.

On 25 June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their secession from the Yugoslav federation. These secessions were considered unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Yugoslavia, resulting in armed conflict. Slovenia experienced a brief “Ten-Day War” with the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), while the Croatian War of Independence, fought between Croatian force, the JNA, and Serb militias, lasted from 1991-1995 and significant civilian displacement of civilians as well as ethnic cleansing.

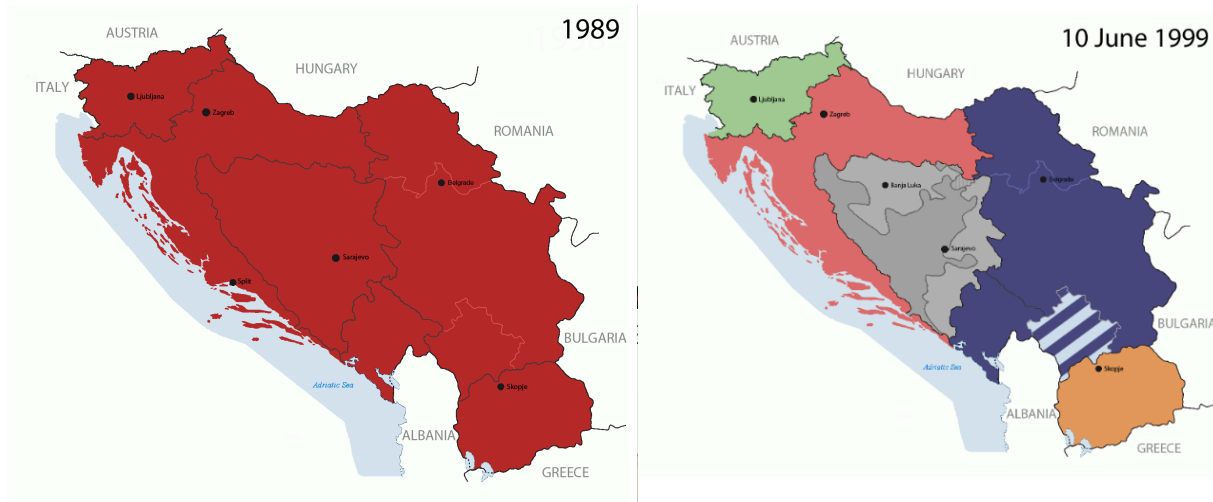
Ethnic Cleansing was a large issue within Bosnia and Herzegovina due to its mixed ethnic demographic structure, including Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. On 3 March 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence. International recognition occurred on 6 April 1992. That same day, the Bosnian War began. The war lasted until 14 December 1995, being the deadliest out of all the Balkan Wars, with over 100,000 deaths. Macedonia was the final nation in the 1990s to declare independence from Yugoslavia on 25 September 1991. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at this point was in shambles, leading to the shift of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including Montenegro, Serbia, and the two autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina.

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia still included unresolved ethnic and political tensions, especially in the province of Kosovo. Kosovo had an autonomous status under the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution which gave the ethnic Albanians within Kosovo political, cultural, and administrative authority. In 1989, after Tito’s death, Slobodan Milošević revoked Kosovo’s autonomy, replacing Albanian officials with Serbian administrators. A discriminatory cultural policy was enforced favouring Serbian traditions, and Albanian-language schools were suppressed. In response, Kosovo Albanians initially expressed nonviolent resistance by creating parallel governments, education and health institutions. This led to an increase of Serbian security structures in Kosovo. Albanians were fired from state-run institutions, and repression of ethnic Albanians intensified.

This oppression throughout the 1990s led to the emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), an ethnic Albanian separatist militia fighting for the separation of Kosovo from Serbia. War erupted in 1998 between the KLA and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’s Army. Throughout 1998, the KLA expanded its operations across Kosovo, using guerrilla tactics against Yugoslav and Serbian forces, with Yugoslav and Serbian forces responding with repeated offensives. The growing number of casualties and large civilian displacement drew international attention and NATO issued warnings of potential military intervention if hostilities continued. Following the Račak massacre in January 1999, in which 45 Kosovan Albanians were killed, NATO launched an air campaign. The conflict came to an end in June 1999 when NATO airstrikes and diplomatic pressure forced Yugoslav forces to withdraw, leading to the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement.

After the war, many former KLA fighters later crossed into southern Serbia, particularly the Preševo Valley, where they formed the UÇPMB. Their aim was to continue the fight for Albanian autonomy within the

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.



*Maps of the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia and Its Post-Breakup Successor States*

## Major Parties Involved

### Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac (UÇPMB):

The Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac was the primary armed group opposing the Serbian government during the Preševo Valley Crisis. The goal of the UÇPMB was to secure autonomy for the Preševo Valley and the right for the region to join the Republic of Kosova. The group originates from Dobrosin, a village within the borders of the GSZ, and was largely composed of local ethnic Albanians, including veterans and former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army. The UÇPMB played a large role in the Preševo Valley Crisis. They employed guerrilla tactics, including ambushes, mortar attacks, and landmines, to primarily target Serbian police and military force. UÇPMB had units operating in the three municipalities of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac. The UÇPMB remained active until the signing of the Končulj Agreement in 2001.

### Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was the main rebel group during the Kosovo War. Formed after continued discrimination towards the ethnic Albanians within Kosovo, the KLA sought the establishment of a Republic of Kosova with full autonomy and Albanian administration. Following the Kumanovo Agreement, the KLA disbanded, but many members moved to the Preševo Valley. These veterans and former members were a major part in the creation of UÇPMB. The UÇPMB was heavily influenced by the KLA, adopting their strategies and rhetoric.

### Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY)

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, consisting of Montenegro, Serbia, and the two autonomous

provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, was the primary opposition to the UÇPMB during the Preševo Valley Crisis. Led by Slobodan Milošević, the FRY deployed the Yugoslav Army and police forces to maintain control over the Preševo Valley region. To prevent the secession of the Preševo Valley to Kosovo, FRY forces conducted counter operations, including checkpoints, patrols, and occasional artillery strikes, while operating under constraints of NATO and KFOR in the GSZ. The goal of FRY was to restore authority and maintain Serbia's territorial integrity.

### Kosovo Force (KFOR)

The KFOR is a NATO-led international peacekeeping force deployed following the Kosovo War. The main responsibilities of the KFOR are to maintain security, supervise the GSZ, and prevent renewed hostilities. During the Preševo Valley Crisis, KFOR played a critical role in restoring peace by monitoring conflicts between the UÇPMB and FRY forces and negotiating ceasefires. The KFOR ensured that when the conflict intensified in 2001 and FRY forces were allowed to re-establish themselves in the DSZ, it did not lead to any further casualties. They helped stabilize the region, preventing the crisis from becoming a full-scale war.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1980	Death of Josip Broz Tito, beginning Yugoslavia's loss of central leadership and increased ethnic tensions.
1989	Slobodan Milošević revokes Kosovo's autonomy, with Albanian officials being removed from government positions.
June 25, 1991	Slovenia and Croatia declare independence, beginning the Ten-Day War in Slovenia and the Croatian War of Independence (1991-95).
March 3, 1992	Bosnia and Herzegovina declares independence, beginning the Bosnian War (1992-95) which involves large ethnic cleansing.
September 25, 1991	Macedonia declares independence
1992	Kosovo Albanians begin to engage in nonviolent resistance against Serbian control.
1996-97	KLA emerges as an armed Albanian separatist group in Kosovo
January 1998	KLA begins to clash with Yugoslav forces, ultimately marking the beginning of the Kosovo War
June 10, 1999	Kumanovo Agreement signed, KFOR peacekeepers are deployed and GSZ is established
1999	UÇPMB forms and begin attacking Serbian forces in the GSZ
November 21, 1999	First deaths caused by UÇPMB occur, marking the beginning of the Preševo Valley Crisis
February 5, 2001	UÇPMB and Yugoslav army exchange heavy fire in the GSZ



March 7, 2001	KFOR agrees to reoccupation of the GSZ by Yugoslav forces
May 21, 2001	Končulj Agreement signed and UÇPMB agrees to disarm
May 24, 2001	Serbian forces re-enter Preševo, officially ending the UÇPMB attacks
March 2002	The region is largely peaceful with the Serbian government reasserting authority. Ethnic Albanians have been integrated into politics and other parts of society.

## Previous and Possible Solutions

### Končulj Agreement and Kumanovo Agreement

The Kumanovo Agreement, signed in June 1999, ended the Kosovo War and required the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo. It further established the GSZ, supervised by the KFOR peacekeepers. While it temporarily stabilized the region, the buffer zone allowed UÇPMB guerrillas to operate in the Preševo Valley, revealing significant gaps in its ability to address emerging security issues.

In contrast, the Končulj Agreement that has been in effect for almost a year, has produced mostly peaceful results. Directly addressing the Preševo Valley Crisis, the Končulj Agreement required the disarmament of the UÇPMB, the cessation of attacks, and the integration of ethnic Albanians into local governance and state institutions. These past agreements demonstrate the successes and faults when regarding ethnic disputes. They emphasize that lasting peace requires not only security measures but also political and social inclusion that address the needs of minority communities.

### UN Security Council Resolution 1244

Following the end of the Kosovo War, the Security Council passed Resolution 1244 providing the legal framework for an international civil and military presence in Kosovo monitored by the UN and NATO-led KFOR command. This resolution stabilized Kosovo by removing Yugoslav forces. However, it unintentionally contributed indirectly to the conditions that led to the Preševo Valley Crisis. Similar to the Kumanovo Agreement, Resolution 1244 focused only on military and security concerns but did not address the underlying ethnic and political tensions occurring within the region. This resolution demonstrates how UN resolutions focusing narrowly on short-term stability may fall short of addressing long-term structural issues that in the long-term would be more beneficial.

### Preševo Valley Autonomy

The question of autonomy is still a large factor that needs to be addressed. One of the main aspirations of the ethnic Albanians continues to be autonomy for the Preševo Valley, something not provided within the Končulj Agreement. While full autonomy or secession may not be attainable, accommodations could be made to give the municipalities greater local governance, including



administrative powers, control over local education, language policies, cultural institutions, and more. The establishment of local councils with proportional representation of ethnic Albanians could also be a feasible approach. This would ensure that ethnic Albanians are included in decision-making processes and do not face political marginalization or forced assimilation.

Furthermore, although some Albanians want the right to join the Republic of Kosovo, shared ethnicity does not automatically justify the integration of the Preševo Valley into Kosovo. Instead, Serbia could emphasize improving relations with the Preševo Valley through the establishment of different programs, including joint economic development projects and instituting minority rights protections.

### Further Integration Efforts

Although the Končulj Agreement outlined different integration efforts for the Albanians into the Serbian government, these integration systems need to be maintained, and over time expanded. The Serbian government needs to be willing to commit to this long-term effort of successfully integrating the ethnic Albanians into society if they wish to keep the Preševo Valley. The Končulj Agreement needs to be upheld, ensuring that Albanians have representation in local administration, police forces, education systems, and public services. These efforts could be monitored by an external body, to ensure the progress of these institutions and to see how they have strengthened over time, ultimately preventing further ethnic discrimination.

Re-integration efforts need to occur following the large displacement of civilians following the Preševo Valley Crisis. Displaced families need assistance; programs for social and economic reintegration must be created, including access to education, healthcare, and jobs. Economic, social and political discrimination based on ethnicities could reignite the conflict. Measures must be implemented to ensure inclusion and equity.

### Questions to Consider

1. How can a sustainable balance be achieved between the needs of both Serbians and Albanians? How can Serbia build trust with the ethnic Albanian community while maintaining its territorial integrity?
2. What measures should be taken to address the needs of those who are affected by the crisis, especially displaced civilians seeking reintegration?
3. How should the international community address the question of autonomy for the Preševo Valley? Should the region be granted local governance, autonomy, should the terms of the Končulj Agreement remain unchanged?
4. How can we ensure that the goals set out in the Končulj Agreement - political, social, and social integration for ethnic Albanians - are fulfilled?
5. What steps can be taken to prevent former combatants—whether FRY forces or UÇPMB members—from remobilizing and destabilizing the region?

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