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A Balkan hotspot: The controversy over the UÇPMB war memorial in the Preševo Valley

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Since November 2012, Preševo Valley, an Albanian-majority area in southern Serbia, has been the epicentre of growing tension in the Western Balkans. Tensions began with the construction of a monument commemorating 27 fallen members of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (UÇPMB) - an offshoot of the Liberation Army of Kosovo (UÇK) - and were then intensified by its removal by the Serbian authorities on January 20.

In the region of the Western Balkans, conflicts over monuments and memorials are almost commonplace, as the former warring parties continue to voice opposing views on interpretations of past events and the roles of those involved – one side’s hero is the other’s villain. Thus, the UÇPMB monument built in front of Preševo’s town hall fits within this context. Serbia considers the UÇPMB terrorists and separatists, responsible for the attacks on Serbian forces in the Valley until the NATO-mediated ceasefire in 2001, as well as for the deaths of 10 civilians and 24 members of Serbian security forces. Albanians though, consider the UÇPMB heroes who have fought against Serbian repression of the local Albanian population, which greatly intensified in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict in 1999.

The Preševo monument is not the only memorial of its kind that has been constructed in this part of Serbia, but it is the first one that has received such publicity, revealing perhaps, that tensions are running high for both the Serbs and the Albanians. This recent incident re-opened old wounds in the Albanian-inhabited Preševo Valley, a part of the Western Balkans on the border with Kosovo, which continues to be a source of instability in the region.



Serbia’s anger

The Serbian authorities perceived the erection of the monument as an open provocation coming from the Albanian side due to the timing chosen for the unveiling. The construction of the memorial occurred at a time when the Albanian population in the entire region was in a mood of national euphoria over the indications that the former commander of the UÇK, Ramush Haradinaj, would be acquitted at the Hague Tribunal for crimes committed against Serbs. His acquittal was a huge insult for Serbian authorities, and thus, the simultaneous tribute to the members of the UÇK offshoot added insult to injury.

An additional aggravating factor was that a similar case had occurred in the centre of the Sandžak region, Novi Pazar, only a few months before the unveiling of the Preševo monument. In Novi Pazar, a Bosniak-majority city of Serbia, local authorities put up a memorial plaque to Aćif Efendija, who was convicted of murdering 7,000 Serbs in the Second World War and was executed in 1945. As the Serbian government had failed to act more decisively in this case,

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the Preševo Monument was an opportunity to show resolve and stop any future actions of this sort.

Most importantly, many in Serbia assumed that the monument unveiling is closely connected with the ongoing dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. Zoran Stanković, chief of the Coordinating Body for Serbia's South which includes the Preševo area, stated that “the whole monument issue was a basis for political manipulation” and represents an attempt to secure a better negotiating position in the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, because “some would like to draw parallels between that area and northern Kosovo”. Indeed, the Albanian leaders of the Preševo Valley have been watching the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, and are worried about how they might be affected if Serbs from Northern Kosovo acquire extra concessions, or even an autonomous status. What most Preševo Valley Albanians demand is that they are given the same status and rights as those who inhabit Northern Kosovo will receive. Calls for a union with Kosovo have persisted, and are sometimes linked to suggestions of a territorial swap, where the largely Serb-inhabited northern Kosovo would be exchanged for the Preševo Valley. That is why some have assumed that the amount of publicity the dispute over the monument has received is actually an attempt of the Albanian representatives to transfer the Preševo issue from the domestic to the international stage, in order to engage the United States and the EU. The Serbs and the Preševo Valley Albanians entered the new year exchanging threats – the former saying that the monument will be removed *volens nolens*, the latter threatening to take up arms if the monument is removed.

The removal of the monument

Due to the circumstances under which the monument was built, Serbians have claimed the monument was “provocative” and “controversial”. However, it is the monument’s *illegality* that has been constantly emphasized as the reason for its removal, as it was constructed without following the official procedure necessary, and acting without the competent body’s approval. ELIAMEP’s analysis of relevant legal documents demonstrates that the decision for the removal of the memorial was based on a legal technicality. According to the Law on Planning and Construction of the Republic of Serbia, the construction and subsequent removal of monuments and memorials in public places, (which are treated as small prefabricated buildings of a temporary nature) are regulated and managed by local governments. Hence, unlike the naming of streets and squares which requires approval from the relevant Ministry, in the case of building monuments or memorials, no historical assessment of the person being commemorated is necessary. It was up to the Preševo local authorities’ jurisdiction to decide to build the monument. However, the square in Preševo is treated as a spatial entity, where, in order for any works and reconstructions to be done, the consent of the Institute for Protection of Cultural Heritage, located in the southern Serbian town of Niš, must be provided. The Institute had issued the requirements for the square in Preševo where the monument was built, as well as for other monuments of historic value in the town, and stated that all further action taken had to be in accordance with the requirements and official rules for conservation. While the Preševo authorities respected the regulation during previous work on the square’s reconstruction, in the case of the monument, the local government neither consulted nor informed the Institute about its unveiling.

As the Institute is a cultural institution and does not have its own inspection services, the relevant inspection office of the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration, after it had been concluded that the proper procedure has not been followed, set a deadline of five days for the monument to be removed. Albanian representatives in the Valley have rejected the compromise proposed by the Serbian authorities which included placing the monument inside the compound of a local mosque. Notably, Preševo Mayor Ragmi Mustafa declared that since the “martyrs” are of the nation they do not belong to a religious group and their monument should not be placed in a mosque or a church. Even moderate Albanian leader Riza Halimi expressed his disappointment with the Serbian reaction. When the local government failed to comply with the inspection’s decision, Serbian authorities, helped by the gendarmerie, removed the monument themselves. The chief of the Coordinating Body for Southern Serbia, Zoran Stanković, stated that the monument will not be destroyed and will be the subject of further discussion with the local governing bodies.

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Albanian grievances

Predictably, the removal of the memorial to fallen Albanian fighters led to protests and strong reactions by local Albanians. Leading local officials in the Preševo Valley condemned the monument's removal, while thousands of Albanians took to the streets of both Preševo and Bujanovac to protest. Although Albanians in the Preševo Valley are not politically unified, they have shown readiness to unite around the issue of the Preševo memorial. After a hot debate over their reaction, with radical forces supporting more drastic measures and the moderates insisting on dialogue for the problem's solution, Albanian local leaders decided to send a request to the Ministry of Justice asking to legalize the monument. Additionally, they called on Belgrade to remove a monument of the village Lučane, which is dedicated to Serbian policemen who were killed during the conflict in 2001. As the initial tensions waned, Albanian leaders from the three municipalities in the Preševo Valley began to demand the reciprocity of rights and status between Serbs of Northern Kosovo and Albanians of the Preševo Valley. The document calls for Albanian autonomy in the spheres of judiciary, police, education and customs control in the Preševo Valley. Furthermore, they announced the construction of a new, 3,000-square-metre memorial complex dedicated to the members of the UÇPMB in the village of Oraovica.

Ethnic composition in the Preševo Valley

Preševo			Bujanovac				Medveđa				
<i>Year</i>	<i>Serbs</i>	<i>Albanians</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Serbs</i>	<i>Albanians</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Serbs</i>	<i>Albanians</i>	<i>Total</i>
<u>1981</u>	4.204	28.961	33.948	<u>1981</u>	15.914	25.848	46.689	<u>1981</u>	n/a	n/a	n/a
<u>1991</u>	3.206	34.992	38.943	<u>1991</u>	14.660	29.588	49.238	<u>1991</u>	7.205	2.832	10.367
<u>2002</u>	2.984	31.098	34.904	<u>2002</u>	14.782	23.681	43.302	<u>2002</u>	6.535	1.816	8.459
<u>2011</u>	n/a	n/a	3.066*	<u>2011</u>	n/a	n/a	18.542*	<u>2011</u>	n/a	n/a	7.292*

*Albanians boycotted the 2011 Population Census. Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia





Preševo Valley is strongly associated with Kosovo; when major crises erupt in Kosovo or uncertainties about the region's status arise, they directly affect the political and social environment in the Preševo Valley. Thus, the memorial removal created a chain reaction in Kosovo, where many monuments and objects of Serbian cultural heritage were demolished or vandalized. To ease the tensions, especially while negotiations with Belgrade were taking place, the Kosovar government condemned this action and stepped up security forces around Serbian monument areas in an effort to prevent future incidents. Although the Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci's declared that relations between Kosovo and Serbia have changed following the removal of the monument, the Kosovar leadership showed restraint. For the Kosovar government, Serbia's decision to remove the monument showed hostility towards ethnic Albanians in Preševo and lack of readiness to find a solution through dialogue. However, the Kosovar leadership has not created any unnecessary confrontations with Serbia that could affect the continuation of the dialogue. Kosovo's political elite do not want to raise the stakes in Preševo given their own statehood is not completely secured, and Priština still does not control large parts of Kosovar territory. The Kosovar government's moderate stance on the issue has disappointed ethnic Albanians in Preševo, while at the same time, has evoked a strong reaction from the opposition, who accused the government of not doing enough to protect Preševo Albanians' rights. The second largest opposition party in the country, Vetëvendosje, organized demonstrations where the protesters marched through the streets of Priština chanting "Justice for Preševo, no negotiations with Serbia", and other slogans in support of ethnic Albanians in the southern Serbian town. Thankfully though, tensions did not escalate past this point.

The dispute over the monument also soured Serbia's relations with Albania, where the pre-electoral campaign significantly increased nationalist rhetoric. Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha attacked Serbia in a speech, warning that he is reconsidering relations between the two countries. Berisha also criticized Serbian "Albanophobia", and the international community for applying a double standard. Calling the response of the Serbian gendarmerie "an ugly

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act”, the Prime Minister stated that national unification is the only solution to the Albanian issue. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in Albania in the Albanian population in the Preševo Valley. In an effort to build their patriotic image in order to gain electoral advantage in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, the two main political parties are competing on who better promotes the Preševo Albanians’ interests and more successfully addresses their problems. However, the Democratic Party’s and the Socialist Party’s new strategy to support Preševo Albanians has not convinced the Albanian leadership in Preševo, which has asked for more concrete measures, including financial support.

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