

## **POLITISCHE GEOGRAPHIE**

### *POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY*

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### **THE GEOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PREŠEVO VALLEY CRISIS**

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### *Zusammenfassung*

#### DER GEOPOLITISCHE KONTEXT DER KRISE IM PREŠEVO-TAL

*Das Preševo-Tal und der Norden Kosovos sind zwei ernstzunehmende Brennpunkte der geopolitischen Krise auf dem Balkan, für die eine nachhaltige und langfristige Lö-*

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sung gefunden werden muss. In letzter Zeit sind einige „neue“ und „alte“ Ideen für eine Lösung der Krise in der Region im Umlauf. Eine der häufig erwähnten Ideen ist die eines „Gebietstausches“ zwischen der Republik Kosovo und Serbien in Bezug auf das Preševo-Tal und den Norden Kosovos.

Die Mehrheit der Bevölkerung im Preševo-Tal besteht aus Albanern, der Norden des Kosovo ist überwiegend von serbischer Bevölkerung bewohnt. Beide Regionen haben geostrategische und geopolitische Bedeutung für den Kosovo und Serbien. Durch den Preševo-Tal läuft der Pan-Europäische Korridor X, einer der wichtigsten Verkehrskorridore Südosteuropas, während der Norden des Kosovo reich an Mineralien und Wasserressourcen wie beispielsweise die Mine Trepča [serb.: Trepča] (Blei, Zink, Silber) und das Kraftwerk in Ujmani [serb.: Gazivoda] ist und daher für die industrielle und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung des Kosovo große Bedeutung hat.

Die allgemeine Nichtanerkennung der Unabhängigkeit des Kosovo durch die serbische Bevölkerung im Norden des Kosovo führt zu den Bestrebungen einer Abtrennung des Nordens Kosovos, um ihn an Serbien anzuschließen. Andererseits wurden kürzlich neue Ideen für den Anschluss des Preševo-Tals an den Kosovo lanciert. Ziel dieser Untersuchung ist es, die Vor- und Nachteile der Idee eines Gebietstausches zwischen dem Preševo-Tal und dem nördlichen Kosovo vor dem Hintergrund der aktuellen geopolitischen Verhältnisse auf der Balkanhalbinsel zu analysieren.

Schlagwörter: Preševo-Tal, Nordkosovo, Serbien, Pan-Europäischer Korridor X, Gebietstausch, Albaner, Serben, Westbalkan, Geopolitik

## Summary

Preševo<sup>1)</sup> Valley and northern Kosovo are two serious points of geopolitical crisis in the Balkans, for which it is necessary to find a long-term quality solution. Recently, some “new” and “old” ideas that could provide a solution for the crisis in the region have resurfaced. One of the frequently mentioned ideas is an “exchange of territories”, between Preševo Valley in Serbia and the northern area of the Republic of Kosovo. The majority of people in Preševo Valley are Albanians, while northern Kosovo is mostly inhabited by Serbs. Both regions have geostrategic and geopolitical importance for Kosovo and Serbia, but also in a wider sense. The Pan-European Corridor X, which passes through Preševo Valley, is one of the most important transport corridors in Southeast Europe, and northern Kosovo is also rich in mineral and water resources, such as the Trepča [serb.: Trepča] mine (lead, zinc and silver ore) and the Ujmani [serb.: Gazivoda] hydroelectric facility, which are of vital importance for the industrial and economic development of Kosovo. The general lack of recognition of Kosovo’s independence by the Serbs in northern Kosovo has led to aspirations for the secession and subsequent rapid accession of northern Kosovo to Serbia. Furthermore, ideas of making Preševo Valley part of Kosovo have also been promoted. The aim of this research is to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of territorial exchange ideas regarding Preševo Valley and northern Kosovo in light of the recent geopolitical circumstances in the Balkans.

<sup>1)</sup> In Albanian, Preševo is called Presheva.

*Keywords: Preševo Valley, northern Kosovo, Serbia, Pan-European Corridor X, exchange of territories, Albanians, Serbs, western Balkan region, geopolitics*

## 1 Introduction

The “Pan-European Corridor X” (transport) connects Salzburg (Austria), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), Belgrade (Serbia), Skopje (Macedonia), to Thessaloniki (Greece). Budapest (Hungary) is connected via the Xb corridor to the main X transport corridor to Belgrade, and Graz (Austria) is connected to Zagreb via the Xa corridor. This corridor is a part of the Trans-European Transport Network that includes numerous roads, railways, and air and water transport networks in Europe (KUMRIĆ et al. 2016). In terms of geopolitics, Preševo Valley is probably the most vulnerable area in the Pan-European traffic Corridor X which passes through Morava Valley in Serbia, and through Vardar Valley in Macedonia. Preševo Valley is located where Morava Valley, in the north, meets Vardar Valley, in the south (EJUPI and RAMADANI 2016). The low watershed is strategically the most important part of Preševo Valley because it is situated between the basins of the Black and Aegean seas.

The entire geostrategic problem of Preševo Valley, in regard to the terminological debate of its position tied to the Pan-European Corridor X, needs to be considered in light of Kosovo-Serbia relations. Kosovo is a new state that began to get recognition in 2008, although full world recognition has not yet been achieved, in the sense that it still does not have full membership in the United Nations and other international political organisations. Until 1999, Kosovo was part of Serbia, as an autonomous province. At the time of writing, Serbia has not recognised Kosovo’s independence. In this article, we will not discuss the nuances of Kosovo’s historical autonomy or Serbian’s recognition of the state’s independence.

## 2 About the Name “Preševo Valley”

Preševo Valley is located in southern Serbia, along the border with Kosovo. Its name has only come into use recently. As a geographic entity, it has no physical-geographical homogeneity. The homogeneity and uniformity of it is the result of its predominantly Albanian population, and their history, identity, and perception of belonging to the same community, as well as backwardness in economic development. Preševo Valley is an area that exists in the collective consciousness of its population, and the region’s name is connected with a sense of relatedness and affiliation, which comes from a common origin, culture, and history (EJUPI and RAMADANI 2016).

All these elements formed this area into a specific idea during the armed conflicts in the 1990s, after which the name gradually came into common usage. The term “Preševo Valley” was first used by American and European diplomats, after which Albanians began to use it. The term is used as a common name for three municipalities: the areas of Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa, with the goal of articulating the common demands

for civil rights of the Albanian population in south Serbia along the border with Kosovo. Serbs have strongly criticised the term “Preševo Valley”.

Within the administrative and territorial division of Serbia, Preševo Valley has been divided into two districts. According to Article 2 of the *Decree on the Districts of Serbia*, the municipalities of Preševo and Bujanovac belong to the Pčinja District, and Medveđa belongs to the Jablanica District (cf. Sl. Glasnik, RS, No. 15/2006).

It should be emphasised that the use of the name “valley” in geomorphologic terms is quite questionable in this case due to the fact that areas like Preševo Valley do not have large water flows. Serbian authors do not use the name Preševo Valley, but they instead call it either Moravica Valley or Bujanovac Valley (KOSTIĆ 1969). They call the area, from the Preševo low watershed to Levosoje, Moravica Valley which is a unique entity, although Bujanovac Valley is an integral part of Vranje and Bujanovac Valley. In his paper published in the “Vranje Bulletin” (*Vranjski Glasnik* 1969), Mihajlo Kostić used the name *Preševska kotlina* (i.e. Preševo Valley in Serbian), which translates into Albanian as *Fusha e Preshevës*. Serbian linguist Momčilo ZLATANOVIĆ claims that the name “Preševo Valley” arose from political considerations, rather than geographical (IRIĆ 2012).

From these allegations, it can be seen that Serbian geographers regionalise this area on the basis of physical-geographic features and the heterogeneity of this area, while Albanians and western diplomats use the term to point out the element of ethnic (Albanian) identity and homogeneity in south Serbia.

Through history, Preševo Valley has been exposed to the influence of various civilisations and empires, from all points of the compass, which intended to extend their power and rule through the region. During the Bronze and Iron ages, this area was part of the Dardanian Empire that stretched from northern Macedonia, through Kosovo, and up to Niš (*Naissus*) in the north (SHUKRIU 1996, pp. 7–36). Starting in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, this area was part of the Roman Empire. In the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Preševo Valley fell under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Due to the fact that it was located at the intersection of roads and also boasted favourable geographic conditions, Preševo became an important urban centre of the region. From 1878 to 1912, Preševo Valley was a special political entity (region) called a *kaza* within the Prishtina Sanxhak in the Vilayet of Kosovo. From 1912 until the beginning of the Second World War, it was a part of Serbia, and also a part, in a certain period, of Vardar Banovina, which was based in Skopje (Macedonia), within Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Albanians make up the majority of the population in Kosovo, the western part of Macedonia, and also in Preševo Valley. According to territorial and administrative divisions during the period of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Preševo Valley belonged to either the Vranje district or the Leskovac district in Serbia. Under the SFRY, Serbia consisted of Central Serbia and two autonomous provinces: Kosovo in the south and Vojvodina in the north. When Preševo Valley was under Serbian control in the era of Yugoslavia, it had difficulties communicating with neighbouring cities that also had a majority of Albanian population, such as Gjilan in Kosovo and Kumanovo in Macedonia.

### 3 The geostrategic and geopolitical importance of Preševo Valley within the Pan-European Corridor X

The Pan-European Corridor X passes through Preševo Valley, namely its road and railway, and it connects Belgrade with Skopje and Thessaloniki. This corridor represents an important link between certain European regions (Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Austria) and the eastern Mediterranean region (Greece) (ISLAMI and EJUPI 2015). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the well-known and influential Serbian geographer, Jovan CVIJIC, deemed the Preševo Valley to be part of the “Balkan Core”. According to him, “the area of Skopje and Preševo is of special importance, because the most important longitudinal and transverse lines of communication pass through it”.

Because of these features, the region of Skopje and Preševo would become the centre, out of which the Balkans could be most easily controlled (CVIJIC 1906, pp. 47–52). The followers of CVIJIC’s theory claim that Serbia possesses favourable preconditions to obtain a central position in Southeast Europe (RADOVANOVIĆ 1983), by controlling important geographical locations. One of these important areas is a longitudinal pair of valleys (Morava and Vardar), which meet in Preševo Valley. The valley has been considered to be of geostrategic importance, and has a strong strategic position vis-à-vis neighbouring geopolitical players (SEKULOVIĆ 2006). Thus, the ideas of influential CVIJIC are still alive among modern generations.

For a more detailed explanation of the geopolitical position of Preševo Valley, we have to take into consideration the current political circumstances within Serbia, and in the ethnic “belt” of Albanians in western Macedonia, south Serbia, and Kosovo. After the wars and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia became a country without direct access to the sea. Consequently, Serbia has focused on maintaining geopolitical importance in the Balkans, derived from its central position, and the Pan-European Corridor X plays an important role in this sense. In the case of Preševo Valley, demography is an important factor of its geopolitical position. Population density, ethnic structure of the population, religious features, and identity make a set of elements that affect political processes (SEKULOVIĆ 2007). Therefore, the size of the population, the ethnic homogeneity of Albanians, the same religious and linguistic features within a compact territorial distribution of Albanians in Kosovo and in western Macedonia, have been perceived as very important factors for Preševo Valley.

The end of the Kosovo War brought about the independence of the Republic of Kosovo from Serbia, but in Preševo Valley, because of the pressure against Albanians from (Serbian) military and police forces, many people were forced to flee their homes. Moreover, armed conflicts in Macedonia and in Preševo Valley displayed the position of the Albanian population well to the international community. Serbia has considered armed conflict in Preševo Valley to be an attempt of undermining its geopolitical position. In reality, Kosovo naturally gravitates in the Vardar-Aegean direction via Preševo Valley. In recent geopolitical contexts, Southeast Europe and Preševo Valley have become very important areas in military-strategic terms, especially for Serbia. Consequently, monitoring and maintaining territorial integrity and sovereignty over Preševo Valley is of vital geopolitical importance for Serbia. In regard to Preševo Valley, Serbia regards the role of the United States of

America in a wider context. According to the Serbian author SEKULOVIĆ, Preševo Valley, together with the nearby USA military base Bondsteel in Kosovo, represents American geopolitical observation and control points in the Balkans.

Also on the basis of Preševo Valley and the Bondsteel military base, the United States geopolitically control the Pan-European Corridor X. It is thought that the military deployment of the US army in Kosovo and its focus on actions in Preševo Valley is intended to reduce the importance of Corridor X, giving advantage to Corridor VIII, which connects Turkey, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania. Preševo Valley is located on the edge of the ethnic Albanian area, but the fact that the Corridor X passes through it gives great geopolitical significance to Kosovo, Albania, and to ethnic Albanian areas in Serbia and Macedonia. Therefore throughout all Albanian “territories” there are two significant traffic corridors: the Pan-European Corridors X and VIII.

The construction of the Dures – Kukes – Merdare highway in Kosovo is an important connection between Kosovo and Albania, and also a connection to Corridor VIII. Here it must be stressed that the Yugoslav policy to isolate Albania, in terms of communication, lasted until 1990. From then on no serious traffic links (roads and rails, etc.) have been built between Serbia and Kosovo, or between Albania and Macedonia or Montenegro. By improving the infrastructural connections of Končul Gorge in Preševo Valley, Kosovo

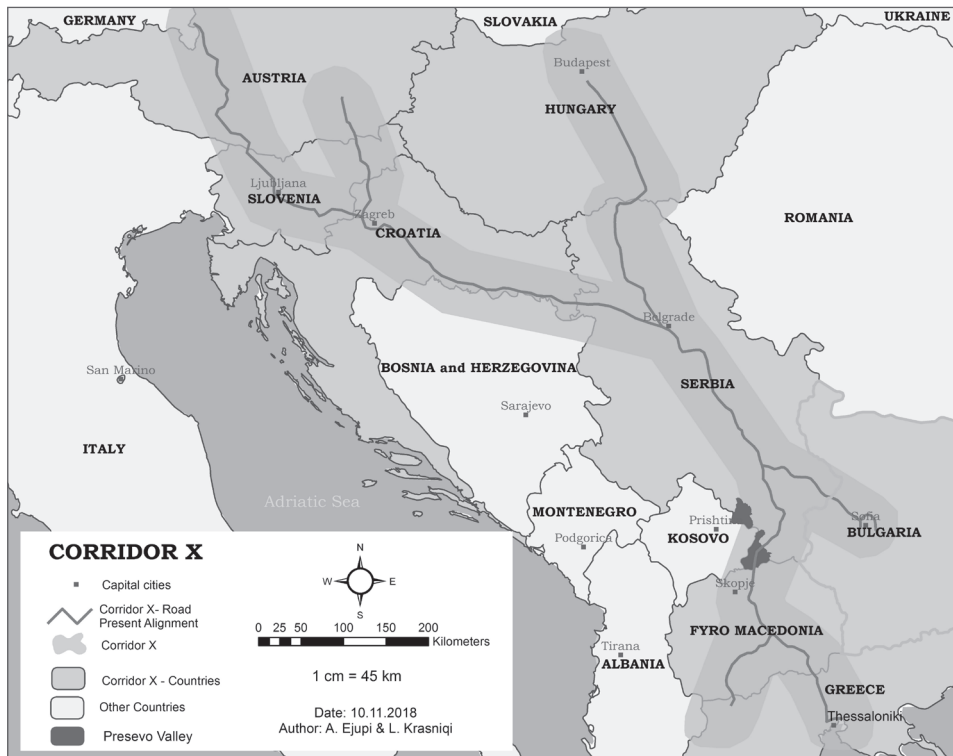


Figure 1: Preševo Valley within the Pan-European Transport Corridor X

and Albania indirectly provided the shortest connection to the Pan-European Corridor X. Albania has direct access to the Adriatic and Ionian seas, and Corridors VIII and X are geopolitically important for Kosovo, Albania, and other ethnically Albanian territories. Preševo Valley is a very important region for Kosovo and Albania, and also for Serbia and the United States. Infrastructural improvements have, however, also been considered to be an important factor in order to strengthen or preserve the geopolitical and geostrategic position of the region in the geopolitics of Southeast Europe.

#### **4 Political circumstances in Preševo Valley**

Since the early 1990s the Albanians in Preševo Valley have been organising themselves into associations and political parties. The first Albanian political association was the “Independent Democratic Union” which was founded on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1990, followed by the “Party for Democratic Action” a few days later. Albanian political parties successfully organised a referendum organisation, and participated in parliamentary votes, electing deputies for the Serbian Assembly. As a result of their engagement, Albanian political organisations prevented massive emigration of Albanians from Preševo Valley during the Kosovo War (1991–1999). The Albanians also conducted a referendum for political and territorial autonomy in Serbia, which also touched on the right to merge with Kosovo in certain circumstances. In the following years the Albanian political scene fragmented and the Serbian government encouraged rivalries between Albanian political bodies and institutions, such as the “Albanian National Council” and the “Assembly of Albanian Councillors”. Serbia has also aligned its laws to meet EU candidacy standards, according to which various ethnic communities in Serbia, including Albanians, are allowed to create regional political institutions.

After the end of the war in Kosovo, a large portion of Serbian military and police forces remained in Preševo Valley, continuing to exert open pressure on the Albanian population. Many Albanians in the Preševo Mountains were forced to move to Kosovo. In the second half of 1999, the first military unit, called the “Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac” (LAPMB; in Albanian: “Ushtria Çlirimtare per Presheve, Medvegje dhe Bujanoc”, UÇPMB) was founded. Until the demilitarisation, units of LAPMB were located in a ground safety zone that emerged as part of a military-technical agreement in Kumanovo between NATO and the Serbian army. Under the “Kumanovo Agreement”, Serbia was forced to withdraw military and police forces from Kosovo, and to create a land and air buffer zone to avoid possible “Kosovo Force” (KFOR) and Yugoslavian troop clashes. The Kumanovo Agreement established a ground safety zone at 5 km of air distance between the border of Kosovo and the close interior region of former Yugoslavia (Kumanovo MTA 1999), that covered a considerable area of Preševo Valley in the Karadak, Bujanovac, and Medveđa Mountains.

A very important political moment for Kosovo and for Preševo Valley was the fall of Slobodan Milošević’s regime. Finding a solution for the crisis in Preševo Valley was an immediate issue that the new government of Serbia had to face. Aiming to ensure support from the international community, which was very important for a country emerging from



numerous conflicts and wars, and to improve the negative image left by Milošević's regime, the new Serbian government considered it necessary to manage the crisis in a peaceful way, i.e. through dialogue. Shortly thereafter, there were intensified demands for the abolition of the ground safety zone, where the LAPMB units had previously been located.

The "Končul Agreement" stopped the armed conflict on behalf of the international community and was signed by Pieter Feith, followed by the representatives of the LAPMB, but the Serbian side refused to sign the agreement. This agreement disarmed Albanian military units, abolished the ground safety zone and allowed the return of Serbian police and military units to the border with Kosovo.

## 5 The territorial exchange idea

The end of the Kosovo War (1999) and the armed conflict in Preševo Valley (2001) did not provide a sustainable solution to end conflict between Albanians and Serbs. The northern part of Kosovo, although it is *de jure* within Kosovo, is *de facto* outside of Kosovo's institutional control. Institutions of municipalities with Serbian majority populations in northern Kosovo have implemented a parallel system of education, healthcare, administration, etc. Following instructions from officials in Belgrade, Serbs in northern Kosovo have organised themselves into political parties that were/are directly controlled by Belgrade.

On the other hand, according to the Končul Agreement, the armed conflict in Preševo Valley ended with the demilitarisation of Preševo Valley (EJUPI 2014). The implementation of this agreement actually led to the demilitarisation of Albanian military units, but Serbia did not withdraw its military or police forces. The continued presence of the Serbian military and police forces in Preševo Valley has not created favourable conditions for the return of the displaced Albanian population, rather resulting in further emigration because some of the Serbian police and soldiers stationed there are the same men who fought in Kosovo in the 1990s. The Končul Agreement stopped an open conflict, but did not bring about the end of the crisis, as significant military and police forces remained in Preševo Valley.

The Serbian government, under Zoran Đinđić, adopted "Čović's Plan" that aimed to resolve the crisis after the armed conflict in Preševo Valley. The goal of the plan was to integrate the Albanians of Preševo Valley into the social and political system of Serbia by enabling them to be part of the police, judiciary, health, education, and municipal bodies of Serbia, in proportion to the ethnic structure. For this purpose, the Government of Serbia created a "Coordination Body for Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa". The multi-ethnic police, created in cooperation and support from the OSCE (the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), has made evident progress, but still, Čović's Plan to integrate Albanians in Serbia has failed in all other respects.

According to the report of the "International Crisis Group", Čović's Plan, as accepted by the Serbian parliament, was not legally binding and was used more for the purposes of the pre-election campaign (ICG Balkan Reports 2001). Čović's Plan did not remain on the books in Serbia after the election was won by the party of Vojislav Koštunica, who departed from the policies of Zoran Đinđić and began to use old nationalist vocabulary



against Albanians and other non-Serbian peoples, and also in regard to the international community.

It is obvious that Preševo Valley and northern Kosovo are two serious areas of geopolitical crisis in the Balkans, for which a long-term quality solution has yet to be found. Recently, some ideas to find a solution for the crisis in the region have been (re)circulating. One of the frequently mentioned ideas is an “exchange of territories”, i.e. of Preševo Valley and part of northern Kosovo, between Serbia and Kosovo.

The proposal for the exchange of territories between Serbia and Kosovo was promoted by Belgrade together with the Albanian government in Tirana, and Pristina [Prishtina] was only included in the process later. This idea has its roots in earlier Serbian plans for the partition of Kosovo. The thesis for a Kosovo partition was presented by academic Dobrica Ćosić, a Serbian writer and one of the main thinkers in terms of Serbian politics of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This idea was presented for the first time in 1968, and later was developed when Ćosić became president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992.

Dobrica Ćosić was unsatisfied by the results of the Brijun plenum of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966, when Aleksandar Ranković, the most influential Serbian politician, head of the secret service, and the vice-president of Yugoslavia, was eliminated from political life in Yugoslavia. This was carried out by the Yugoslav leadership and president Josip Broz Tito. In 1968, at the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, Dobrica Ćosić held a talk about the biological expansion and supremacy of the Albanians, which he considered the greatest danger for the future of Serbia and Yugoslavia. At that time, he talked about the division of Kosovo based on the ethnic principle: the part of Kosovo with an Albanian majority could be added to Albania, whereas the part of Kosovo with a Serbian majority would remain a part of Serbia and Yugoslavia.

Any agreement in regard to the division of Kosovo would have been between Belgrade and Tirana, and Kosovo (only an autonomous province at the time) would have had no say in the matter. The plan did not include the territory of internal Serbia, nor Preševo Valley (despite its Albanian majority) and all of this area would have remained (without discussion) a part of Serbia and Yugoslavia. Therefore, the idea Ćosić had stressed was the division of Kosovo, and not the exchange of territories between Kosovo and Serbia, and this was based on his view that Yugoslavia needed to change internal (republican and provincial) and state borders. Moreover, although Ćosić did not directly mention an exchange of territories, his idea was based precisely on such an exchange.

Dobrica Ćosić was the first president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (composed only of Serbia and Montenegro) from 1992 to 1993 and during the 1990's he tried to enact the division of Kosovo. He wrote this thesis in his book *Kosovo*, published in 2004. Most Serbian presidents that followed have a high opinion of the views of Dobrica Ćosić and he is probably the most influential Serbian political thinker in the last 50 years. During 1993, as a final solution for the Kosovo problem which was termed as the “Albanian-Serbian issue”, he proposed the idea for the partition of Kosovo to the members of the “Geneva Conference” for the former Yugoslavia, namely to Cyrus Wance and Lord David Owen at UN headquarters in Geneva (ISLAMI 2008). These two diplomats rejected this idea, saying that the division of Kosovo would also cause the division of Macedonia (The Former

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), and neither the EU nor the United States found this acceptable (Ćosić 2004, pp. 77–88).

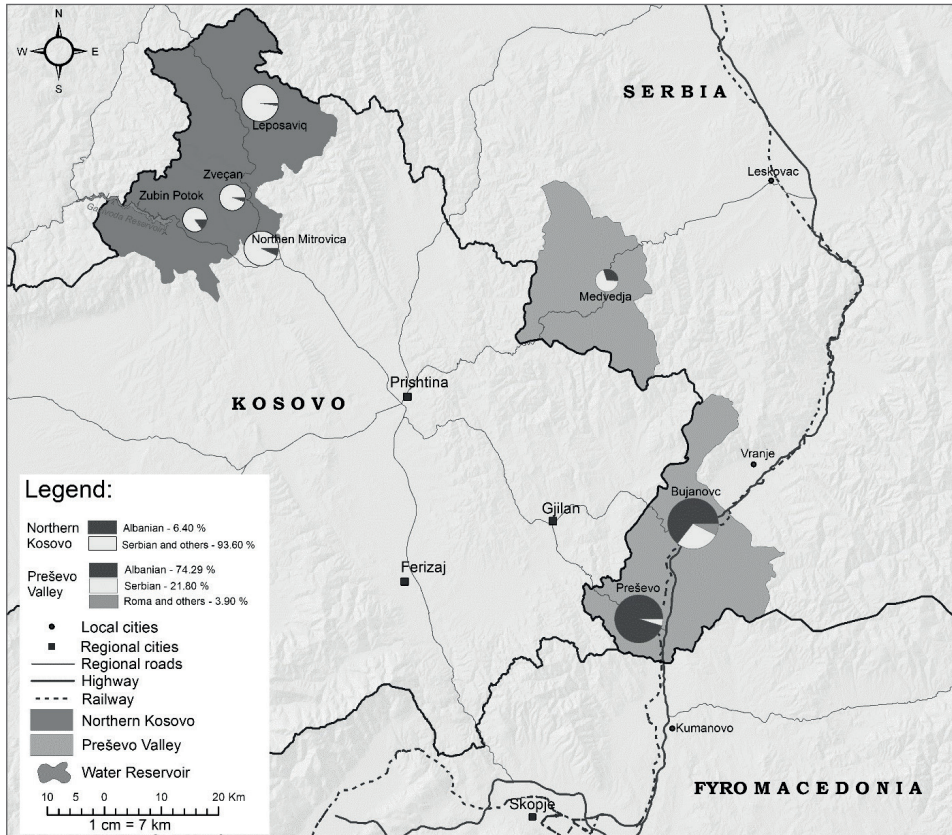
The formal state of Albania has also ignored the sovereignty of Kosovo at times. The best example was the statements of the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and the Albanian prime minister Edi Rama in Niš, in regard to the construction of the Niš – Merdare – Kukes – Tirana – Durres highway, which would connect Serbia and Albania via Kosovo. The issue was that neither president had asked for official state conformation from Kosovo before announcing the highway project. The statement of Albanian president Edi Rama, at the time of the ten years anniversary of the independence of Kosovo in Pristina, was that “Albania and Kosovo needed to have only one president”, by which he ignored the sovereignty of Kosovo, which was not well received (ISLAMI and EJUPI 2018).

Nowadays, some Serbs who consider the “Frozen conflict” status between Albanians and Serbs, who would like Serbia to become a part of the EU sooner rather than later, are increasingly contemplating the aforementioned territorial exchange concept in order to gain as much as possible from a distant dialogue with Kosovo, which has so far been unproductive. This would also serve to reduce the possible negative domestic side effects in Serbia (political, religious, etc.), but they hesitate to name it an “exchange of territories”, as they do not accept Kosovo as an independent state. They have instead adopted formulations such as a “modification” or “rearrangement” of the territory in question.

The initial aspect of the “territorial exchange” idea relates to an ethnic structure, which derives from the fact that northern Kosovo is inhabited mainly by the Serbs, and Preševo Valley by Albanians. According to the census data of 2002, 112,000 people lived in Preševo Valley (EJUPI 2017b). The Albanian population increased from 44.3% in 1961 to 78.8% in 1991, and decreased to 72.9% in 2002 according to the Serbian census. The smallest percentage of Albanians was documented in 1961, which was the effect of more intense emigration of said Albanians to Turkey and a high level of non-participation in the census among mountain villages.

The domination of the Albanian population is particularly marked in the municipality of Preševo, where Albanians make up 94% of the population, making it one of the most ethnically homogenous municipalities in Serbia (EJUPI and RAMADANI 2016). During the 2002 census, the principle of place of residence was applied, and as a result 23,900 people who lived and worked in other European countries were excluded, and these made up 21.2% of the total population of Preševo Valley. Population migration from Preševo Valley to other European countries began in the 1960s. Most of these emigrants, about 60%, live and work in Switzerland, Germany, or Austria today (EJUPI 2017a).

According to the ethnic structure of the population, Preševo Valley’s settlements can be divided into three areas. The first area includes settlements with total Albanian population and stretches along the western slopes of the valley next to the village of Karadak. These settlements extend to the west of the Pan-European Corridor X. Settlements of the second area are those that extend to the Moravica plains, between the railway and the highway. These settlements are distinguished by domination of the Albanian population. The third area stretches into the eastern part of Preševo Valley and the Corridor X. These settlements are situated on the eastern western slopes of Rujan Mountain. Apart from more settlements with Albanian majorities, there are also some settlements with Serbs in this area.



Source: A. EJUPI and L. KRASNIQI 2018

Figure 2: Ethnic composition of Preševo Valley and northern Kosovo

Serbs in Kosovo did not participate in the last census, conducted in 2011, because they did not recognise the new political reality and independence of Kosovo. According to an estimation made by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2011), in four municipalities in northern Kosovo where 40,196 inhabitants lived 37,625 inhabitants or 93.6% were Serbs, while 2,571 inhabitants or 6.4% were Albanians.

Supporters of the territorial exchange idea between Serbia and Kosovo have argued that after the end of the long conflict between Albanians and Serbs, this would be the fastest way for these countries to integrate into the European Union. Taking into account the positive and negative effects of this kind of solution, such a project would be difficult to realise.

Both regions, northern Kosovo and Preševo Valley, have geostrategic and geopolitical importance for Kosovo and Serbia, but also in a wider scope. Northern Kosovo is rich in mineral and water resources such as Trepça [serb.: Trepča] mine and the Ujmani [serb.: Gazivoda] hydroelectric facility. For this reason, they continue to be of vital importance for the industrial and economic development of Kosovo. The Pan-European Corridor X,

one of the most important transport corridors in Southeast Europe, passes through Preševo Valley (PAVIĆ 1999). For Serbia, the territorial exchange idea is unacceptable for (at least) two reasons:

- 1) the main roads between Central Europe respectively Belgrade and Thessaloniki pass through the territory of the municipalities of Bujanovac and Preševo, and are of paramount importance to Serbia. The importance of this corridor for Serbia has increased since 1999, when the main alternative route to reach the sea via Pristina became unusable, due to the Kosovo War and the subsequent loss of Serbian control over Kosovo;
- 2) Serbia does not recognise the Republic of Kosovo, neither do Serbian-dominated areas of Kosovo – despite being within Kosovo – and the *de facto* authorities in this region are implementing policies in accordance with Belgrade's directives. This detail represents a major complicating factor for Kosovo and for the international community, and slows down the process of integrating the new state into various international organisations.

The northern part of Kosovo has a surface area of 1,002 km<sup>2</sup>, consisting of Leposavić Municipality with 539.05 km<sup>2</sup>, Zubin Potok Municipality with 334.38 km<sup>2</sup>, Zvečan Municipality with 123.01 km<sup>2</sup>, and Northern Mitrovica Municipality with 5.46 km<sup>2</sup>. This part of Kosovo has a population of 40,196, living in 174 settlements. It is rich with mineral ores (lead) in the areas of Zvečan and Leposavić – settlements of Bellobërdë (Belo Brdo), Koporiq (Koporiće), Zhuta Perlin, and Crnac – which had estimated reserves of 6.4 million tons of mining capacity in 1986. Other resources include geological construction materials, such as 56 million tons of marlstone in Pali Vodenica and Dren of Leposavić, and also stone from magmatic rocks used mainly for construction. On the other side, in the territory between Kosovo and Serbia, the largest dam in Kosovo was built on the Ibar River, called Ujmani (Gazivoda), with a capacity of 390 million cubic metres of water. It is vital for the entire country – not just for northern Kosovo. The reservoir was built in 1979, and its purpose was to supply water to the population and for irrigation of about 20,000 hectares of fertile land in the Kosovo Plain and the Drenica Region. Such power plants don't work without a healthy water supply. The power plant named "Kosovo A" has a monthly water consumption of 8 million cubic metres, while the power plant "Kosovo B" spends about 9 million cubic metres.

As a land-locked country, Serbia does not wish to lose control over the part of the Belgrade – Skopje – Thessaloniki international railway that passes through Bujanovac and Preševo, the Belgrade – Thessaloniki highway, the newly built military base in Cepotin (south of Bujanovac), or the territory of Medveđa Municipality. According to pragmatic and realistic approaches in political and academic circles, in new geopolitical circumstances that would only come about after a historical agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, were the railway and the highway would remain under Serbian jurisdiction, the realisation of the territorial exchange idea would damage and weaken the geopolitical position of Kosovo.

The modern highway runs close to the existing railroad and is a part of the Corridor X, bringing many advantages to Serbia and to Serbia's transport connections to Southeast Europe. On the other hand, Serbia's desire to reach the Aegean Sea dates from the second half

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was attempted via the construction project of the Morava-Vardar canal, which many well-known companies were interested in. The project failed, due to the complicated terrain factor (i.e. a complete system of cascades and canals would be needed to be built in order to eliminate the 491.6 m hypsometric difference in the low watershed between Preševo and Kumanovo), high financial costs, and the Russian desire to have an increased presence in the Balkans. Serbian political and academic circles from that time, however, were set on reaching the sea – and they still are to this day. This idea is still present in Serbia, and is promoted by Tomislav Nikolić, Aleksandar Vučić, as well as various ministers, experts, and analysts. For the purposes of this project, a Chinese company has completed a feasibility study, which has already become part of planning and strategic documents in Serbia, such as the official spatial plan and other such similar documents.

The exchange of territories between Kosovo and Serbia would lead towards the spatial and ethnical homogenisation of certain areas, but also to growth in geopolitical and geostrategic importance of others. The idea of this territorial exchange was rejected in the “Ahtisaari Plan”, and the International Crisis Group has consistently warned of the division of power, by focusing on the consequences that such an act may have in the wider region (ICG 2010).

The majority of the international community does not support the idea of a partition of Kosovo, nor the idea that Kosovo would return to its pre-1999 state or merge with another state. Even Kosovo’s constitution forbids such an idea: “The Republic of Kosovo is an independent, sovereign, democratic, unique, and indivisible state” (Article 1, paragraph 1) and “there are no territorial ambitions against any state or part of any state, and [Kosovo] shall not seek to unite with any state or part of any state” (Article 1, paragraph 3).

The Ahtisaari Plan recognised Kosovo’s borders as they were before the December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1988. It clearly stated that the territory of Kosovo would be defined by the borderline of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo, within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, as this was the case until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1988 – with the exception of border changes resulting from the demarcation agreement between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Macedonia (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) of February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2001 (and September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007). After this demarcation process, Macedonia gained 1.91 km<sup>2</sup> from Kosovo. This and many other documents, such as the Constitution of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo of 1974, the Declaration of Independence of February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and the Constitution of the Republic from 2008, the “Badinter Commission” of 1991, and the recent decision of the International Court of Justice in the Hague (2011), clearly defined the borders of Kosovo, with an overall surface area of 10.905 km<sup>2</sup>. At the time of writing, 115 countries have recognised the Republic of Kosovo with the aforementioned borders.

One line that Serbia does not want to lose is the newly-built military base in Cepotin, south of Bujanovac, and also the Belgrade – Thessaloniki motorway that runs through the Preševo and Bujanovac municipalities. If Pristina were considering an exchange of territory, a line that Kosovo probably could not stand to lose passes beside Lake Gazivode, along the dam on the Ibar River, in Zubin Potok Municipality. This is the main water supply in northern Kosovo, which is needed to operate the thermo-electric power plants that supply Pristina with electricity.



## 6 Conclusion

Taking into account all the advantages and disadvantages of an exchange of territories, it is unlikely, for several reasons, that it would ever take place. In the current geopolitical climate, Serbia (with its central continental position) is very interested in the Pan-European Corridor X. Its entire development has been focused on the advantages brought about by this corridor. By exchanging its territory, Serbia would lose control over the Corridor X, and part of its most important road to the south would no longer be under their control. The Corridor X is Serbia's passage into Macedonia and on to the Greek port of Thessaloniki. Supervision over the Corridor X all the way to Macedonia is of crucial importance to Serbia, as it is an area of frequent political tensions and insecurities. Furthermore, any renunciation of its claim to Kosovo is unthinkable for Serbia. If territories were to be exchanged, northern Kosovo and its natural wealth would be gained, but gaining natural resources is less important for Serbia than the strategic value of the area that would be lost.

Kosovo has not yet been fully recognised by the international community, and therefore is not an equal geopolitical participant in Southeast Europe. In economic terms, Kosovo would lose more than it would gain by a territorial exchange with Serbia. Looking at the locations of natural resources and energy facilities, northern Kosovo is far more valuable than Preševo Valley. From a purely strategic point of view, in war conditions, control of the Corridor X by Kosovo would be a great advantage. Regarded in this way, a territorial exchange could be regarded as advantageous for Kosovo, but during peacetime when it would be unacceptable to interrupt traffic flows; this strategic advantage for Kosovo would be insignificant in relation to permanent use of the natural resources and energy facilities in northern Kosovo. The experience of the war in the 1990s has shown that roads can be interrupted in other territories, if there is sufficient military power. In such cases, an official state border is not of paramount importance. In the greater context, a territorial exchange with Serbia would not be a good solution for Kosovo either.

Additionally, the international community has also rejected the idea of territorial exchange, because of fears that such an exchange would have negative consequences for Southeast Europe and other areas. If an exchange of territory between Kosovo and Serbia, i.e. northern Kosovo for Preševo Valley, were to take place, it would serve as a precedent for the region and could be applied elsewhere, e.g. in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Republika Srpska would most likely hold a referendum to separate from Bosnia and Herzegovina and merge with Serbia. This could lead to violence and emigration of the population in the form of an ethnic cleansing – an outcome that no one wants to see. A similar territorial exchange situation might also take place in western Macedonia, where most Albanians would like to merge with Albania. So the very idea of an exchange of territory between Kosovo and Serbia represents a potentially dangerous precedent that could have far-reaching consequences for Southeast Europe.

In the end, the concept of a territorial exchange is not a good solution for anyone in the region. In fact, any territorial alteration is not acceptable to either side, except in northern Kosovo for the local Serbs and in Preševo Valley for the local Albanians. It is unlikely that

the aforementioned local communities could overcome national interests or the interests of the international community.

The existing republican borders of the 1974 Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) constitution will likely be retained, on the basis of which the international community recognised the republics that became independent after the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991 (Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and later Serbia and Montenegro). In the case of Kosovo, the international community recognised the international and also the provincial borders dating from 1974 in the SFRY period. We can emphasise that the final key word will come from the international community, and in particular from the West, and any actions taken by Kosovo or Serbia must be within the framework accepted by the international community, that is the one that ultimately defines the state of affairs on the ground. In terms of local politics, it is crucial to gain the accord of important international community members for any such political action. In the case of Kosovo, the United States has had the greatest impact. In addition to the demands for adherence to peace and good neighbourly relations, the achievement of an enviable level of human rights for minorities is also a requirement in order to accept local autonomy in terms of identity and culture.

This does not, however, hold true in terms of military, security, and economic autonomy for Preševo Valley and northern Kosovo. Therefore Kosovo should maintain its current territorial integrity and existing borders, while ensuring equal rights for their Serbian minority. Also, the crisis in Preševo Valley should be solved in the same way, by giving the region special political and territorial status which would let the local Albanians enjoy equal rights in terms of identity, language, and culture. The autonomous status of this region would also enable the Albanian population to have special ties with Kosovo, in order to actively participate with their ethnic peers, thus solving current problems in education, culture, information, and science, as well as economic integration with other ethnic Albanian territories within the Balkans, as well as European integration.

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