

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP - NEW REPORT

Serbia: Maintaining Peace in the Presevo Valley

Belgrade/Pristina/Brussels, 16 October 2007: Albanian politicians, the Serbian government and the international community need to act now to ensure that the Kosovo status process does not destabilise the neighbouring Presevo Valley.

[Serbia: Maintaining Peace in the Presevo Valley*](#), the latest report from the International Crisis Group, examines the steps that need to be taken so that Kosovo's anticipated independence in the coming months does not undo a mostly successful conflict resolution story across the border in southern Serbia. Following a low-grade ethnic Albanian insurrection in 2000-2001, there has been a good deal of progress in the valley, with no major incidents for over three years, but tensions linger due to high unemployment and uncertainty in the region.

If formal partition or large-scale violence accompanies independence in Kosovo, peace could unravel in the valley and even lead to ethnic cleansing in southern Serbia, accompanied by significant, cross-boundary, two-way refugee flows.

“Grievances abound on both sides,” says James Lyon, Crisis Group Senior Balkans Adviser. “Albanians feel peace has not ended tensions with Serb security forces and wish to join the valley to Kosovo, while Serbs feel the Albanians are a disloyal, irredentist minority”.

The international community, working closely with Serbia, negotiated an end to the armed insurgency in the valley in 2001 (the Konculj Agreement). However, uncertainty about Kosovo events is darkening the political landscape. If anti-Serb violence erupts there, both Albanian and Serbian extremists may seek to spark incidents in Presevo – Albanians in the hope of uniting it with Kosovo, and Serbs in the hope of using the cover of violence next door to ethnically cleanse the area.

Contact Group embassies in Belgrade (France, Germany, Italy, Russia, UK and U.S.) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) must press all parties to refrain from violence. If fighting breaks out in Kosovo, the NATO mission there (KFOR) should prevent Albanians from ethnically cleansing Serbs from the Kosovo enclaves and prevent any would-be insurgents from crossing between Kosovo and southern Serbia.

Belgrade should improve the effectiveness of the Coordination Body (CB) supervising the Konculj agreement and extend its life at least until 2010; better control the actions of its security forces; and stop discriminatory employment and investment practices in the region. Albanian politicians in the valley should end their CB boycott, participate in Serbian political life and cease provocative display of Albanian national symbols.

“Kosovo’s uncertainty and Belgrade’s lack of a clear policy hamper the needed changes,” says Sabine Freizer, Crisis Group Europe Program Director. “All parties need to work to develop the Presevo economy and ensure Kosovo events do not disrupt progress.”

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