

**The Conflict and its Aftermath in South Serbia – Social and Ethnic Relations, Agency and
Belonging in Presevo and Bujanovac**

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by

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Executive summary

1. Introduction – background to the study

This study represents the result of a nine month-long project commissioned by the UNDP office in Serbia and carried out by the Center for Comparative Conflict Studies (CFCCS) at the Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University in Belgrade. In view of the specific situation of the region comprising municipalities Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac in the south of Serbia, and having in mind current activities of international organizations in the region, CFCCS undertook a study with the aim to provide insight into the background of the conflict that took place in the region in 2001, as well as its aftermath and the way it currently shapes the daily life in Presevo and Bujanovac.

The Presevo valley conflict, in literature most often treated as a ‘spillover’ from the conflict in neighboring Kosovo, ended with the signing of the Končulj agreement in 2001. The process of post-conflict reconciliation, peacebuilding and development in the region was characterized by a set of measures including the integration of members of Albanian national minority into institutions of local governance, development of multiethnic police, amnesty and reintegration of former combatants, development of education and economy, and the strengthening of civil society. Besides the policies of the Republic of Serbia elaborated in the Čović plan and implemented by the Coordination Body for the municipalities of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, the region is in the focus of a number of international organizations such as Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), as well as of local and Belgrade-based civil society organizations.

However, despite such efforts, the region is still considered partly volatile. Economic development is still very low, whereas unemployment and migration remain high. The proximity of the administrative border with Kosovo, as well as the idea of territorial exchanges between Serbia and Kosovo that is occasionally picked up by local politicians, international experts and the media, continue to exert influence on the region. Though described by the International Crisis Group (2007) as “one of the rare conflict resolution success stories in the former Yugoslavia” (p. *i*), south Serbia remains an area of lingering tension.

The starting point of this study aimed at looking into these ambiguities in order to obtain a deeper perspective on the life in a multiethnic, post-conflict environment. Instead of classifying the region as either a ‘failure’ or ‘success’ in post-conflict development, the study aimed to address the realities of life in Presevo and Bujanovac today, by looking at the ‘human dimension’ of the post-conflict situation and focusing on the perspectives and opinions of the local population, interpersonal and interethnic relationships to see how – and if – the legacy of conflict is influencing the daily as well as future prospects in the region. In this sense, the study was informed by the distinction between negative and positive peace, established by Johan Galtung, one of pioneers in the field of peace studies. While negative peace is characterized solely by the absence of direct or personal violence, positive peace relates to the overcoming of structural and cultural violence as well. According to this approach, the absence of direct or personal violence does not necessarily result in positive peace or social justice (Galtung, 1969, p. 183; Galtung, 1990). Thus, the study emphasized the subjective opinions and interpretations of the local actors, aiming to counterbalance previous research on the region that has been more oriented at informing policies, and less at reaching a holistic understanding of the region and its issues.

2. Methodology, phases of research and structure of the study

The methodology of the study was developed in accordance with the previously described approach, prioritizing semi-structured interviews conducted with a variety of actors. The sampling primarily followed the principle of grounded theory, while the criteria of critically important cases and the common snowball-effect also shaped the data collection process. Specific attention was given to avoiding the ‘elite bias’, characteristic of many studies of the sort, which happens when researchers focus only or primarily on political and/or institutional actors, not including the perspectives of ‘ordinary people’. Thus, the interview partners included 53 persons from different ethnic groups, gender, age, education and occupation, ranging from civil servants to cleaners in the local motel. Engaging in individual narratives and life-histories, the study focused on a number of levels. One concerns the level of institutions – or rather, how locals interact with institutions, how much trust they have in institutions (and which), etc. The other concerns interethnic relations – or, how people from different ethnic groups perceive each other. The third related to the perspectives on international organizations working on post-conflict development and/or peacebuilding in the region – how their personnel perceive and construct the local populations and their relations,

as well as how their work is being perceived by the locals. The research included the following phases:

(a) **Background research**, focusing on the setting of the current situation and relevant social actors in South Serbia. This phase included a critical review of existing literature and reports, particularly concerning the conflict in the Presevo Valley, as well as an overview of socio-demographic characteristics and trends in the region (population size and structure; education, migration and political participation; etc.). The objective was to provide an overarching and comprehensive view of the current 'situation' in the field and 'trace' the context of the region – with a special focus on mapping and analyzing conflict prevention and peacebuilding projects. The results of this phase are summarized in the Chapter 2 (Literature review).

(b) **Field research** was conducted in three phases (exploratory, main and concluding phase) and consisted of participant observation, taking field notes, qualitative in-depth interviews and informal conversations. The overall aim of the fieldwork was to provide an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, opinions and concepts of actors who participate in this social and political setting, which can provide a comprehensive description, or 'cognitive mapping'¹ of the concepts of the given actors and their agency – interactions with each other, as well as with their environment on the local, regional, national and international level. A detailed description of the phases of research is given in Chapter 3 (Methodology).

(c) **Preliminary analysis/mapping**, during which the research team identified key (core) topics, evaluated and adjusted the selection of interviewees, compared notes and further developed the methodology for the main fieldwork phase. The aim of this phase was to bring together the insights based on the background research and the first phase of fieldwork, and to differentiate and define the most adequate research focuses and sampling strategies. The team focused on the issues of agency and belonging, relationship with the state and with 'others', and participants' perception on the life in Presevo and Bujanovac, which also became analytical categories explicated in chapters 3 and 4 (Methodology and Analysis).

¹ Cognitive or mental mapping relates to the ways individuals imagine, organize and narrate their perceptions of the external world, including not only geographical spaces, but also qualities and attributes of objects and their mutual relations.

(d) **Analysis**, which consisted of the critical reading and coding of the interview transcripts, as well as field notes. Given the broad scope and complexity of the researched concepts, the research team wanted to avoid ‘fitting’ participants’ responses into pre-defined categories. For this reason, the method of coding based on grounded theory, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), was used. This methodological approach consists of three phases: open, axial and, finally, selective coding. During the phase of open coding the data were broken down into codes, which were subsumed into categories. In the process of axial coding, the categories were refined and regrouped into different levels of abstraction within single and along continuous comparison between transcripts. In the last phase of selective coding, so-called **core categories** were extracted and named, which subsumed the most axial categories and their interrelations. These core categories include the pluri/marginalization of the region, the “negligent” state, “others” and (ethnic) relationships with the “others”, conflict and the sense of “imposed” multiculturalism. The relationship between data and analytical categories is elaborated in Chapter 4 (Analysis).

(e) **Interpretation**, which aimed to contextualize participants’ responses, narratives and perceptions in relation to the situation and social/ethnic relations in the region, taking into account the history and legacy of the conflict, as well as to draw some implications for the future. The overall objective was to offer a contextualised overview of the opinions, views and perceptions of actors, the ways these are shaped by the conflict legacy, and the ways that they reflect on the relationships between different aspects of society, as well as the future development of, and prospects for, Presevo and Bujanovac. The interpretations were used as a basis for the conclusions (Chapter 5), which in turn informed the recommendations (Chapter 6). The conclusions and recommendations are summarized below.

3. Conclusions

From the narratives collected during the research, it appears as if **ethnic divisions in Presevo and Bujanovac significantly pre-dated the conflict in 2001**. Although Serbs, Albanians and Roma were living ‘side-by-side’ in peace and had generally good relations, there are indicators that show that in **reality communities rarely interacted beyond certain boundaries**. The **political and economic crisis of the 1990s** that exacerbated the social inequalities, especially in the poorer parts of the former Yugoslavia, provided a **fertile ground** for attempts to fight for greater equality through means of **ethnic mobilization** (cf. Jenne 2006). The context of the continued repression of ethnic Albanians and the ensuing

international intervention in Kosovo, coupled with the (Serb) nationalist revival in Serbia, further contributed to ethnic differentiation and the growing importance of ethnic identity as the basis for political programs. In this context, the **Presevo Valley conflict** that took place in 2001 can be interpreted as an **extreme, or violent, form of ethnic mobilization** with, presumably, political goals. Hence, the conflict can be related not only (and perhaps not primarily) to the ethnic conflict in Kosovo, but also to the conflict in Macedonia that also took place in 2001.

The consequences of this form of ethnic mobilization continue to **shape the daily political life of both Presevo and Bujanovac**, where parties and political leaders, as well as the main issues, are defined primarily by their ethnic affiliation. The “state” (Republic of Serbia), and especially the central government in Belgrade, are thus, in many instances, identified with the representation and protection of (ethnic) Serb national interests. Of course, this is not without foundation, as the representation of Albanians and Roma in central and higher instances of public administration in Serbia is very low to almost nonexistent.

Consequently, most of the issues in the **daily life of Presevo and Bujanovac** are **viewed through an ethnic ‘lens’**. This sort of climate and political balance of power contributes to the **lack of trust** between communities. Namely, the ethnic character of political bargaining, coupled with a relative lack of funds and investment and great sense of marginality exacerbated by the economic crisis, makes it easy to view social and public policies as a ‘zero-sum game’, in which all gains for one ‘side’ (ethnic group) are automatically losses for the other. This kind of atmosphere can indeed be **peaceful** (i.e. characterized by the absence of open conflict), but it **does not help integration**.

International and local civil society organizations active in the region normally take ethnic divisions (whether as the cause or consequence of the 2001 conflict) as ‘given’ and approach the development of Presevo and Bujanovac within this framework. Approaching the 2001 conflict as a ‘spillover’ from Kosovo and treating the region in the context of the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia after 1990 further reinforces the concept of Presevo and Bujanovac as societies deeply divided primarily or solely along ethnic lines. As much as many of these initiatives are valuable for the employment and engagement of the local population (even if temporary), they can create, reproduce or contribute to the perception that

development, engagement and advocacy of one's rights is only, or primarily, possible in the framework of ethnic identities.

The perception of many of the interview partners of the **“fake”, “imposed”, or “artificial” multiculturalism** can be partially understood as a consequence of this approach. Namely, participants almost without exception criticize the absence of ‘tangible’ economic development in the region and, similarly, they are almost unequivocal in the positive appraisal of the work of both international organizations and public administration of the Republic of Serbia when concrete, observable results are produced. Many claim and seem to think that employment and economic growth will produce social integration, and not vice versa. This can also explain why ‘peacebuilding’ as a concept is felt as imposed or even outright rejected by many of the participants. Given the predominant refusal of the idea of their own involvement in the 2001 conflict, and its almost unequivocal qualification as “external” - something that “was not between the people but between the Army/police forces and rebels”, “politicians” etc. - it is not that surprising that most of the interview partners felt that ‘peacebuilding’ is an approach or substitute to development work is not best suited to local needs and problems.

4. Recommendations

The situation in Presevo and Bujanovac is complicated and complex. As this research shows, there are many overlapping layers of problems. In this context, it is not easy to provide recommendations or definitive guidelines on how to approach development, peace- and trust-building initiatives. However, based on the data gathered during this research, some suggestions for how to approach local development in Presevo and Bujanovac are given:

- 1) *Focus on initiatives that engage the local population (from different communities) in joint projects and endeavors that are not necessarily framed in the context of ‘reconciliation’, and have longer-lasting outcomes that directly contribute to the economic and social development of the region, (e.g.: employment on different (shared) projects and enterprises aimed at local economic development; life-long learning, especially programs and courses that help participants develop skills relevant for future employment (i.e. computer skills, writing and presentation skills, languages); learning a second (Albanian/Serbian/Roma) and third (English, German, Russian, French) language).*

- 2) *Stimulate and support initiatives that aim to engage, educate and involve people from Presevo and Bujanovac – in particular women, young persons and other marginalized groups – in issues related to local development, political participation and community involvement etc. These initiatives should cut across ethnic lines – for instance, the (already existing) multiethnic football club, environmental initiatives, local businesses, etc.*

The majority of the population feels disempowered and distant from the realm of decision-making, even at the local level; some steps towards fuller involvement of the local population can be taken (public discussions, consultations, information sessions, citizens' juries focusing on issues of relevance to all citizens: the environment (water and waste management), infrastructure (roads, sewage and public transport etc.) or security (safety and policing etc.). Special efforts should be taken to stimulate women and other marginalized groups to take active part in these discussions. This is often difficult to achieve and may run counter to some perceptions of 'appropriate' gender roles, but women's groups – both regional/national and international – can provide expertise and advice for such projects.

- 3) *Develop programs for political leaders and representatives in order to redirect the focus of local politics from being exclusively ethnic to more issue-based (e.g., public discussions and debates; developing mechanisms of public accountability and transparency, clamping down on corruption and nepotism).*
- 4) *Develop and support programs that give visible, 'tangible' results, such as investments in infrastructure etc.* (Participants in the research emphasized how they appreciate international involvement more if it produces 'visible' outcomes. This, of course, does not mean that development efforts should be solely focused on providing infrastructure, but programs that are less obvious and take longer to produce results should, ideally, be coupled with those that bring immediate benefits to the local population.)
- 5) *Actively address the issue of migration/diaspora with respect to all three communities, and empower/encourage an active approach to the development of the region both in terms of economic development and integration.*

The (to date) almost completely ignored fact that the region is strongly marked by migration to Western Europe should be addressed – by the state, civil society and international organizations –

not necessarily as an issue of “brain drain”, but also as a valuable potential for the further development of the region.

6) *Continue developing coordination amongst international organizations, donors, but also local initiatives, as well as state institutions present in the field.*

7) *Do not ignore the legacy of the conflict, but be aware of the reproduction of ethnic divisions, as well as other inequalities that may be obscured by ethnic divisions* (it is possible to frame the discussion of post-conflict legacies, as well as the development of security and trust, as **regional** and not ethnic issues. Special attention should be paid to the voices and needs of those who are usually forgotten in the construction of the conflict, and ethnic relations, as being primarily between Serbs and Albanians. This includes the Roma, who are the most marginalized, but also women, children, in some cases young people, as well as those with special needs. Many of the problems and issues facing these groups cut across ethnic divisions, thus dealing with them can help not only improve their relative position, but also overcome some of the divisions based on ethnicity.

The Conflict and its Aftermath in South Serbia – Social and Ethnic Relations, Agency and Belonging in Presevo and Bujanovac

I. Introduction - Entry Points

June 2011 marked the tenth anniversary of the culmination of a series of events that escalated into an armed conflict in South Serbia. On June 2nd 2011, a headline on the website of B92, a leading Serbian media outlet, announced that the day marks a period of “Ten years of peace in Southern Serbia,” stating that “on this day in 2001, peace was reestablished in southern Serbia after 200 days of war.” (B92, June 2, 2011). Indeed, whilst the armed conflict in the municipalities of Bujanovac, Medvedja and Presevo in South Serbia has ended a decade ago,² deep divisions still exist; not only between the Serb and Albanian communities, but more so, between the Albanian minority in Serbia and state institutions. This study therefore aims to address both of these levels – the community/everyday and the political/institutional – as both are vital for understanding the realities in the region and, consequently, the prospects for future stability.

The distinction between *negative peace* and *positive peace* was established early on as one of the theoretical foundations of the field of Peace Studies. Whilst the former is characterized solely by the absence of direct or personal violence, the latter relates to the overcoming of structural and cultural violence as well. This distinction informed our approach and entry point to the study of the conflict in South Serbia and its aftermath. It was developed by one of the ‘fathers’ of the field of Peace Studies, Johan Galtung. According to this approach, while personal violence can be registered and tracked (and is therefore something that shows), structural violence is essentially static and silent; it doesn’t show; thus, structural violence can be hidden or seen as natural, while personal violence is most often seen as wrong or harmful. Cultural violence, on the third hand, refers to any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural

² In the Serbian language, the municipalities are called Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac, and form parts of the counties [okruzi] called Jablanički and Pčinjski. The municipalities of Preševo and Bujanovac are next to each other, but Medveđa is farther away, and – in the opinion of some analysts – it is primarily grouped with the other two because of the percentage of Albanian population in all three municipalities. In the Albanian language, the municipalities are called Preshevë, Medvegjë and Bujanoc, and the some of the Albanian population, especially when arguing for its distinctiveness – and sometimes for territorial separation – prefer to refer to it as Lugina e Preshevës (Presevo Valley). Accordingly, the conflict has become known, including in international circles, as the Presevo Valley conflict. Given that this study was written in English, the Anglicized versions “Presevo,” “Bujanovac” and “Medvedja” will be employed throughout. The conflict that took place in 2001 is alternatively referred to as the “Conflict in Presevo and Bujanovac” and “the Presevo Valley conflict”. Given that the conflict predominantly took place in Presevo and Bujanovac, these two municipalities were the locality of our research.

form. According to this approach, the absence of direct or personal violence does not necessarily result in positive peace or social justice (Galtung, 1969, p. 183; Galtung, 1990).

Informed by this approach, this study aimed to look deeper into the dynamics of conflict and post-conflict development, and the ways they shape the understanding of the current realities in South Serbia. It included local perspectives, not only on peace and stability, but also on many other issues that define people's daily lives – identities, belonging, agency, relationships between people, groups and institutions, states and political entities. In this sense, the study aimed at presenting a deeper perspective on the interpersonal, as well as institutional, settings in Presevo and Bujanovac, and the ways people – not only political elites, but 'ordinary' citizens – refer to everyday life and the challenges facing the region, a decade after the armed conflict ended.

The Setting of the Study

The root causes of the 2000-2001 armed conflict in the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja and its aftermath can be seen as part of a network of conflicts in the Western Balkans that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990's. The conflict is often perceived as being connected to the preceding conflict in Kosovo, and the ensuing conflict in neighbouring Macedonia, and thus the analysis aimed to be sensitive to the local and regional dynamics, and the concept of conflict 'spillover'. Though described by the International Crisis Group (2007) as "one of the rare conflict resolution success stories in the former Yugoslavia" (p. i), Presevo Valley remains an area of uneasy relationships between majority and minority groups, and lingering tension, particularly in light of Kosovo's declaration of independence on February 17th, 2008. In the summer of 2009, ethnic Albanian representatives from the municipalities of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac issued a declaration calling for the establishment of a separate "Presevo Valley region", sometimes referred to in similar local contexts as "East Kosovo". Previously, a number of ethnic Albanian politicians from these municipalities had adopted a joint platform that included a commitment to "unify the Presevo Valley with Kosovo in case of...possible change of [Kosovo's] borders" (Barlovac, 2011). The region, as such, is therefore inextricably linked to the developments regarding the status of Kosovo and its relationship with Serbia. Indeed, an International Crisis Group report (2010) spoke about the possibility of "trading the heavily Serb North for the largely Albanian-populated parts of the Presevo Valley in southern Serbia" (p. i). In this sense, it is obvious that, both in the local, national and international contexts, the region is still portrayed as volatile and represents a challenge to peace, stability and security in this part of Europe.

However, neither the root causes of the 2000-2001 conflict and its inter-connections with other conflict dynamics in the Western Balkans, nor the events that followed the armed conflict and the political and social realities it generated, have attracted significant attention from political or social scientists. Therefore, there is a lack of in-depth academic analyses of the social and political dynamics that could inform the development and peacebuilding activities in the field. The aim of this study is to start filling this gap by offering an exploratory analysis that could be further elaborated and expanded, and whose conclusions can, at the same time, be relevant for practitioners and decision-makers; whilst simultaneously stimulating academic discussions and research related to the conflict and post-conflict dynamics in the region.

The Aim of the Study

Focusing on the analysis of the aftermath of the conflict in the communities of Presevo and Bujanovac this project aimed to offer an integrated perspective, informed by qualitative data, on the social and political dynamics in Presevo and Bujanovac, and the ways that these are related to the history and legacy of the 2000-2001 conflict. The approach to the study – both in terms of theoretical groundings and methodological procedures – was interdisciplinary, aiming to draw from the fields of peace and conflict studies, post-Yugoslav and Balkan studies, anthropology and sociology³. Thus, the study employed a cautious, sensitive and critical approach to the concepts of conflict and conflict resolution, peace and peacebuilding, and to exploring the perceptions of these processes in Presevo and Bujanovac. The aim was to include more ‘bottom-up’ perspectives, as opposed to the previously dominant ‘top-down’ approaches that characterized much of the inputs that shaped policy analysis, international intervention and peacebuilding projects in the post-Yugoslav successor states (Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings, 2006, p. 1). Given the small scope of this study, but also its potential to be developed further, our hope is to inspire both scholars and practitioners in the field of

³ Research in peace and conflict studies has been through significant changes since its inception after World War Two and the Cold War period. The field emerged as part of an effort to imagine and establish an international order “not dominated by the old ‘realities’ of imperialism and aggressive nationalism” (Rubenstein, 2009, p. 495). The question whether the field would function as an *adjunct* to power-based institutions, or if it would create *alternatives* to such institutions, remained unclear and latent over the years (Ibid). In the post 9/11 world and the ‘War on Terror’ led by the United States, the U.S. administration began to demonstrate a new interest in the vocabulary and methods of conflict resolution. The main question became one of whether this would give conflict specialists an opportunity to alter policy making and ‘wean’ US leaders away from coercive power, or whether the experts would be used to provide the US with a more sophisticated, cost-effective arsenal of ‘hard’, ‘soft’, and ‘smart’ power weapons (Ibid, p. 497). Whilst such questions challenged those dynamics within the United States, where peace and conflict studies was firmly established as a field, they are also relevant for other post-conflict countries, where projects are conceptualized, implemented, and discussed in a manner that mirrors these dilemmas, and is thus directly affected by them.

peacebuilding and conflict resolution to work towards an enhanced bottom-up approach in understanding and explaining post-conflict societies, and in implementing projects.

The structure of the study

The study consists of six chapters. After the Introduction, Chapter 2 (Literature Review) sums up the existing literature and background information available on the conflict in the Presevo Valley. Chapter 3 (Methodology) lays out the methodological approach of the study; presents the main, guiding research questions; and describes the techniques of gathering and interpreting data. Chapter 4 (Analysis) presents the interpretation of the collected data through the main cross-cutting themes and categories, and offers critical reinterpretations of some of the information gathered during the research. Chapter 5, (Conclusions) sums up the results of the analysis and their implications, whereas the final chapter (Recommendations) offers a number of broad recommendations whose aim is to inform future thinking and planning related to the development of the region. The Appendixes include a comprehensive bibliography, information about the institution carrying out the project, as well as the structure of the research team.

II. Literature Review - Explaining the Conflict in South Serbia

Though described by the International Crisis Group (2007) as “one of the rare conflict resolution success stories in the former Yugoslavia” (p. i), south Serbia remains an area of lingering tension and mistrust, particularly in light of uncertainties about Kosovo’s status following its declaration of independence in February 2008. The prospect of territorial exchanges between Serbia and Kosovo as part of a comprehensive settlement, for instance, continues to exert a profound influence on attitudes towards and within the south. The bulk of the literature pertaining to the region focuses on three key elements; the 2000-2001 insurgency, the impact of Kosovo and relations between ethnic Albanians and the Serbian state.

Background to the 2000-2001 Insurgency

Geographically, Presevo and Bujanovac are part of the Pcinje administrative district (Pcinjski Okrug), and Medvedja is a part of the Jablanica district; bounded by Kosovo to the south-west and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to the south. South Serbia occupies a key strategic point, sitting as it does “main historical trade and invasion route between Western Europe and the Levant” (ICG, 2003, p. 2), with Corridor 10 today passing through the region to the Greek port of Thessaloniki. According to the 2002 census, the population of Presevo is 89.09% Albanian and 8.55% Serb, Medvedja is 26.17% Albanian and 66.57% Serb, whilst Bujanovac has a slightly more complicated ethnic balance - 54.69% Albanian, 34.14% Serb and 8.93% Roma (Ibid, p. 3). The substantially different compositions of each municipality suggests the need to employ a more micro-level approach to analyzing inter-ethnic relations within these respective localities, as opposed to employing more general conclusions about inter-ethnic relations for south Serbia as a whole.

Tracing the historical contours of the region helps explain some of the instability that persists today. Like elsewhere in the Balkans, shifting borders have left many separated from their ethnic kin, including “the border settlements imposed in the decade after 1912, which divided territories inhabited by ethnic Albanians so that more were outside than inside the new state of Albania” (Ibid, p. 2), plus changes to the administrative boundary line in 1947 that separated the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja from Kosovo (Ibid, p. 3). These divisions have had profound, yet largely underexplored, ramifications on the sense of belonging of the ethnic Albanians residents in the south.

Amidst the regime of Slobodan Milosevic and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, ethnic Albanians were further subjected to institutionalized forms of discrimination and violations of their minority rights, especially in the fields of education and employment (ICG, 2007, p. 1). As part of the centralization of power, the Serbian constitution of 1990 introduced a package of laws which were designed to “bolster central government” at the expense of municipalities (HLC, 2002, p. 2). These factors combined led an overwhelming majority of ethnic Albanians in the Presevo Valley to express their desire

to join Kosovo in an unofficial referendum in 1992 (ICG, 2007, p. 10), though such aspirations went largely ignored.

Following the 1999 conflict in Kosovo, the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB), with support from the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK), attacked police and army units (Ibid, p. 1). The Končulj Agreement of May 2001, engineered by the international community with NATO's mediation, ended a 17-month armed insurgency by ethnic Albanians, in which 100 people were killed and 12,500 Albanians fled (ICG, 2003, p. 1). The terms of the Agreement included a pledge by the UCPMB to "demilitarise, demobilise, disarm and disband" in return for guarantees that their fighters would be amnestied, refugees allowed to return, a multi-ethnic police force formed (Stodiek and Zellner, 2007) and Albanians integrated into public institutions.

Since then, the Presevo Valley has been governed under the Čović Plan, whose four pillars seek to "all kinds of threats...to state sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia", establish "security...freedom of movement..., ensured by the complete dis-banding and disarmament of terrorists, by the demilitarisation of the region and by allowing the return of all the refugees to their homes", develop a "a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society" and ensure "prosperous and rapid economic and social development" (Čović, 2001, p. 70). As Čović himself notes, the plan aimed at achieving the "harmonization of the ethnic structures of the employees in the civil services...with the ethnic structure of the population" (2001, 79).

Efforts to improve the position of ethnic Albanians

Though ethnic Albanians had long been under-represented at the national level, changes to the rules governing minority parties – ensuring that the five per cent threshold in parliamentary elections no longer applies – has facilitated the participation of Albanian politicians at the national level (ICG, 2007, p. 5-6). The 2007 election of Riza Halimi, leader of the Party for Democratic Action (Partia për veprim demokratik, PVD), to Serbia's parliament was a significant step for the integration of ethnic Albanian communities into political life, ending an almost decade-long boycott of Serbian institutions. Politics at the local level⁴, however, remains a source of considerable tension. Largely defined by an inter-Albanian political struggle in Presevo and an ongoing Serb versus Albanian struggle in Bujanovac (ICG, 2006, p. 9), politics in the south has been riddled with indecision over the extent of its political engagement with the Serbian state and central government.

The extent and nature of the divisions between these factions is best illustrated with respect to the Albanian national minority council. The Albanian community long rejected the establishment of a Council, until the

⁴ The main political actors include Riza Halimi's Party of Democratic Action (Partia për veprim demokratik, PVD), the Presevo Valley's strongest Albanian party, Jonuz Musliu's Movement for Democratic Progress (LPD), Ragmi Mustafa's Democratic Party of Albanians (PDSH) and Skender Destani's Democratic Union of the Valley (BDL).

passage of new legislation in 2009 clarifying the authorities, competencies, finances and electoral processes of the Councils helped remove some of the main concerns (Bancroft, 2010, p. 1). The Council will help ensure that the Albanian community is “able to make decisions which are of key importance for nurturing their national identity, especially in the field of education, information in their mother tongue, development of their national culture and the use of national symbols” (Ibid, p. 2). Nonetheless, whilst some Albanian political leaders demonstrated a preference for exploiting benefits from the greater cultural autonomy afforded by the Council, others continue to pursue a stance centered upon greater territorial autonomy as the only means of tackling the problems faced by the ethnic Albanian community. Whether the establishment of a minority national council serves to sharpen or soften these divisions, therefore, will have profound implications for the integration of the Albanian community into mainstream political life in Serbia (Ibid, p. 4).

Skepticism persists amongst the ethnic Albanian community about the Serbian state's commitment to protecting and upholding their rights. As Huszka (2007b) notes, “a history of discriminating state policies means that grievances often gain an ethnic interpretation” (p. 3). Such grievances, however, have not remained static overtime, with some issues tending to predominate over others at different junctures. For instance, a number of important initiatives have been implemented in accordance with the Čović Plan – including the creation of the Multi-Ethnic Police Element (MEPE) – which have gone some way towards alleviating the problems faced by the ethnic Albanian community. The MEPE established ethnically mixed units and patrols which ensured that “Albanian police officers were to be integrated into the existing Serbian police in the three municipalities, Medvedja, Bujanovac and Presevo” (Stodiek and Zellner, 2007, 20-21). Nonetheless, ethnic Albanians continue to be under-represented in public institutions under state control including the post office, tax authorities, land registry, social institutions, healthcare centres, customs services, state inspection bodies, and the judiciary (Huszka, 2007b, p. 3). With respect to district-level administration, “altogether Albanians contribute to around 25% of the Pcinje district population, yet Albanians feel excluded” (Huszka, 2007a, p. 2).

Education and official language use have increasingly become two of the most important issues for the ethnic Albanian community. As Huszka notes, whilst “use of textbooks brought from Kosovo is allowed in practice...the curricula have not been harmonized with Serbian curricula” (2007a, p. 4). One of the most pressing educational issues concerns the recognition of diplomas from Kosovo and the provision of higher education in south Serbia (a branch of the University of Nis Faculty of Economy was recently opened in Medvedja, whilst around 350 students from the Presevo Valley are currently believed to be studying in Prishtina, Tirana and Tetovo). A report, entitled 'Higher Education Development in Presevo and Bujanovac', concludes that the development of higher education “should take place within the institutional framework of the Republic of Serbia”, “be sustainable”, “be integrative in terms of development of knowledge and competencies of the members of all communities” and “take into account the social

dimension of education” (Ivosevic and Lukovic (Eds.), 2010, p. 13-15). The official use of the Albanian language⁵, meanwhile, is inhibited by the shortage of Albanian-speaking staff, under-representation in public institutions and the failure by Serbian ministries to issue papers in the Albanian language (Huszka, 2007a, p. 3-4). The persistent failure to find solutions to such tangible problems will quickly undermine confidence in the National Minority Council and will only serve to vindicate the Council’s opponents (Bancroft, 2010, p. 2).

Another source of friction is the presence of the Serbian security forces; especially the Gendarmerie, which has been the subject of regular attacks since the end of the insurgency, including sporadic outbreaks of fighting in 2002 and 2003. Following a spate of incidents in the Autumn of 2009 – including a grenade attack near Bujanovac which injured two police officers, and an explosion in a mainly Serb-populated neighbourhood of Presevo – there were calls from ethnic Albanians for the complete removal of army and interior ministry security units from the region, accusing the latter of brutality (Bancroft, 2010, p. 2). Whilst Huszka (2007a) asserts that the “establishment of the multi-ethnic police force with the assistance of the OSCE can be regarded as a real success” (p. 5), an over-reliance on use of the Gendarmerie suggests “that the state relates to this population as a potential enemy” (Huszka, 2007a, p. 5).

Socio-Economic Dimensions – Fuelling Antagonisms?

One of the biggest problems facing south Serbia is massive unemployment, having previously been estimated at around 60% in Presevo and 42% in Bujanovac (ICG, 2007, p. 15); though these figures are clouded by the existence of a large informal sector and idle socially-owned enterprises⁶ in which many are still listed as being employed. Average incomes are believed to be around a third of the national average, whilst extreme poverty, especially in rural areas, has a conspicuous presence (Ibid, p. 16). Though both Serbian and Albanian communities alike share these afflictions, they tend to magnify the under-representation of the latter in public institutions, which are relied upon to make-up for the lack of private sector jobs. Recognizing the security connotations of such socio-economic dynamics, the Rapid Employment Programme (REP) initially provided “temporary public works employment for some 6,000 former fighters and the long-term unemployed during an 18-month period” (Thorogood, 2006). However, there is still a need to tackle unemployment, particularly “of the young male population, many of whom are former UPCMP fighters” Huszka, 2007a, p. 3).

⁵ In principle, “Albanian became an official language in Bujanovac and Presevo in 2002, when the law on national minorities was adopted at the federal level, which enabled municipal local governments to recognize minority languages as official next to Serbian” (Huszka, 2007a, p. 3-4).

⁶ According to the ICG (2007), “a more traditional form of development would have meant that many of the twelve socially-owned enterprises and factories Presevo had and the fourteen Bujanovac had would have been in nearby urban centres, such as Skopje, Vranje or Prishtina. Instead the two municipalities are kept alive economically by the presence of the old, socially-owned enterprises (some of which are now privatized), which employ primarily Serbs” (p. 15).

Instability, organized crime, corruption and poor infrastructure have discouraged investment, though sources of optimism exist with the construction of a new customs zone at the border crossing with Macedonia inside Presevo municipality and the eventual completion of the Corridor 10 highway linking Thessaloniki to Belgrade (ICG, 2007, p. 15-16). Whilst the Kosovo status issues have impacted the free flow of goods (Lazic, 2008), “cross-border smuggling is flourishing” (Huszta, 2007a, p. 3). Though south Serbia has been affected by the economic crisis, “a reliance on basic, staple products and long experience in crisis situations may keep the impact from being greater than it otherwise would have been” (USAID, 2009, p. 13). Economic development remains a key priority, however, municipal governments “do not have many tools at their disposal to attract investment”, in part because of weak decentralization (Huszta, 2007a, p. 4).

The south has, however, since the end of the insurgency, been largely dependent upon donor support, which provided 45% of the total investment in both Bujanovac and Presevo between 2000-2005, as well as 17% in Medvedja, but which have been in decline ever since (ICG, 2007, p. 16). Investment by the Serbian government, meanwhile, has tended to favour Serb-majority municipality, with Bujanovac receiving €36 per capita, Presevo €91 and Medvedja €199 in 2006-2007 (ICG, 2006, p. 5). The privatization of socially-owned enterprises provides a further source of contention, with considerable doubts expressed about the neutrality and transparency of the process, including allegations of an inherent bias against Albanian businessmen by the centrally-controlled Privatization Agency (Huszka, 2007a, p. 4). Decades of institutionalized discrimination have now contributed to creating reverse discrimination (ICG, 2007, p. 5), whilst persistent population outflows and a reliance upon remittances both continue to impact the region (Huszka, 2007a, p. 3).

The Co-ordination Body

The Serbian state has sought to contend with the problems facing south Serbia through the Coordination Body for the Municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja. Though initially established to co-ordinate the activities of the Joint Security Forces (the army and interior ministry, all Serbian/Yugoslav officials, until Albanians were admitted in 2005), it became responsible for the Čović Plan – initially for a three-year period only – following the signing of the Končulj Agreement in May 2001 (ICG, 2007, p. 8). Many within the Albanian community feel that “the peace plan has not fully delivered on either an end to tensions with the security forces or increased prosperity” (Ibid, p. 8).

However, the credibility of the Co-ordination Body has been undermined by a variety of factors. In its initial phase, Albanians were excluded from the Body, which served to co-ordinate the Serbian government and the security forces. Even once the Albanian community played a more important role, the Body’s failure to deliver in specified areas, Serbia’s preoccupation with the Kosovo status issue (the former head of the Co-ordination Body, Nebojša Čović, dealt with both portfolios) and the tendency for government

ministries to ignore the Body (Ibid, p. 8-10; ICG, 2006, p. 4-5) all had a profound impact on Albanian perceptions of the Body and its intentions. The prestige of the Co-ordination Body was further undermined by its failure to consult the mayors of Bujanovac, Medvedja and Presevo, nor local Albanian and Serb political parties, before making key decisions, such as the September 2007 streamlining of the Body (ICG, 2007, p. 8).

Albanian politicians, however, must also share some of the responsibility for the Coordination Body's shortcomings due to their regular boycotts (Ibid, p. 9). Some ethnic Albanian politicians have, at various junctures, considered co-operation with the Coordination Body as an act of treachery and have derived political benefits from pursuing a more confrontational stance (Ibid, p. 8-10). Furthermore, "those who decided to cooperate openly found that when the Coordination Body failed to deliver, they lost credibility with their electorate" (Ibid, p. 8); such as then mayor of Presevo, Riza Halimi, who lost a recall vote. Though Albanian politicians, however, have regularly acknowledged the need for a functional Coordination Body, the mayor of Presevo, Ragmi Mustafa, insists that he has "better access to government ministries in Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo than in Belgrade" (Ibid, p. 9).

The role of the international community

According to Thorogood (2006), there has been an "effective division of labor among the international agencies active in the region"; with the UNDP focusing on governance, civil society and local economic development, whilst the OSCE has taken a leading role on judicial and police reform. In addition, regular monitoring of the security situation was undertaken by the European Monitoring Mission (EUMM). Between 2001 and 2005, UNDP-implemented initiatives in south Serbia⁷ enjoyed strong donor support; with €10.5m provided through the EU and \$3.5m through other donors such as the World Bank, the UNDP and the governments of the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Sweden, respectively (Thorogood, 2006). Much of this assistance – which included a contributed of some \$2m from local stakeholders – was focused on improving infrastructure in the south. From 2005 to 2008, the Municipal Improvement and Revival Programme Phase II (MIR2) – supported by a consortium of the European Agency for Reconstruction and the Swedish, Norwegian, Austrian and Serbia governments – has distributed some €10.2m (Thorogood 2006), strengthening regional cooperation, municipal strategic planning, municipal management and access to administrative services. A joint UN programme, Peacebuilding and Inclusive Local Development (PBILD), is the latest manifestation of the UN's support, funded by the Spanish, Swiss and Norwegian governments, plus the UNDP.

Aside from its role in the establishing the aforementioned multi-ethnic policing element (MEPE), the OSCE has – as part of its security and stability mandate – has played key role in terms of confidence building and supporting the work of the Co-ordination Body, particularly as its role transformed from

⁷ Including the South Serbia Municipal Improvement and Recovery Programme (SSMIRP), the Rapid Employment Programme (REP) and the Municipal Improvement and Revival Programme Phase II (MIR2).

an initial conflict management function to one of co-ordinating government policy towards the south. This mandate has had distinctly political connotations – for instance, facilitating processes to encourage the creation of a genuinely multi-ethnic government; namely, the inclusion of Serbs in the local authorities and ethnic Albanians in state-level institutions. In addition, the Mission has also worked to help establish the conditions for economic development and assisting with, for instance, the creation of higher education facilities.

South Serbia – in the Shadows of Kosovo

For the predominantly ethnic Albanian southeast corner of Serbia, the proximity of Kosovo – geographically, politically, and culturally – exerts a profound influence on its relations with the Serbian state. Spillover effects from NATO’s 1999 intervention in Kosovo have been identified as one of the key causes of the 2000-2001 insurgency in south Serbia (Liotta, 2003). Emboldened by the successes of the Kosovo campaign, and well-equipped thanks to the support of Albanian diaspora and an influx of weapons following the Albanian government's collapse in 1997, the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB) “used the five-kilometre wide Ground Safety Zone, established by NATO, as a sanctuary from which to attack Serb police and military units” (Corson and Turregano, 2002). According to Liotta (2003), the UCPMB “sought to ‘liberate’ areas in the Presevo area and to recognize the gains that been made on behalf of Albanians as a result of the NATO intervention over Kosovo” (p. 94). Indeed, the conflict in south Serbia is often cited as the key spark for conflict in the neighboring Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Ibid, p. 96).

By often referring to the south as “East Kosovo”, some Albanian politicians continue to draw an implicit link between Serb-inhabited territory north of the River Ibar in Kosovo and the future of southern Serbia. According to the ICG (2010), “the Valley’s leaders believe they have a right to join Kosovo but, conscious of their relatively weak position, are content to let Prishtina represent them.” (p. 13). In January 2006, a political platform was adopted by Albanian councilors from Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja in which they “commit to [the] unification of Presevo Valley with Kosovo in case of...possible change of [Kosovo’s] borders” (Huszka, 2007a, p. 7). The platform maintains that the Valley “should have a form of administrative territorial organization with functions in the fields of the judiciary, police, education, use of language and national symbols, health, economic and cultural development, local planning, environment, natural resources, housing issues and social services” (Ibid, 2007a, p. 7).

For the ICG (2010), “just as Belgrade links the fates of Kosovo and the North, so Albanians insist on equal treatment of the North and the Valley” (p. 13). In August 2009, the fifty-nine members of the Albanian Councillor’s Assembly (composed of councillors from the municipalities of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac) issued a declaration calling for the establishment of a separate “Presevo Valley region”, replete with regional institutions (Bancroft, 2009b). The declaration, described as being “in the spirit of the

political platform of January 2006” concerning the right to self-determination for ethnic Albanians in the region, also seeks proportional representation for ethnic Albanians in state structures, public institutions and “especially in local and border police” (Ibid.). Milan Marković, Serbia’s Minister of human and minority rights, public administration and local self-government, and president of the Co-ordination Body, termed the request as both “unrealistic” and “politically motivated”, adding that it “will not solve any problems” and that “regionalization cannot and should not be based on ethnicity...since it would not be in accordance with European standards” (Ibid.).

The hardening of Kosovo's partition in the predominantly Serb-populated north, however, has fuelled speculation about a possible exchange of the north Kosovo for a substantial part of the Presevo Valley, as a means of securing a comprehensive settlement that would include recognition of Kosovo's independence. The proposal gained further credence when the ICG (2010) elaborated upon several of the “complex calculations” involved in such a trade. According to the ICG (2010), Serbia’s red lines in the Presevo Valley are the newly-built Jug [South] military base⁸ at Cepotina, south of Bujanovac; Corridor 10, which runs through Presevo and Bujanovac on its way to Thessaloniki; and Medvedja municipality, with its Serb-majority (p. 12-13). Other complications include the fact that the town of Bujanovac would be “fiercely disputed; [as] its population consists of roughly equal Albanian, Roma and Serb communities, and all Albanian parties there insist it must join Kosovo as a whole” (ICG, 2010, p. 13). The ICG warns that, “if there is no solution to the problem of the North, Prishtina might intervene in Presevo unilaterally” (ICG, 2010, p. 14); for instance, by allocating funding earmarked for north Kosovo to south Serbia.

⁸ The Serbian army's biggest capital expenditure since the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

III. Methodology

Given that the conflict in the Presevo Valley was of low-intensity, happened over a decade ago and lasted only a relatively short period of time, this research primarily focuses upon the consequences and implications of the conflict on life in Presevo and Bujanovac as it is today. This focus is further justified by the continued instability of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja in the context of Serbia-Kosovo relations, which fuels political tensions in the municipalities. Thus, the team opted for comprehensive sociological/anthropological research in order to offer a broad perspective on the social and ethnic relations and dynamics in Presevo and Bujanovac, including the ways these may have been impacted or are being structured by the history of the conflict, as well as its consequences for the long-term stability and development of the region.

A multi-layered approach that aimed to combine extensive background research with intensive field research, focusing on in-depth, semi-structured, life story-interviews and observations, was applied throughout the study. 53 interviews were conducted and analysed in the course of the study. Apart from a systematic comparison and method triangulation, the validity and representativeness of the data was ensured by sampling techniques based on existing research and data aimed at including relevant social actors, thereby capturing both the structure and dynamics of the conflict under examination. The sampling primarily followed the principle of theoretical sampling according to Grounded Theory, while the criteria of critically important cases and the common snowball-effect during fieldwork also shaped the data collection process.

The research proceeded in the following phases, which – in accordance with the circular qualitative research design – should be understood as interrelated and overlapping, rather than as separate and successive:

1. **Background research**, focusing on the setting of the current situation and relevant social actors in south Serbia. This phase included a critical review of existing literature and reports, particularly concerning the conflict in the Presevo Valley, as well as an overview of socio-demographic characteristics and trends in the region (population size and structure; education, migration and political participation; etc.). The objective was to provide an overarching and comprehensive view of the current 'situation' in the field and 'trace' the context of the region – with a special focus on mapping and analyzing conflict prevention and peacebuilding projects. This provided the basis for the ensuing fieldwork by aiming to answer the following questions:

- a) **Contextualizing the region:** What are the basic social, economic, demographic and political characteristics of the region? How is it related/connected to the history of the regional conflicts and the wider political framework (dissolution of Yugoslavia, transition processes etc.)?
 - b) **The local context:** Who are the key local state and non-state actors in Presevo and Bujanovac? How are they defined (externally and internally)? How are they connected to the history of the conflict in the area, if at all?
 - c) **The international context:** Who are the key international actors in Presevo and Bujanovac? What international organizations/initiatives are present in the field? What is their role, mission and the timeframe of their activities?
 - d) **Conflict/Peacebuilding Initiatives:** What are the existing conflict prevention, post-conflict peacebuilding, and ethnic integration/reconciliation projects in Presevo and Bujanovac? Who is conducting them? What do such projects identify as key issues/obstacles? What do they identify as objectives? How is the discourse on interethnic relations/conflict constructed within these projects? What are the perceptions the local participants have of such projects?
2. The **field research** was conducted in three phases (exploratory, main and concluding phase) and consisted of participant observation, taking field notes, qualitative in-depth interviews and informal conversations. The overall aim of the fieldwork was to provide an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, opinions and concepts of actors who participate in this social and political setting, which can provide a comprehensive description, or ‘cognitive mapping’,⁹ of the concepts of the given actors and their agency – interactions with each other, as well as with their environment on the local, regional, national and international level.
3. **Preliminary analysis/mapping**, during which the research team identified key (core) topics, evaluated and adjusted the selection of interviewees, compared notes and further developed the methodology for the main fieldwork phase. The aim of this phase was to bring together the insights based on the background research and the first phase of fieldwork, and to differentiate and define the most adequate research focuses and sampling strategies.

⁹ Cognitive or mental mapping relates to the ways individuals imagine, organize and narrate their perceptions of the external world, including not only geographical spaces, but also qualities and attributes of objects and their mutual relations.

4. **Analysis**, which consisted of the critical reading and coding of the interview transcripts, as well as field notes. Given the broad scope and complexity of the researched concepts, the research team wanted to avoid ‘fitting’ participants’ responses into pre-defined categories. For this reason, the method of coding based on Grounded Theory, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), was used. This methodological approach consists of three phases: open, axial and, finally, selective coding. During the phase of open coding the data were broken down into codes, which were subsumed into categories. In the process of axial coding, the categories were refined and regrouped into different levels of abstraction within single and along continuous comparison between transcripts. In the last phase of selective coding, so called **core categories** were extracted and named, which subsumed the most axial categories and their interrelations. The codes and categories of different levels were continuously double-checked between members of the research team who formed so-called “interpretative communities”.

During the open process of grounded theory coding, as it has been described, the following question clusters were used as guidelines in terms of extracting codes and categories, and drawing relations between them:

a. Perceptions of individual and collective identity, belonging and agency; constructions of and relations with the “other” (ethnic groups, inhabitants of other cities, members of other parties), etc:

- Who are the participants/interview partners? What do they do? What is their position in the society? What are their life histories? How did they come to Bujanovac/Presevo? How were their lives impacted by recent history, including the conflict?
- What are the key problems affecting the area? Why? How do these problems relate to/reflect in participants’ personal lives/histories? What is the role of ethnicity, gender, age, locality etc. in this?
- What are participants’ hopes/fears? What are they afraid of? Do they feel threatened, and if yes, by what/whom? What do they feel they can do? What do they think are constraints to their actions?

b. Perceptions of the actors and actions of the state (national, regional and local level) and the international community:

- Who is in charge? Who is the state? Who is in charge on the local level? What are the local power relations and distributions? How do different parts of the

society interact? What are the social divisions/fault lines? What is the level of trust/security when it comes to the state? Does the conflict and its aftermath figure in these narratives? If so, how?

- What is the role of the international community? Who is represented by the international community? What is their mission/mandate? What are they doing for Bujanovac/ Presevo? What are the positive, and what the negative contributions? What could they do better?

c. Perceptions of intercommunity relations and post-conflict legacy in south Serbia:

- Are there references to the conflict and/or its aftermath? How do the participants construct the memory of it? How is it described? Who are (were) the ‘sides’ in it? What is its contemporary relevance? Do they position their own society as (a) post-conflict, (b) multi-cultural, (c) divided?
- How do the relations with and developments in Kosovo affect the area? How much does this figure in participants’ narratives? How do they construct their own, personal and social, position in relation to this?

5. The **interpretation** aimed to contextualize participants’ responses, narratives and perceptions in relation to the situation and social/ethnic relations in the region, taking into account the history and legacy of the conflict, as well as to draw some implications for the future. The overall objective of the analysis and interpretation was to offer a contextualized overview of the opinions, views and perceptions of actors, the ways these are shaped by the conflict legacy, and the ways that they reflect on the relationships between different aspects of society, as well as the future development of, and prospects for, Presevo and Bujanovac.

In order to provide a theoretical context for the study – which was based on the methodology of Grounded Theory along the lines of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and as such “allows” pre-empirical theoretical inputs – the most important concepts that represent the background of the study should be outlined. These correspond to the topical fields and cross-cutting dimensions which evolved as a meaningful structure, both on the grounds of the data analysis and theoretical perspectives.

Apart from capturing the main features of **the state** in the structural/institutional sense and, in particular, in the context of its role within conflict/peacebuilding processes, the team made use of an approach which focuses on the everyday dimension of the state. This anthropological perspective does not understand the state as “something up there”, but as an entity represented and

embodied by institutions, persons and processes which citizens “encounter” on a daily basis (Sharma and Ghupta 2006; Trouillot 2001). In that sense the perception of the role and power of the state by individual social actors as they narrate and reflect on their everyday-life experiences – in terms of public offices, schools, media, mobility, legal processes etc. – and within the context of conflict, in particular, was of special interest for this study.

The **local context** can be understood as the space – or in a metaphoric sense, the “arena” – where different social/institutional actors, – respectively, their meanings/concepts and agencies/practices – come together and interact, including local politicians, international organizations, media, civil society, the state etc. The term “local” is best understood within the context of contemporary approaches to theorizing processes of globalization (Appadurai, 1996) and, as such, does not represent a closed and bounded space, but precisely is the locus of intersections between local, regional and supra-local/global processes (Gingrich, 2002). In this sense, “South Serbia” can not be fully understood without taking into account not only the context of Serbia, the surrounding countries (Kosovo, in particular), but also the activities and ideologies of international organizations or the effect of migration.

Interethnic relations: One of the groundbreaking insights into interethnic relations – which is essential for this study – is Frederic Barth’s approach. In his seminal work on ethnic groups and boundaries, ethnic relations are not the “result” of a given (ethnic) identity, but rather a process through which identity (collectivity) and belonging are being negotiated and produced along the definition of the boundaries between groups. Later works on ethnicity (Banks, 1996; Eriksen, 1993) – further crucial reference points for framing ethnicity and interethnic relations in this study – differentiate between the largely outdated primordial/essentializing notion of ethnic identity, and further, an instrumentalizing and, finally, a constructivist/relational one. Primarily the latter approach, which focuses on how the “(ethnic) other” is constructed by whom, is of prime importance for this study. As a final point – in order to take into account the recent critical reflections on the “ethnic lens” (Glick-Schiller, Caglar and Guldbrandsen, 2006) – it is important to note that the notion “ethnic” or “ethnic group” is an emic one, which means that the concept of ethnicity clearly is largely used in the local/regional context to describe the identities and relations of/between individuals and collectivities.

Identity/Belonging: These concepts strongly overlap with the notion of ethnicity. However “identity” – being endlessly complex and thus best approached in an interdisciplinary manner –

goes far beyond ethnic affiliation. It can be most adequately captured in terms of processes and patterns, as well as their “results”, of constructing self and other (“selfing and othering”). In order to capture these, a good reference point are the “grammars of identity and alterity” by Baumann and Gingrich (2004), which imply three crucial “grammars” of how the “other” – and, in that way, the identity of the “self” – is constructed: the grammar of orientalization (or reverse mirror-imaging), the segmentary grammar (of contextual fission and fusion), and encompassment (by hierarchical consumption) (ibid.).

The notion of belonging is an interesting hybrid consisting of “being” and “longing” and, as such, brings together the cognitive and emotional aspect of identity; the latter being often neglected in social sciences. The focus on belonging aims at grasping both micro and macro aspects of multicultural dynamics of minority/majority constellations by tracing the processes and emotional aspects of membership/identity, however without blending out the structural aspect of social and national positioning and equality claims (Strasser, 2009).

Agency represents one component of the basic dyad within social sciences – structure versus agency (Brettell, 2002) – along which different approaches to the social world are being differentiated. In that sense, agency implies that apart from ascribing meaning to the social world which consists of structures (of power and thus meaning, representation, social relations etc.), humans are also social actors and engage in interactions and practices through which they (re)produce, and thus can also change society and culture. Similar to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”, this study is based on a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency; however, with a special focus on the often neglected potential of individuals to actively engage in societal transformation in socio-cultural contexts marked by conflict, tension and peacebuilding.

Conflict/peacebuilding: In war and protracted conflicts, peacebuilding is understood as a system that requires a comprehensive approach to the people who operate in it and to the setting in which it is rooted. According to John Paul Lederach, peacebuilding should be understood and approached as more than post-accord reconstruction. In this study, peacebuilding is approached as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates and sustains the full array of processes, approaches and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable relations (Lederach, 1997). In that sense, conflict transformation is understood as a process that goes beyond the resolution of issues, and represents a comprehensive set of lenses for describing how conflict

emerges from, evolves within and brings about changes in the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions (Ibid).

Perceptions refer to the opinions and impressions expressed by the participants in interviews (interview partners). Originating from psychology, the concept of 'perception' has been expanded in anthropology to include different types of subjective interpretations of reality. The approach is based on the idea that the social world is not exclusively or only characterized by the 'objective', physical reality, but is largely constructed through the interaction of actors and structures, and thus dependent on particular, social and individual, interpretations of the meaning of events. In this concept, culture is a web of meanings; understanding the social world and social interactions requires interpreting the meanings people attach to concepts, events and relationships (Geertz, 1973).

IV. Analysis

Pluri-marginalization

- ⇒ **Life in the region** is marked by pluri-marginalization of both the region in the general political and socio-economic sense, and the communities in particular¹⁰. The data mostly provide reference for the marginalization of the Albanians and Roma, but Serbs also sometimes feel – or are referred to – as marginalized, especially in the context of being in the “periphery” (of the country).
- ⇒ **The Albanian community** perceives itself as being “stuck” between Belgrade and Prishtina, marginalized by both ‘centers’ – neglected and discriminated by the Serbian state and often treated as foreigners in Kosovo. The metaphor that is active here, and which was often encountered in the data, is the Albanians being the “hostage of Belgrade and Prishtina”; the cities being proxies for the official positions of the states of Serbia and Kosovo, respectively. The third common reference relates to the experience of being a migrant in Western Europe, which, as is well known, is most likely characterized by marginalization as well – an aspect not explored within this project, but which can be argued on the basis of existing research on contemporary Albanian migration (cf. Dahinden). One could conclude that Albanians feel pluri-marginalized: within Serbia, in Kosovo and as migrants.

The “negligent” state

What is described as the main source of the problems of the region – in particular for the Albanian community – is the “negligent” state.

- ⇒ The **poor economic situation** (unemployment, lack of foreign investment etc.) is described as a result of the state’s attitude of neglect towards the region, especially post-Milosevic. Virtually all interview partners mention the low level of economic development as the chief source of the region’s problems; describing the economy as “the common enemy of all” or the region as a “dead end”.
 - A direct consequence of the bad economic situation is **migration**, in general, and of young persons, in particular, due to the lack of a future perspective.
- ⇒ The second aspect of the ‘negligence’ of the state is the sphere of **structural inclusion/integration of Albanians**. The work of the Coordination Body is described as

¹⁰ As noted in the paragraph on Interethnic relations as analytical category (p. 19), communities and ethnic groups are an emic category. In the context of this study, thus, they are applied accordingly – participants who refer to themselves as members of a particular community/ethnic group are referred to as ‘Albanian(s)’, ‘Roma’ and ‘Serb(s)’. This does not imply that the members of the research team endorse the essentializing concepts of identity.

initially positive, but lacking in strength and continuity. The multiethnic police initiative is most commonly cited as a positive impetus in the right direction. However problems emerging over time caused Albanians to retreat from this aspect of multiethnic governance, again leading it to be viewed through a critical lens. Albanians not only feel marginalized, but also discriminated by the institutions governed by the Serbian majority. For some, this perception stems from the “Tito period”, which was marked by the sanctioning of ethnic/national/religious identification; it was significantly increased during the Milosevic regime and the political instrumentalization of the ‘Albanian problem’ with reference to Kosovo. While there is a consensus regarding the fact that the inclusion of minorities – primarily with reference to the Albanians – within political, legal and administrative structures is a necessary component/precondition for a life together and peace, there are different opinions to what extent this has actually been achieved.

- An aspect which belongs both to category 1 and 2 is the perception by many interview partners, regardless of ethnicity, that the state pursues “shallow” integration policies, motivated by or resulting in some sort of “**artificial**” **multiculturalism**. This aspect of the agency of the state does not contribute to a “real”/“true” life together (see also point 2), but merely is “cosmetic” agency, primarily targeted at the international (donor) community, and as such, represents a reflection of a crucial lack of interest for the situation and future in the region.
- ⇒ In terms of **belonging**, the state (the Republic of Serbia) is a very important reference point for the Albanians; however, this belonging is mostly manifested in the sense of being entitled to economic and political support, empowerment and equality, but not in terms of identification. Namely very often it is being perceived and highlighted – by both Albanians and Serbs – that they do not feel as citizens of Serbia, due to the state’s neglect and structural discrimination/lack of integration. However, an important dimension in which many Albanian interview partners describe their own agency as being primarily oriented towards Albania or (more frequently) Kosovo is human capital, in the sense of education and work. Serb interview partners, on the other hand, tend to think that the Albanian political elite’s primary orientation and loyalty is towards Kosovo, and not towards Serbia.
- ⇒ Referring to both political and economic neglect and discrimination, there are **mutual claims** by both Albanians and Serbs that the other community is privileged. The Roma tend to see both Albanians and Serbs as privileged, in reference to their own position on

the margins. A local Roma activist literally argued that the conflict in 2001 was successful because it drew the attention of the international community to the problems of Albanians, whereas the Roma – having no such structural power – have remained marginalized.

- ⇒ In the **most extreme version of the argument**, the neglect by the state is interpreted as the goal to make the Albanians leave the region in the sense of gradual “ethnic cleansing”.
- ⇒ A further aspect within which the crucial role of the agency of the state becomes visible is the issue of **demilitarization** of the region. While Albanians often highlight that demilitarization is needed – since the military presence is unnecessary and marks the Albanian community as potential “terrorists” and the region as marked by potential violent conflict – the authorities claim that the higher level of uniformed presence is still necessary, due to “potential conflict” and the proximity of Kosovo.
 - This leads to somewhat divergent perceptions of security. Though some participants in the research say they feel “secure” and “safer than before”, there are many that don’t.

Coexistence/Cohabitation

(Interethnic) relations are characterized as coexistence/cohabitation; that is, living side by side (in distrust) without conflict, but not living “together”. This points to continuing ethnic divisions and lack of trust between communities.

- ⇒ The question how people in the region perceive and refer to mutual relations is one of the crucial aspects of the research. Although different expressions used to describe the relations – such as “good”, “satisfactory”, but also “distant”, “not spontaneous”, “marked by a barrier”, “inherited distrust”, etc. – suggest that there is clearly a **lack of open conflict**, there is also the perception of **clear boundaries between the communities** defined as ethnic. These boundaries relate to education, language, religion, media, but are also spatial - i.e. members of a particular community often occupy geographically separate spaces (areas of town, streets, public spaces such as cafes etc.), as well as sometimes different ‘time zones’ (some of the interview partners have described how Albanian and Serbian youth go out at different times of the evening, thus making it unlikely for them to meet). This is consistent with the findings from the previous paragraph that emphasized the perception of “artificial” multiculturalism present among many of the participants. What can be perceived is almost a ‘double’ standard of interethnic relations – one

that defines them as ‘good’ and is constructed in relation/comparison to the history/legacy of the conflict with the state and not between people and communities; and the other, which is more critical and tends to emphasize the absence of integration in the spheres of everyday life.

⇒ One of the aspects of living “side by side, but not together” relates to the **language** used in communication and linguistic competence; in this context, language is understood not only as a technical tool of communication, but also as a component of the identity that highly reflects on majority-minority power relations. Overall, there are more Albanians who speak Serbian, than Serbs who can speak Albanian; however, the situation in Presevo is quite specific, as a significant part of the (Albanian) population has only vague knowledge of Serbian, whereas Serbs, as claimed by our interview partners, speak Albanian. In Bujanovac, however, most daily communication, including official communication, takes place in Serbian; there is an official ‘expectation’ that Albanians should speak Serbian. For example, most of our interviews were conducted in Serbian, even when the mother tongue of the interview partners was Albanian. Language remains an important issue. In mixed working spaces, the use of one language over the other may be subject to certain unspoken tensions or misunderstandings; our data indicate that these are rarely discussed directly, but rather become the object of jokes or some cynicism. Older participants, who grew-up in Yugoslavia, tend to recall (frequently with at least a degree of nostalgia) the times when both Serbs and Albanians spoke each other’s languages. Interestingly, though it is the younger generation, who came to age in the post-Yugoslav Serbia, who, on average, have least knowledge of the language of the ‘other’, they are the demographic group that most frequently emphasizes the need to learn that same language of the ‘other’. Some of the Albanian interview partners expressed regret that Serbs show “no interest” in learning Albanian; Serb interview partners sometimes claim that Albanians “do not want to” learn (or speak) ‘proper’ Serbian. Participants emphasize the role of education in this context.

- Roma interview partners have, not surprisingly, somewhat different opinions, given that most Roma speak Serbian, Albanian or both. However, issues of proficiency would relate to the Roma population as well, especially when it comes to access to jobs or secondary or tertiary education.

⇒ In terms of **identity/belonging**, of particular importance are narrations of “othering”, which constitute the mutual construction of “identity”, belonging and community. Our data show some variation between Serbian and Albanian narratives and stereotypes of ‘the other’, currently pointing to the observation that the Serb narrative of “othering” Albanians is more pronounced than vice versa. However, this observation needs to be taken with a degree of caution, given the structure of the research team.¹¹ Even when describing interethnic relations as ‘good’, some of the Serb interview partners argued that mutual understanding and loyalty can only reach “a certain point”. This limitation is ascribed to the alleged “collective nature” of Albanian identity, in which the individual will uncritically obey the elders (men) and do as told (e.g. when voting, he/she will vote for the party/representative his/her family votes for), without thinking and acting “individually”. Here we can witness the Serbian ‘othering’ of the Albanians (in the sense of the ‘grammar of orientalization’(Baumann)) – they are marked as traditional, non-integratable, simply too different (and even dangerous “separatists” or “terrorists”). It is important to note, that this difference is primarily constructed as cultural/‘civilizational’, and not as religious or economic. On the other hand, Albanian participants in the research tended almost unequivocally to perceive Serbs as being (over) privileged or entitled to different benefits Albanians do not have access to. What is interesting is a similar form of collective designation when it comes to Serbs as an [abstract] ethnic group; for instance, participants would say “*Why do Serbs need higher education here in Bujanovac if they have it in Nis or Vranje*” (thus equating all Serbs, regardless of locality, age or socio-economic status). However ‘closer-up’ differences and variations appear, many of the interviewed persons would say that they have good relations with their Serb neighbors, etc. In a similar vein, the narrative of the ‘othering’ is frequently reserved for the (imaginary) “State”; that is, central government in Belgrade. Although this “state” is sometimes understood as representing primarily Serb ethnic interests, there are still variations in the levels of distancing between local Albanians and Belgrade-based vs. locally-based Serbs. In the latter case, there

¹¹ All the members of the research team, except for the local coordinator, were Serbian speakers, and thus it is highly likely that they were perceived as members of the same ethnic group by the interview partners of Serb ethnicity, but not by those of the Albanian. In this context, it is possible that Albanian narratives ‘othering’ Serbs, if they existed, would not be communicated in the interviews.

seems to be less distance, frequently warm relations, and even a certain sense of comradeship, especially among those working together.

⇒ **Diachronical dimension:** There are a number of different (though not always competing) interpretations of the past, which point to different agendas and ideas related to their application in the current political situation. On the one hand, the period of the former Yugoslavia (“the Tito-period”) is sometimes narrated, constructed and imagined as the ‘golden age’ of multiculturalism; marked by greater proximity between the communities and a more pronounced integration/inclusion of Albanians and, not unimportantly, higher economic development. On the other hand, those emphasizing the discrimination and marginalization, both of the Albanian community and the region in general, also place the origins of this trend in the “Tito era”. Most of the participants agree in the unreserved criticism of the “Milosevic era”; primarily in the sense of further ethnic divisions and what Albanian interview partners describe as repressive policies.

- **The 2001 conflict** as a point in history is often referred to only in passing; engaging participants in a longer narration regarding it and its immediate aftermath usually required some prompting. Overall, the most frequently encountered narrative is the claim that the conflict was “not between people” (usually coupled with the idea that “interethnic relations were always good”), but rather was “imposed”, coming from “outside”; the state (Gendarmerie) and the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja combatants, or simply “politicians”. A lengthy quote from one of our interview partners (Albanian, male, living in Bujanovac) sums up this sort of position very well:

“When you speak to the Serbs, and the Roma, they will all say we've always lived well here together. With each other. But a third party did not want to keep it that way. Neither Serbs, nor Albanians, nor Roma in Bujanovac are to blame... [When you say 'third party', what do you have in mind?] I mean Belgrade. And they're the ones who can solve it, no one else can. So, there is good will here to live together, we have always lived together, and never had problems. I'm 48 years old and have never had any problems either with Roma or Serbs“.

- **Rejection** of the idea of **own involvement in the conflict** is quite pronounced among all participants in the research. In this sense, the participants' narratives seem to partially back up the theory of the conflict as having 'spilt over' from Kosovo. However, this conclusion needs to be taken with caution, as it is impossible to estimate how much the participants' perceptions and narratives have been, and still are, influenced and shaped by different constructions of the conflict, including those that attribute it to the 'spillover effect'. Some of the interview partners involved in international development work in the region state that the Kosovo conflict has become "internalized" [by the Albanian population of Presevo and Bujanovac] and that, despite the Končulj agreement, it continues as the conflict with the "imaginary state".
- References to the **post-conflict period** are mixed and different. Some participants are critical of how "October 5th never came to the South" (presumably meaning democratic changes were never fully implemented); some relate to the work of Zoran Đinđić (Prime Minister of Serbia 2000-2003, assassinated in 2003) and Nebojša Čović, the first President of the Coordination Body, as positive examples, but say their legacy is not felt.
- Many of the participants in the research spoke of the "**inherited lack of trust**". In the context of the evolution and dynamics of interethnic relations described above, it seems that this stems equally from the period *before*, as well as *after*, the conflict. The lack of trust is evident in participants' usually very critical appraisal of the actions/achievements of the other ethnic group. Another component is the absence of trust in the state and its institutions, present mostly with Albanian and Roma participants. Almost without exception, all actions of the state are viewed with high criticism and suspicion, and (rare) positive appraisals are usually immediately qualified by negative aspects.

The local context

The local context (in the sense of the local institutional setting: local politics, civil society and international organizations) is characterized by the continuation and reproduction of ethnic divisions. Many participants felt there was a lack of a systematic, continuous and long-term strategy to de-marginalize and develop the region, integrate communities and reduce tensions.

- ⇒ **Marginalization and ‘in-between-ness’:** both municipalities (Presevo and Bujanovac) are, as already emphasized, characterized by their position of being ‘on the margins’ and, at the same time, ‘in between’ other entities (in this case, Serbia and Kosovo, or Belgrade and Prishtina). This is partially, of course, due to the region’s geographical position (and ethnic composition), but is also related to the ways the region is constructed in institutional contexts.
- ⇒ **Differences between Presevo and Bujanovac:** The fact that the municipalities of Presevo and Bujanovac are, as a rule, grouped ‘together’, is another example of a ‘marginalizing’ and ‘othering’ discourse which defines these places primarily through their ethnic composition (i.e. the percentage of Albanian population) and/or the history of the conflict. However, in the ‘symbolic geography’ of many of the interview partners, Presevo and Bujanovac, though sharing common problems (beginning with economic underdevelopment), are clearly distinguished from each other. Thus, Presevo is (both by ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’) portrayed as more “independent” or “stubborn” (one Albanian interview partner described the local government in Presevo as “[Albanian] nationalist and refusing to cooperate with the central authorities”), whereas Bujanovac is more strongly integrated within the state. Similarly, Bujanovac is usually referred to and described as an example of ‘multiethnicity’, whereas Presevo is considered to be an “Albanian” town. Contrary to this, there is the perception communicated by some of the Serb interview partners from Presevo, that their town and in particular the surrounding villages are the locus of “authentic multiculturalism”, marked by active neighbor/friendship-relations and the implicitness of the knowledge and usage of both Albanian and Serbian as the prime marker of living together and not side-by-side.
- ⇒ **Local politics:** the political arena in both municipalities is primarily defined by ethnic affiliations (i.e. ‘Serb’ and ‘Albanian’ parties), and only secondly by party (or ideological) attachments. However, there are pronounced differences between Presevo and Bujanovac. Whereas the local politicians in Presevo tend to be more ‘hard-line’, in the sense of proximity to Kosovo politics and frequent references to the idea of the secession of the Presevo Valley (or territorial swap of Presevo and Bujanovac for the north of Kosovo), Bujanovac has a multiethnic local governance (in practice, this means that the parties representing major ethnic groups participate

in local administration together) and its local politicians seem to see the Republic of Serbia as the primary political framework. Though the situation is too complex to allow for easy generalizations, overall it could be said that the political arena in Bujanovac is more integrated in the context and framework of the Republic of Serbia; whereas the political arena in Presevo, though within the framework of the Republic of Serbia, has equally strong connections to ‘external’ political actors, including those in Kosovo. This difference is sometimes explicit in the narratives of local politicians: those from Bujanovac (regardless of ethnicity), refer to Serbia as “here” and are adamant about Bujanovac’s position within the Republic of Serbia; an (Albanian) interview partner even related with irritation how he had to explain to some politicians from the north of Serbia that “*no, Presevo and Bujanovac are not in Kosovo*”. Politicians from Presevo, on the other hand, conceptualize the region (Presevo and Bujanovac, sometimes including Medvedja) as a more distinct entity, frequently emphasizing its specific status.

- ⇒ The position of **local politicians** (on different levels) is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, these politicians aim (and claim) to have good connections with the local community (especially ‘their’ ethnic group), and, more often than not, even as civil servants, continue to act as representatives/advocates of that particular group. On the other hand, they have obligations and loyalties on other levels, starting from local governance, to state, to international community. In this sense, the legitimacy of the local politicians is derived from two sources: one is from ‘below’ – their influence and capability to represent the interests of the local community (usually ethnic community); the other is from ‘above’ – recognition (official or unofficial) by the representatives of the state and the international community and thus the (perceived or real) capacity to influence the success or failure of different national and international policies and initiatives. Thus, local politicians act less as policy ‘entrepreneurs’ and more as ‘interpreters’ or intermediaries; one of them (Albanian, living in Bujanovac) describes the sort of pressure coming from below as “*(...) What would the people from my village say? Their votes got me elected here, and you can't act irresponsibly at this time, because they are watching you, following you, hearing you.*” Another (Serb, living in Bujanovac) says: “*Here, people vote for persons. I was in [...] for five years, I was at every house, I knew everybody personally. People get to know you, have trust, that's important. You should never betray their trust.*”

- ⇒ Alone, this would suggest that political initiatives are perceived as coming either **from the ‘bottom’ or from the ‘top’**. However, this assumption needs to be counteracted with the distance that the majority of people feel towards the world of politics. Despite frequently engaging in discussions and having opinions about the political situation in the region and beyond, not a lot of people seem keen to become actively involved in local politics or think that they can influence it. In the words of one of the interview partners, “*Politics is distant from common citizens. We cannot influence it*”. Another participant emphasized the lack of political participation and agency of women. Thus, the nascent political elite is vital in not only presenting and mediating local needs in the national and international arena, but also in influencing and shaping them.
- ⇒ The **media** play quite a significant role in Bujanovac and Presevo, however, the local media situation has also been shaped by ethno-political divisions and conflicts. In the past, this was reflected in tensions over the distribution of frequencies and funding for local media channels. Currently, the situation is somewhat stable; TV Bujanovac has programs in three languages – Serbian, Albanian and Roma. It appears as if participants overall have more trust in the local as opposed to national or international media; frequently it is mentioned that ethnic divisions/conflicts in Presevo and Bujanovac were “(over)inflated by the media”, giving the impression that ‘external’ media contributed to the conflict in 2000-2001.
- ⇒ **Local civil society**: The region has a young and developing civil society. However, the civil society scene in Presevo and Bujanovac, just like other aspects of society, is profoundly marked by the idea of ‘ethnic divisions’ and the concept of the region as a post-conflict society. Thus, civil society initiatives are either aimed at ‘reconciliation and integration’ of communities or, alternatively, constitute projects of identity-building for particular communities. This is not surprising given that civil society in Presevo and Bujanovac is entirely dependent on external donor funding. In this context, local initiatives are geared to suit donor priorities and agendas. Although this provides the needed and important impetus for the development of civil society, it negatively affects the sustainability of initiatives, and their capacity to react to the broader or more long-term needs of the population.

⇒ **International organizations:** Given the presence of international organizations and development initiatives in the region, it may come as a slight surprise that participants in the study rarely commented on their impact. After prompting, they would usually recall some of the good things “they” had done, mostly in terms of infrastructural investment. The local population seemed to appreciate most when international involvement in the region would produce observable, “tangible” results, such as schools etc. On the other hand, some of the participants, including those involved in the work of some of the international organizations, openly criticized what they described as a “*lack of direction...lack of coordination between organizations/donors. Everybody’s just doing what they are doing anyway*”. Although donor coordination is aimed at avoiding the duplication of efforts, it seems that what is lacking is a more pronounced sense of direction or reliable methods of evaluation of what has been achieved. One of the interview partners said that international organizations sometimes act as “parents” towards the state or local politicians who are described as “immature children”. However, one of the things that are rarely openly discussed is the relevance of international presence for employment, but also for the opportunities for the local population to get work experience and training. When this is mentioned, some of the participants seemed to be critical of the people who, having worked for such an organization, developed their own non-governmental organizations. Others seemed to see it as normal or even expected. Overall, it seems that the international presence in Presevo and Bujanovac is tolerated and accepted, but that there is little reflection on the political mandates or outcomes of the work of these organizations, as well as on differences between them.

Post-conflict and Peace Building Initiatives

*Reflections on the post-conflict development and peacebuilding initiatives; relations between Serbia and Kosovo; perspectives for the future: The **conflict** was between “external” actors (combatants and the military/state); it did not arise out of the character of (interethnic) relations, but was rather **created** by the “politicians”. Thus, ‘peacebuilding’ as a concept can be perceived as borrowed or even imposed.*

⇒ Given the ‘external’ nature ascribed to the conflict in 2001, it is not surprising that many of the interview partners saw peacebuilding as a concept that is borrowed or

even imposed. As some of our interview partners engaged in local peacebuilding project reflected, years of marginality and neglect created layers of mistrust and a generation of politicians who offer an ethnic agenda only, rather than a civic or a regional one. Instead of emphasizing regional needs and identities of “Preševljani and Bujanovčani”, there is more political gain from continuing to emphasize divisions. In that sense, peacebuilding should not just aim at quotas of Albanians or Serbs – as one activist put it, “to look good in the final report” - but rather focus on the regional identities and challenges that all communities in south Serbia share. The image that we heard more than once suggested that what was done so far was on the level of “make-up” only, on the surface, comparing it with “building a house from the roof”. Instead, many of our interview partners claimed that building trust and peace must start from the roots; from the basis of the problems.¹² The local offices of peacebuilding projects currently operating from Bujanovac have become spaces of exchange and everyday encounters between Albanians and Serbs, but participants claimed that even in these spaces, the real issues or their root causes are never openly discussed.

⇒ Reflections on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo: an example of what is not discussed in the peacebuilding/international organizations environment is the week of the declaration of independence in Kosovo. The participants claimed that, while Albanians in Kosovo and elsewhere were celebrating in the streets, in Bujanovac or Presevo the celebrations took place much more privately. People celebrated inside private spaces and with their families, but shared no emotions about it openly in work or public space. In spite of the fact that additional research would be necessary to pursue this issue further, referring to the theoretical remarks, one could interpret this as everyday practices to manage and negotiate multiple loyalties and strategies of belonging. The unsolved relations between Belgrade and Prishtina are like a dark shadow over local relations between members of Serb and Albanian communities in South Serbia. While often in the local news one can read references to a politician’s statement reiterating the solution of an exchange of territory between Kosovo and Serbia (Barlovac, 2011),¹³ many interview partners – as has been already noted – have expressed feelings of being “hostage” to this frozen situation as long as issues such as

¹² This in fact corresponds well with John Paul Lederach’s seminal work on peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997).

¹³ See more in the Balkan Insight Spotlight on South Serbia, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/tag-group-topics/south-serbia-focus>

the recognition of diplomas, transportation or trade are not solved.¹⁴ This points to the conclusion that participants in the study have a relatively clearly defined **hierarchy of needs** of the region, in which economic development, growth and jobs are the *basis*, whereas community relations and building trust are *superstructures*.

- ⇒ **Future prospects:** The previously mentioned motive of marginalization and lack of agency/entrepreneurship also plays an important role in the imagining and narrating of future prospects. Overall, the interview partners communicate relatively bleak and pessimistic outlooks for the future, coupled with uncertainties and indeterminacies. The impression is that most of the participants (especially those who are not actively involved in politics) feel like passive observers in a political game in which the region is the ‘bargaining chip’. There is a clear and pronounced idea that the future of the region first and foremost depends on political developments, including the outcome of negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina, but also longer-term goals such as European integration.
- ⇒ This perception is supported by a predominant lack of a sense of control over one’s own destiny: the future will be determined by the outcome of the interactions of ‘external’ factors (such as the political proxies, “Belgrade” and “Prishtina”), and the influence of individual agency is negligible, if not entirely absent. This motive is repeated in the projections of the role and agency of the state (expectations and hopes “if the state does this or that”), as well as of the EU and international community more broadly. In most of the interviews, membership of the EU figures as a positive future blueprint, and correlates with a vision of socio-economic prosperity and equality.
- ⇒ Stimulating economic development and creating employment are by far most frequently mentioned as prerequisites for the future development/integration of Presevo and Bujanovac. Most interview partners expect the state to have a leading role in this, although foreign investment and the work of international organizations/donors is frequently mentioned as well. Economic development and employment are also presented as blueprints for achieving integration and better relations between communities, as opposed to the mentioned concept of “artificial” (fabricated) multiculturalism. As participants say, “*Put people to work together and they will live together and interethnic relations will develop*”.
- ⇒ This also entails the idea of removing the structural obstacles to a joint life, meaning overcoming segregated schooling and work, developing multiethnic governance, etc.

¹⁴ At the time of writing, there are indications that negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina may result in a solution for the issue of diploma recognition.

Many participants claim that this would also contribute to the feeling of ‘belonging, i.e. being “really” (fully) citizens of the Republic of Serbia. All this would reduce the distance and tensions between the communities.

V. Conclusions

The discussions with our interview partners, as well as observations and informal conversations, point to a complex reality, and nuanced voices and perceptions related to the causes and consequences of the conflict in Presevo and Bujanovac. The conclusions presented below aim at summarizing them and, in particular, pointing to those results that may provide fresh perspectives on, and insights into, the common perceptions of the dynamics in south Serbia.

- Many of our interviewees seem to feel that **ethnic divisions in Presevo and Bujanovac significantly pre-date the conflict in 2001** or even the general worsening of the position of ethnic minorities in former Yugoslavia, beginning from 1980 onwards.
- Although Serbs, Albanians and Roma were living ‘side-by-side’ in peace and had generally good relations, there are indicators that show that in **reality communities rarely interacted beyond certain boundaries**. Besides geographical (spatial, urban/rural etc.), linguistic and perceived cultural divisions, the persistence of social fault lines can be derived from the reported absence/low rate of intermarriages, despite the existence of interethnic (particularly Serb-Albanian) friendships. These fault lines were further exacerbated during the economic and political crisis in the nineties, when Albanians started experiencing discrimination in employment and some other spheres of social life.
- The **political and economic crisis of the 1990s** that exacerbated the social inequalities, especially in the poorer parts of the former Yugoslavia, provided a **fertile ground** for attempts to fight for greater equality through means of **ethnic mobilization** (see Jenne 2006). The context of the continued repression of ethnic Albanians and the ensuing international intervention in Kosovo, coupled with the (Serb) nationalist revival in Serbia, further contributed to ethnic differentiation and the growing importance of ethnic identity as the basis for political programs. In this context, the **Presevo Valley conflict** that took place in 2001 can be interpreted as an **extreme, or violent, form of ethnic mobilization** with, presumably, political goals. In this way, the conflict can be related not only (and perhaps not primarily) to the ethnic conflict in Kosovo, but also to the conflict in Macedonia that also happened in 2001.

- The consequences of this form of ethnic mobilization continue to **shape the daily political life of both Presevo and Bujanovac**, where parties and political leaders, as well as the main issues, are defined primarily by their ethnic affiliation. The “state” (Republic of Serbia), and especially the central government in Belgrade, are thus, in many instances, identified with the representation and protection of (ethnic) Serb national interests. Of course, this is not without foundation, as the representation of Albanians and Roma in central and higher instances of public administration in Serbia is very low to almost non-existent.
- Consequently, most of the issues in the **daily life of Presevo and Bujanovac** are **viewed through an ethnic ‘lens’**. In this context, Albanians tend to be very critical of the policies of the government (both in Belgrade and the Coordination Body) and see every ‘wrong’ step as directed against their ethnic group; Serbs interpret public policies aimed at integration as “favoritism” towards Albanians and Roma; the Roma feel that the relations between Albanians and Serbs dominate the public realm; and the Serbian central government interprets most of the actions of the Albanian politicians as ‘stubbornness’, ‘obstinateness’ or even ‘separatism’ (cf. Jenne 2006).
- This sort of climate and political balance of power contributes to the **lack of trust** between communities. Namely, the ethnic character of political bargaining, coupled with a relative lack of funds and investment exacerbated by the economic crisis, makes it easy to view social and public policies as a ‘zero-sum game’, in which all gains for one ‘side’ (ethnic group) are automatically losses for the other. This kind of atmosphere can indeed be **peaceful** (i.e. characterized by the absence of open conflict), but it **does not help integration**. On the contrary, the lack of trust means that people view the actions of everybody coming from a ‘different’ group with a degree of suspicion; this may explain what many participants described as inherent or existing “instability” in the region.
- The **initiatives aimed at “reconciliation” or “peacebuilding” often, willingly or not, reproduce the ethnic divisions described above**. The international organizations active in the region, by and large, take ethnic divisions (whether as the cause or consequence of the 2001 conflict) as a ‘given’ and approach the development of Presevo and Bujanovac within this framework. Approaches to the conflict in 2001 as a ‘spillover’ from Kosovo and treating the region in the context of the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia after

1990 further reinforce the concept of Presevo and Bujanovac as societies deeply divided primarily along ethnic lines. This sort of prioritization also reflects on the **local civil society initiatives**, which tend to **follow international (or national) donor agendas and priorities**. Thus, local initiatives tend to fall into two categories: a) those aimed at ‘reconciliation’ and ‘crossing boundaries’, in the sense of providing venues or contexts in which (usually young) people from different ethnic groups can interact; b) those aimed at developing the identity of, empowering and fighting for the rights of a particular group (e.g. Roma). As much as many of these initiatives are valuable for the (even if temporary) employment and engagement of the local population, they can create, reproduce or contribute to the perception that development, engagement and advocacy of one’s rights is only, or primarily, possible in the framework of ethnic identities. Similar trends can be noted in societies with ‘consociational’ (power-sharing) arrangements, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia; as stated, it is questionable to which extent they allow for integration and to which extent they reproduce the ethnic and other societal divisions.

- The perception of many of the interview partners of the **“fake”, “imposed” or “artificial” multiculturalism** can be understood as a consequence of this approach. Namely, participants almost without exception criticize the absence of ‘tangible’ economic development in the region and, similarly, they are almost unequivocal in the positive appraisal of the work of both international organizations and public administration of the Republic of Serbia when concrete, observable results are produced. Many claim and seem to think that employment and economic growth will produce social integration, and not vice versa. This can also explain why ‘peacebuilding’ as a concept was felt as imposed or even outright rejected by many of the participants. Given the predominant refusal of the idea of their own involvement in the 2001 conflict, and its almost unequivocal qualification as “external” - something that “wasn’t between the people but between the Army/police forces and rebels”, “politicians” etc. - it is not that surprising that most of the interview partners felt that ‘peacebuilding’ is an approach to development that was not best suited to local needs and problems.

VI. Recommendations

The situation in Presevo and Bujanovac is complicated and complex. As this research shows, there are many overlapping layers of problems. In this context, it is not easy to provide recommendations or definitive guidelines on how to approach development, peace- and trust-building initiatives. However, based on the data gathered during this research, there are suggestions for how to approach local development in Presevo and Bujanovac:

8) *Focus on initiatives that engage the local population (from different communities) in joint projects and endeavors that are not necessarily framed in the context of ‘reconciliation’, and have longer-lasting outcomes that directly contribute to the economic and social development of the region.*

- Employment on different (shared) projects and enterprises aimed at local economic development is one of the ways in which members of different communities can work together;
- Life-long learning, especially programs and courses that help participants develop skills relevant for future employment (i.e. computer skills, writing and presentation skills, languages), are equally relevant to all communities. These courses are sometimes available in the context of the National Employment Service, but can be developed and expanded, especially so they can reach people who are not necessarily registered as unemployed (e.g. Roma women, recent graduates etc.);
- Learning a second (Albanian/Serbian/Roma) and third (English, German, Russian, French) language can provide venues in which participants with different backgrounds can meet, interact and communicate. It offers a lot of opportunities for exchange (e.g. mutual language tutoring), and can also increase the participants’ chances for gaining future employment.

9) *Stimulate and support initiatives that aim to engage, educate and involve people from Presevo and Bujanovac – in particular women, young persons and other marginalized groups – in issues related to local development, political participation and community involvement etc. These initiatives should cut across ethnic lines – for instance, the (already existing) multiethnic football club, environmental initiatives, local businesses, etc.*

- One of the things the results of the research consistently show is that the majority of the population – the so-called ‘ordinary’ people – feel disempowered and distant from the realm of decision-making, even at the local level. Although the general aspect of political participation in Serbia may take years to change, some steps towards fuller involvement of the local population can be taken, whether in the form of public discussions, consultations, information sessions, citizens’ juries etc. These initiatives should ideally focus on issues that are of relevance to all citizens regardless of ethnic identity – such as the environment (for instance, water and waste management etc.), infrastructure (roads, sewage and public transport etc.) or security (safety and policing etc.).
- Special efforts should be taken to stimulate women and other marginalized groups to take active part in these discussions. This is often difficult to achieve and may run counter to some perceptions of ‘appropriate’ gender roles, but women’s groups – both regional/national and international – can provide expertise and advice for such projects.

10) Develop programs for political leaders and representatives in order to redirect the focus of local politics from being exclusively ethnic to more issue-based.

- A consistent finding is that local politicians see themselves firstly and primarily as representatives of their ethnic group, and only secondly as representatives of citizens. Although this is to a large extent an expected consequence of the principle of ‘ethnic voting’ common in most divided societies with some form of power sharing, it doesn’t imply that local politicians should not attempt to work for the entire population/municipality. Public discussions and debates mentioned in the previous item are one of the ways of achieving this.
- Developing mechanisms of public accountability and transparency, and clamping down on corruption and nepotism, are necessary steps in this process.

11) Develop and support programs that give visible, ‘tangible’ results, such as investments in infrastructure etc.

- Overall, participants in the research emphasized how they appreciate international involvement more if it produces ‘visible’ outcomes. This, of course, does not mean that development efforts should be solely focused on providing infrastructure, but rather that programs that are less obvious and take longer to produce results should,

ideally, be coupled with those programs that bring immediate benefits to the local population.

12) Actively address the issue of migration/diaspora with respect to all three communities, and empower/encourage an active approach to the development of the region both in terms of economic development and integration.

- Migration is not a phenomenon “outside” of the “home” society, but rather – through active transnational social networks and flows pursued by migrants as social agents – represents a crucial transformative factor and resource for both the “receiving” and “home” country. In this sense the, to date, completely ignored fact that the region is strongly marked by migration to Western Europe should be addressed – by the state, civil society and international organizations – not necessarily as an issue of “brain drain”, but also as a valuable potential for the further development of the region.

13) Continue developing coordination amongst international organizations, donors, but also local initiatives, as well as state institutions present in the field.

- Many participants in the study have emphasized what they described as the lack of donor coordination and long-term investment in the region. Although this may create opportunities for short-term employment of citizens of Presevo and Bujanovac, especially those already active in the civil society, in the longer term it does not help sustainable development.

14) Do not ignore the legacy of the conflict, but be aware of the reproduction of ethnic divisions, as well as other inequalities that may be obscured by ethnic divisions.

- One of the issues that have not been properly dealt with in the context of the post-conflict development of Presevo and Bujanovac is contending with the memories and legacies of all those who had participated in, or closely witnessed, the conflict. Political considerations and fears of consequences may be the reason why the Government of Serbia and former combatants, respectively, have not dealt with this issue. However, our research showed that those who have experienced the conflict have no problems talking about it openly, as long as the atmosphere is confidential and non-judgmental. Given the political status of international organizations, this is one of the fields in which international involvement may be highly beneficial.

- Dealing with the legacy of the conflict should not entail the reproduction of ethnic divisions in Presevo and Bujanovac. To a certain extent, there is a good basis to avoid this, as the local population predominantly sees the conflict as something “external” that largely did not involve local people. Thus, it is possible to frame the discussion of post-conflict legacies, as well as the development of security and trust, as **regional** and not ethnic issues.
- Special attention should be paid to the voices and needs of those who are usually forgotten in the construction of the conflict, and ethnic relations, as being primarily between Serbs and Albanians. This includes the Roma, who are the most marginalized, but also women, children, in some cases young people, as well as those with special needs. Many of the problems and issues facing these groups cut across ethnic divisions, thus dealing with them can help not only improve their relative position, but also overcome some of the divisions based on ethnicity (e.g. solidarity between women can run counter to the solidarity with one’s own ethnic group).

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About the Center for Comparative Conflict Studies (CFCCS)

The CFCCS is an educational Center at the Faculty of Media and Communications (FMK), Singidunum University. The CFCCS is dedicated to the comparative analysis of societies in conflict. Working primarily within the context of the conflicts in the former republics of Yugoslavia and Palestine/Israel, the Center provides opportunities for university students, scholars, and adults to critically engage in the study and research of conflict, its transformation, and various roles taken-up within conflicts. In so doing, the Center offers theoretical and practical resources for those working to be effective agents of social change. We achieve our goals by offering comparative interdisciplinary frameworks for understanding dynamics within societies in conflict.

The center is currently engaged in: a) research projects; b) teaching Peace and Conflict Studies; c) Comparative Study Tours; and d) organizing the Summer School in Comparative Conflict Studies that so far took place at the Faculty of Media and Communications in 2010 and 2011.

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