

## **Presevo Students See Future in Serbia**

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Despite lingering local distrust of Belgrade, Presevo Albanian youngsters are heading to the Serbian capital to study.

“We talked in school recently about where we were going to study. I told them I wanted to go to Belgrade,” Ragmi Mustafi, a high school student from Bujanovac, in southern Serbia, told IWPR.

Anywhere else in Serbia such a remark would hardly be noteworthy, but not here in the Presevo valley, where for years local Albanians have attended university in Kosovo.

“The teacher looked at me in surprise, and then told me that a lamb should not wonder away from its flock, or the wolves would eat it. But the teacher studied in Belgrade, he often goes there, and no one has eaten him yet.”

After several decades of refusing to cooperate with the Serbian authorities, there are now signs some young Albanians in this region see their future in Serbia, not Kosovo.

From the very beginning of Slobodan Milosevic’s rule, Albanians in the Presevo valley began withdrawing from public life. When Kosovo’s autonomous status was revoked in the late eighties, people here were targeted for protesting against the move.

The situation continually worsened. And in 1992, the Presevo Albanians held an unofficial referendum calling for independence from Yugoslavia and union with Kosovo. Ninety-five per cent voted in favour.

They no longer recognised Belgrade’s authority, refused to participate in state affairs and abstained from all elections and censuses. If they wanted to study beyond secondary schools, they went to universities in Kosovo, Albania or western Macedonia.

That came to an end when the region was riven by armed conflict between the Yugoslav army and Albanian guerrillas from January 2000 until mid-2001.

Fighting died down after an internationally-brokered deal was reached between the two sides, under which the Albanians disarmed and gave up plans for secession in return for guarantees of greater human rights and representation in local government and police structures.

The agreement opened the way for a process of fuller integration into Serbia. But many here still lack confidence in Serbian institutions - especially the largely unreformed army.

Albanian youngsters, however, are more inclined to at least consider playing a more active part in Serbian life, believing the political changes in Belgrade will open new opportunities for them - hence their growing desire to study in Belgrade.

Amir Xhaferi, who is just about to graduate from a high school in the Presevo town of Veliki Trnovac, told

IWPR that he plans to attend the military academy in the Serbian capital in order to fulfil his dream of becoming a pilot. He said he was better off studying there than in Kosovo or Macedonia.

Jeton Ljutfiu, also from Veliki Trnovac, said he wants to study economics in Belgrade when he leaves high school. "Bearing in mind that the Belgrade University is as good as any in Europe, that's where I want to be. I will then be able to return home and make a useful contribution to my municipality," he said.

Those who head for the capital to complete their education, however, risk provoking the wrath of their neighbours who continued to distrust the Serbian authorities.

"I do not know if I am afraid more of my own people or of the Serbs," said Nedzat Azizi, a local lawyer, who is thinking of sending his son to study in Belgrade.

"My father [said] you can get knowledge and a chance to succeed only there. That is your country and your capital - he told me. Now, my son is getting ready for university. I have the same opinion as my father."

Azizi said this has not gone down well with locals, "They are already labelling us as spies."

He, like many parents of students going to Belgrade, are equally anxious of what might lie in wait for their children when they arrive there, " What if something happens to my son? The Serbs killed their own prime minister, so why wouldn't they kill an Albanian?"

While political and religious leaders in southern Serbia have not commented publicly about the education trend, there are indications that they don't exactly approve.

Behlul Nasufi, deputy head of the region's ruling Party for Democratic Action, feels the move to study in Belgrade is premature. "It is too early for Albanians to go," he said. "The wounds from the recent past are still fresh and deep."

In an effort to encourage more Presevo youngsters to enrol in Serbian universities and generally acquire a better understanding of Serbia, the Belgrade-based Centre for Inter-ethnic Reconciliation, in a move backed by the government, is offering scholarships for 100 students to several higher education institutions, financial assistance for sports clubs to compete outside the region and funding for cultural exchanges between Albanian and Serbian artists.

Serbia's education minister Gasa Knezevic has already voiced his support for the scholarship project. "I will do my best to make sure that every young Albanian who meets the standards and wants to study in Belgrade is enrolled," he said.

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