

## **Serbs Set for Kosovo Return**

**Author:** [Miroslav Filipovic](#)

Serb refugees disillusioned with life in Serbia are being encouraged to return to Kosovo.

Around 20,000 Kosovo Serb refugees could be repatriated under a plan drafted by Serb leaders in the province.

The Serbian National Council, SNV, says its proposal, which has been submitted to the international community, would help to create multi-ethnic territory in the north of Kosovo.

Under the plan, refugees would return to the parishes of Istok and Klina, located between Mitrovica and Zubin Potok, the only places where Serbs have remained in large numbers.

Following the withdrawal of Serbian forces last June, about 350,000 non-Albanians left Kosovo, among them about 270,000 Serbs. Cold-shouldered and faced with insurmountable financial difficulties in Serbia, many now want to return to Kosovo.

Mihajlo Doncic, from Bice in Kosovo, lives with around fifty other Serb refugees in one household in Jovac, near Kraljevo, Serbia, " We know we must be a burden to local people and to Serbia - that's why we want to go back.

"This weekend we visited our villages in Kosovo. They are all destroyed, but they are still our villages and our property."

Before the exodus from Kosovo, there were 34 villages in Istok and Klina in which Serbs formed the majority, and 41 in which they represented a significant minority. Serbs owned 60 per cent of the land in the area.

The leader of Serbs from Mitrovica and President of the Executive Council of SNV, Oliver Ivanovic, said, "The Serbs are facing a grave situation. Time is not on our side. We are getting further away from a multi-ethnic Kosovo every day."

According to the SNV, the refugee return will take place in two phases. The first will see Serbs going back to villages in which they were a majority; the second to where they were a minority. The stages are scheduled to finish by mid-June and the end of September respectively.

Ivanovic says the weakness of the plan, which is said to have US backing, is that KFOR may not be able to protect the refugees. "The return of the Serbs should be secured by KFOR," he says. "It is trained for such tasks, so it must be able to carry it out."

According to US officials, the successful return of Serb refugees would enhance the position of moderate Serbian leaders, encourage Serb co-operation with international officials and test the declared readiness of the Albanian politicians to accept a multi-ethnic Kosovo.

Ivanovic told IWPR that the US State Department has earmarked \$5 million for the repatriation programme. "It is not even near our needs, but it is a good figure to start with," he said.

The programme, however, has not been welcomed by UNHCR. "We can hardly support something like this at the moment," said a senior UNHCR official, adding the agency could only back repatriation when key conditions, such as the security of the refugees, their accommodation and access to public services, have been met.

NATO, however, is keen to see the process go-ahead, arguing repatriation can no longer wait for perfect conditions.

Meanwhile, The President of SNV in Mitrovica, Dr Vuko Antonijevic, has criticised humanitarian organisations that have helped Kosovo Serb refugees build houses in Serbia.

"This works against the interests of the Serbian people, " he said. "We want them to return. If somebody builds a house for them in Serbia, they will remain there. I appeal to the humanitarian organisations to wait for the refugees to go back and then build houses for them."

Ivanovic wants Albanian leaders to agree to the repatriation project in writing. So far, the Democratic Progressive Party of Kosovo, led by Hashim Thaci, has said it is not against the plan, but insists it should be preceded by the freeing of Albanian prisoners in Serbia.

At the same time, more and more refugees are making it clear that they no longer want to live in Serbia. Representatives from the Council for the Return of Serbs from Istok and Klina have opened offices in Kraljevo and Kragujevac - Serbian cities with the largest number of refugees from the two parishes - and they say the number of people eager to come back is growing.

"There is no life for us outside Kosovo," said Dragica Ruspic from Istok. "We're blamed for everything bad that happens in Serbia. Local people say we're responsible for everything."

Meanwhile, Bratislava Morina from the Ministry of Refugees in Serbia says Kosovo Serbs should not be compelled to return. "The SNV cannot make one person return to Kosovo, if he does not wish to do so," she said recently in Kraljevo, during the talks about the fate of about 25,000 refugees in this city.

It's clear that the current instability in the north of Kosovo would make it hard for Serbs to return. Repatriation, though, is a priority for those who stayed behind. "This year is decisive, " said Ivanovic. " Either Serbs return to Kosovo, or those of us who remain will leave for Serbia."

Miroslav Filipovic is a regular contributor to IWPR from Kraljevo.

**Location:** Serbia  
Kosovo

**Focus:** Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable  
Training

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/serbs-set-kosovo-return>