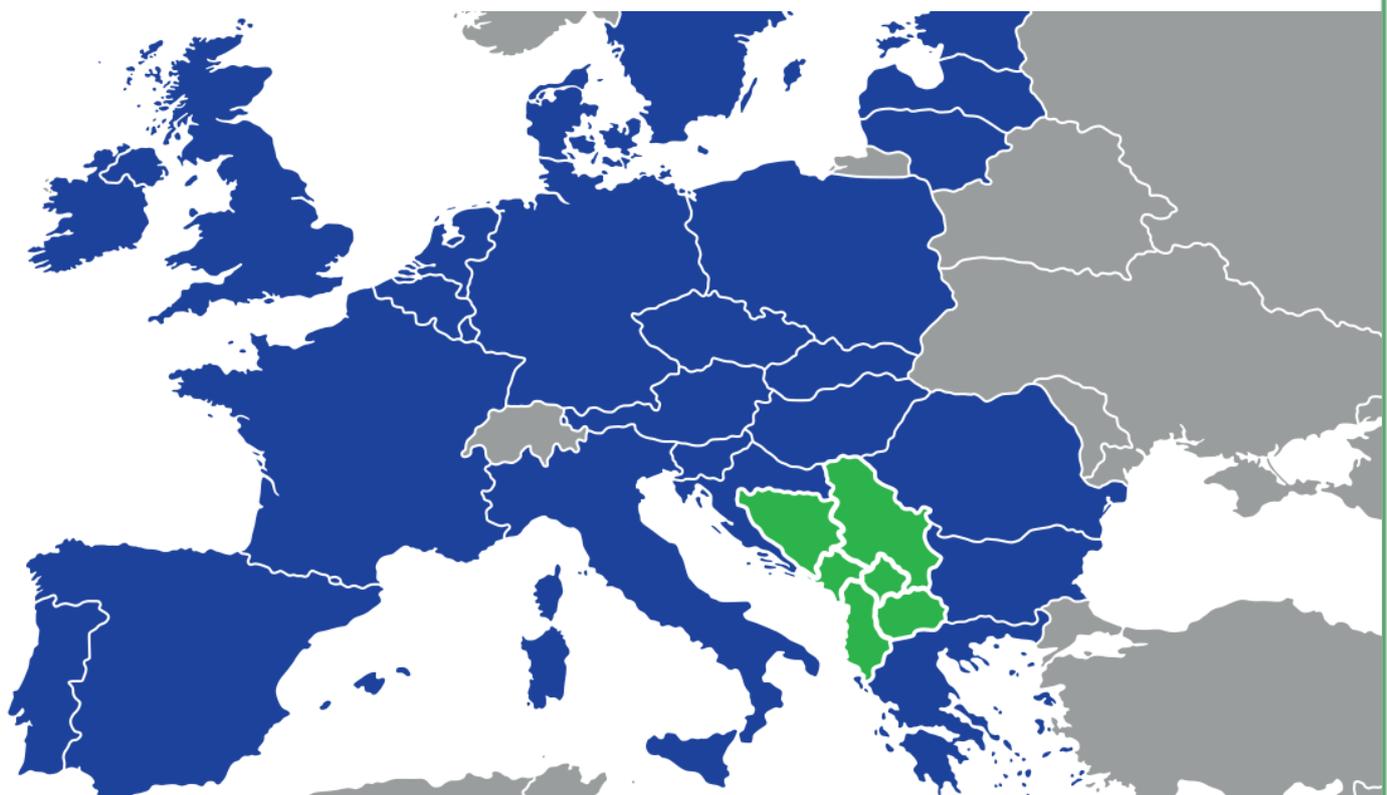


EASTERN MONITOR

Kosovo elections – moving towards better future?

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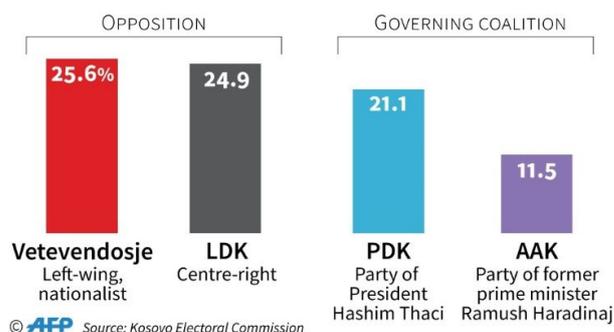
- **The result of the Kosovo parliamentary elections this October brought rather unexpected result, casting the ruling parties to opposition and ending 12 years of PDK-led governance in Kosovo, representing thus the first real governmental change since Kosovo's independence.**
- **The winner of the elections, the Vetevendosje ("Self-Determination") party, has become a part of the government for the very first time, with a very narrow victory over another opposition party, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK).**
- **Negotiations between the two parties on the formation of the government are already underway through frequent meetings of working groups and the agreement is expected to be reached next month.**



The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the party of Kosovo's incumbent President Hashim Thaci, narrowly ended up third after LDK. Together with its previous coalition partner, the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK) led by former PM Ramush Haradinaj, will be in opposition, as both Vetevendosje and LDK declared that they will not enter coalition with PDK. The results reflect the desire for a change among Kosovars, dissatisfied with the continued state capture, lack of progress in the fight against corruption and dire economic situation of majority of Kosovo population, including one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe, especially among young people.¹ By removal of the PDK and AAK coalition from power, the elections brought change that can potentially improve the image of Kosovo in the eyes of international community. One of the problems with Kosovo, pointed out by various state leaders, among them also the Czech President Miloš Zeman, was the association of ruling elites with the guerrilla forces, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Several former members of KLA are now being prosecuted for war crimes by the Special Court. After all, the snap elections itself was announced by the former PM Ramush Haradinaj, former KLA commander, after he had been called to the Hague for questioning in relation to war crimes investigations.² However, it is also noteworthy that despite the fact that PDK will be in opposition for the first time, the results as well as conduct of the election were not challenged by the former leaders and the change took place in a very calm and civilized manner, something that should not be taken for granted in the Western Balkans.

Parliamentary elections in Kosovo

Provisional results with 97.8% of votes counted



New faces of Kosovo's political transition

The rise of Vetevendosje and Albin Kurti to the position of the new government leader is arguably the biggest surprise of the election outcome. Vetevendosje, a center-left party with strong nationalist tendencies, has matured significantly over the years and seemingly evolved from a rather radical movement to a constructive and responsible party. At least that is what its leader's Albin Kurti's recent statements suggest regarding the new government's priorities. So far, the new government seems to be good news for Kosovo, possibly leading to turning things around, especially with regard to the fight against corruption and crime, economic issues and services for citizens. Kurti, leader of student protests in the late 90s, has announced that the priorities of his government will be rule of law, economic development, education and health sector, and social issues.³ The softening of Kurti's rhetoric is significant especially on Kosovo's relations with its

¹ World Bank, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2019, March 2019. Online available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/351461552915471917/pdf/135370-Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2019.pdf>.

² Haradinaj resigns as PM of Kosovo after an invitation for questioning in the Hague, *European Western Balkans*,

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/07/19/haradinaj-resigns-as-pm-of-kosovo-after-an-invitation-for-questioning-in-the-hague/>.

³ Key Takeaways From Kosovo's Watershed Vote, *Radio Free Europe*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-elections-watershed-key-takeaways/30204385.html>.

neighbours. While in opposition, Vetevendosje represented strong Albanian nationalism and pursued unification of Kosovo with Albania. While still pursuing the idea of unification with Albania, in recent statements, Kurti frames this unification as part of the larger process of European integration which eventually also leads to borders removal. Vetevendosje has also always strongly opposed dialogue with Serbia. In the position of PM, however, Kurti wants to continue the dialogue, although with a different approach than previous governments did, and the negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade are expected to start soon. Despite the optimism surrounding the new leadership, the lack of experience of Vetevendosje (and as a matter of fact, also Vjosa Osmani, LDK PM Candidate) with running a country might prove disadvantageous, although given Kosovo's aforementioned history, this would apply to any new incoming government. Despite ambitious plans, Kurti as well as Kosovo public might find out the new government will not be able to deliver on all promises, perhaps not due to the lack of political will but due to structural obstacles and the difficulty of changing a system during one government term. Another obstacle making Kurti's position difficult is be a potential push-back from the groups benefiting from the corrupt and malfunctioning system, resisting the changes the new government wants to implement.

The partnership between Vetevendosje and LDK might seem odd to those who have been following Kosovo politics, as both parties reside in different parts of the political spectrum, with Vetevendosje being in its center-left and LDK falling into its center-right part. Vetevendosje is more progressive and liberal than the usually conservative LDK. Furthermore, in the past, Vetevendosje was very critical of the government led by LDK Isa Mustafa for signing the deal with Belgrade facilitated by EU High

Representative Federica Mogherini, resulting even in violent protests.⁴ One of the less glamorous moments of Vetevendosje was when during the opposition to the border demarcation deal with Montenegro, Vetevendosje MPs used tear gas in the parliament to prevent its ratification.⁵

However, what seems to be a uniting factor in this not-so-obvious partnership, is the opposition to the parties ruling up until now and the will to break away from the grip on the state by former paramilitary KLA leaders, strongmen keeping in place a system functioning on corruption and nepotism. Both parties seem to have found common grounds also in other areas, such as equality in the workplace and quality of education.⁶ Other areas remain to be revealed once the government program is finalized and published and when it becomes clear which other coalition partners will be involved, especially from the parties representing ethnic minorities.⁷

Dialogue with Serbia – continued but different

The new political elites inherited from their predecessors plenty of not only internal but also external challenges, most urgently the stalled dialogue with Serbia on normalization of relations between the two countries. After the imposition of 100% tariffs on goods from Serbia by the previous Kosovo government, no meeting between Pristina and Belgrade has taken place under the EU-led dialogue, despite France's recent proactive involvement in its facilitation.⁸ Meanwhile, several steps from international actors suggest there might be a breakthrough pushed forward by the international community soon. First, the US

⁴ Kosovars use bricks, tear gas protesting EU agreement, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/12/kosovars-bricks-tear-gas-protesting-eu-agreement-151220110123486.html>.

⁵ Kosovo parliament ratifies border deal with Montenegro after stormy session, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-parliament-teargas/kosovo-parliament-ratifies-border-deal-with-montenegro-after-stormy-session-idUSKBN1GX1GB>.

⁶ Key Takeaways From Kosovo's Watershed Vote, *Radio Free Europe*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-elections-watershed-key-takeaways/30204385.html>.

⁷ Since 2008, from the 120 seats in the Kosovo Assembly, 20 seats are reserved for ethnic minorities representatives – 10 for Kosovo Serbs and 10 for other communities.

⁸ France's Macron pledges to relaunch Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-france/frances-macron-pledges-to-relaunch-serbia-kosovo-dialogue-idUSKCN1UA275>.

State Department appointed Matthew Palmer as the Special Representative for the Western Balkans, indicating renewed interest of the USA in the region.⁹ This appointment was recently followed with President Trump appointing current US Ambassador to Germany as the US Special Envoy for Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the EU has been trying to overcome the present failure in its leadership in the negotiations by discussing the possibility of appointing a Special Envoy for the dialogue¹¹, separating this agenda from the work of the EU High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy, who is leading the dialogue on behalf of the EU now.

In regards to Kosovo's new leaders, there also seems to be willingness to return to the negotiations table and adopt steps necessary to unblock the dialogue. The biggest change from the previous government is that the new PM's will henceforth most likely be leading the dialogue on Kosovo's side, taking over from President Thaci, who has been representing Kosovo until now, on the basis of an agreement with former PM Haradinaj. Kurti has expressed that he is in favour of revoking the tariffs against Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and continue the dialogue with Serbia. However, he also stressed that while the tariffs will be cancelled, other restrictive measures will be applied on the principle of reciprocity. For instance, at this moment, Serbia does not recognize Kosovo licence plates or Kosovo IDs – similar measures might be adopted by the new Kosovo government against Serbia.¹² According to Kurti, there is also no rush to reach an agreement with Serbia and, apparently, he intends to approach it patiently. First, he wants to start with a review of implementation of the agreements between Kosovo and Serbia which have already been signed. An interesting new factor is his will to establish proper communication with Kosovo Serbs and receiving their feedback and inputs in regard to the

evaluation of implementation of the existing agreements.¹³ This engagement of the Serbian community in Kosovo could help defuse the tensions between Kosovo Serbs and Pristina by giving a voice to the Serbian community in Kosovo, which is the most affected by the agreements yet at the same time also rarely consulted. All these signs indicate that the nature of the dialogue will change substantially and that the new Kosovo PM has a very different vision about its outcome from President Thaci, potentially making the continued dialogue more difficult. However, the conditions of the dialogue will be largely shaped also by the international actors and special envoys and their expectations. Thus, it is still too early to draw any conclusions.

Conclusion

The surprising outcome of the latest elections definitely represents a new chapter in Kosovo's modern history. The new leadership is taking over from politicians associated with KLA, war crimes, systemic corruption and lack of rule of law and progress on the European path. While the program of the new government will most probably be ambitious on paper, the expectations have to be tempered with a grain of scepticism. Even for the new leaders not associated with the previous regime, it might prove to be difficult to pursue all necessary reforms. Cooperation with other political parties as well as support from international community will be crucial. Nevertheless, the change taking place in Kosovo right now could be a historical one, meaning a real political transition and creating space for first real progress in the fight against corruption and strengthening rule of law. Exactly this

⁹ US special envoy: US will focus on Western Balkans again, *NI*, <http://ba.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a377154/US-special-envoy-US-will-focus-on-Western-Balkans-again.html>.

¹⁰ Richard Grenell named US Special Envoy for Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/04/richard-grenell-named-us-special-envoy-for-belgrade-pristina-dialogue/>.

¹¹ EU Envoy for Belgrade-Pristina dialogue to be appointed after Borrell's hearing?, *European Western Balkans*,

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/09/27/eu-envoy-for-belgrade-pristina-dialogue-to-be-appointed-after-borrells-hearing/>.

¹² Bershidsky, L., Kosovo Chooses Defiance Over Progress, *Bloomberg*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-10-07/kosovo-election-agreement-with-serbia-will-now-be-harder>.

¹³ Kosovo election: Incumbents defeated, dialogue with Belgrade to be resumed?, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/07/kosovo-election-incumbents-defeated-dialogue-with-belgrade-to-be-resumed/>.

internal change towards principles and values pursued by the EU and aligning with democratic standards can eventually open up doors for Kosovo's recognition and better international relations by diminishing the arguments most often touted by Kosovo's opponents, and prove that Kosovo is capable of being a functioning independent state.

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