

The Continuing Political Turmoil in Kosovo

by Bledar Feta

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Summary:

In the last Working Paper of ELIAMEP's South East Europe Programme, Research Associate Bledar Feta deals with the political situation in Kosovo. More specifically, the paper attempts to provide the main aspects of the political and institutional crisis that hit Kosovo after Parliamentary elections of June 8th, 2014. The aim of the paper, besides giving an overview of the most important developments since then, is to provide an analysis on the attempts of Kosovar political class to establish a stable government putting under the microscope their political behaviour. In addition, the paper deals with the last parliamentary elections, as well as the new government's priorities, the challenges ahead and the key policy issues which remain a major talking point in the political and public debate, polarizing opposition, the coalition government and the public opinion in general.

Key Words:

Political Crisis, Kosovo, Parliamentary Elections, Stable Government, Opposition, Paralyzed Parliament, Street Politics, Political Class.

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Table of Contents

About the South East Europe Programme	4
Introduction	5
2014 Parliamentary Elections – A Complex Internal Political Situation	6
PDK-LDK Coalition Government	8
A Highly Divided Political Scene – Paralyzed Parliament.....	9
Street Politics	10
PDK-LDK coalition collapse	13
Early elections – Widespread dissatisfaction with Kosovo's politics.....	15
Kosovo's new coalition has no stable foundation	20
Key policy issues at new government's agenda	21
Conclusion.....	24
Check South East Europe Programme Reports and Analyses:	25

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The Continuing Political Turmoil in Kosovo

Introduction

On June 11th, 2017, Kosovo held its third parliamentary elections since independence. This was the third time the Kosovar government turned to early elections trying to unlock a political stalemate in an effort to exorcise the ghosts of political and electoral past. Clearly, the successful completion of the electoral process was a progress and an opportunity for the country to move forward. At the same time, the flipside of this positive development was the political bargaining among country's political parties which complicated the government formation process. The main political parties in Kosovo have a long history of mutual animosity and it is difficult for them to find common ground and work for the good of the country as whole. As key national priorities are held up by this rivalry and the political deadlocks, public trust in politicians is approaching rock bottom. Three months after the snap parliamentary elections, Kosovo's political parties finally reached an agreement on forming a government. This fundamental step is beneficial for Kosovo's internal stability, but the continued political fragmentation between key political actors and the internal agenda that requires broader political consensus cast doubt on whether the existing coalition will successfully confront thorny challenges in the near future, raising questions about the stable base of this new political amalgamation. While consolidating the recent challenges, conflicting views could perplex the already complex situation triggering a new round of snap election. To move forward – all in one package, the new Kosovar government needs to acknowledge the cost of further escalation, show strategic clarity and political will and, above all, it needs to advance national interests at the expense of individual ones.

Table 1. Chronology of Parliamentary Elections in Kosovo

2001 - 2017
17 November 2001
17 November 2007
12 December 2010 [early elections]
08 June 2014 [early elections]
11 June 2017 [early elections]

This working paper attempts to provide the main aspects of the political and institutional crisis that hit Kosovo after Parliamentary elections of June 8th, 2014. The aim of the paper, besides giving an overview of the most important developments since then, is to provide an analysis on the attempts of Kosovar political class to establish a stable government putting under the microscope their political behaviour. In addition, the paper deals with the last parliamentary elections, as well as the new government's priorities, the challenges ahead and the key policy issues which remain a major talking point in the political and public debate, polarizing opposition, the coalition government and the public opinion in general.

2014 Parliamentary Elections – A Complex Internal Political Situation

On May 12th, 2014, MPs in Kosovo voted overwhelmingly to dissolve the Assembly and snap elections were called for June 8th, three months before the formal schedule. The dissolution of parliament was triggered by impasse over the creation of a national army.³ Continuing the pattern of extraordinary elections since 2010, this election came as a need for a new configuration in the legislature in order to break the log-jam and produce a more coherent government in position to better address Kosovo's internal problems. Paradoxically, the 2014 snap elections did not lead to the formation of a stable and a stronger government with a solid mandate; on the contrary, the elections brought about some surprising results since no single political party or coalition won enough parliamentary seats to secure a governing mandate. Therefore, the political parties started to squabble over who has the right to form the new government and Kosovo was locked in a constitutional and political crisis that brought the political life to a practical standstill. The actual causes of this crisis originate in the appetite of political parties to remain in power. In the past few years, Kosovo's political elite has appeared to be very inventive in discovering formulas and manoeuvres for the implementation of this objective, undermining in this way Kosovo's processes of state building and democratisation.

In the 2014 early elections, the Democratic Party of Kosovo-led coalition (PDK) came out on top with 30.38 per cent of the votes, but these results did not give Hashim Thaçi enough seats in parliament to form his third successive government alone. With PDK run out of partners, the formation of a government proved a difficult task for the ex-guerrilla commander who was governing Kosovo for almost ten years. Thaçi faced a formidable competition from a coalition of opposition parties, which presented a unified political front to oust him by offering an alternative majority and putting forward Kosovo Liberation Army leader Ramush Haradinaj as prime minister.⁴ The opposition bloc, known as VLAN, comprised the conservative Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK – 25.24 per cent of the votes), the centre-right Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK – 9.54 percent of the votes), and the newly established Initiative for Kosovo (NISMA – 5.15 per cent of the votes). The anti-Thaçi block was supported by the ultra-nationalist Self-Determination party (Vetëvendosje – 13.59 per cent of the votes), which stood by them while remaining in opposition. This political amalgamation became a headache for PDK because it gave VLAN coalition a

³ See Corinne Deloy “*Early elections in Kosovo after the dissolution of Parliament*”, European Elections Monitor, June 2014. Available at: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/oe/oe-1508-en.pdf> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

⁴ See Krenar Gashi, “*Kosovo elections: Has everything changed?*”, Research on South Eastern Europe, LSE Blog, 11 June 2014. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/06/11/kosovo-elections-has-everything-changed/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

comfortable majority of 63 seats against the PDK's 37,⁵ thus threatening the political domination of Hashim Thaçi in Kosovo's political life. However, the leader of PDK employed shrewd tactics by embroiling in a game of interpretation of the constitution with regards to the election of the parliament speaker, thus blocking the formation of a government by the VLAN coalition.

When VLAN coalition elected LDK's leader Isa Mustafa as Assembly Speaker, the PDK challenged it to the Constitutional Court, insisting that only PDK or the coalition that has won the elections, be that victory an absolute or a relative one, can form a government. The Court ruled in favor of PDK supporting that only the party that won most of the votes in the elections has the right to be the first to nominate a prime minister, as well as that this party is entitled to the position of the assembly speaker, which is essential to parliament to become functional.⁶ In some way, through this decision Kosovo's Constitutional Court created an institutional deadlock because on the one hand it gave the right to a political party to form a government although it did not have the necessary votes to do so. On the other hand, it refused this right to a coalition with a commanding majority of seats in the assembly obliging them to cooperation with the party that won most of the votes, which in this case was impossible because of the anti-PDK political block formed earlier. Many in Kosovo viewed the decision of Hashim Thaçi to go the issue to the court with suspicion, and saw the Court's verdict itself being altered in favor of a specific political party and against Kosovo's internal stability because it delayed the formation of a government with tremendous effects on a series of policy issues. Instead of settling a serious domestic institutional problem, the decision worsened Kosovo's post-election politics increasing suspicions on political pressure over state institutions and their independent functioning.⁷

⁵ See Adrian Zeqiri, “*Kosovo snap elections, background, rules and some predictions*”, European Centre for Minority Issues Kosovo (ECMI), 17 May 2017. Available at: <http://www.ecmikosovo.org/uploads/1.Kosovo%20snap%20elections%20background%20and%20predictions%20A%20Zeqiri%20.pdf> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

⁶ See Nate Tabak, “*Rulings deepen political crisis*”, Prishtina Insight, 12 September 2014. Available at: <http://prishtinainsight.com/rulings-deepen-political-crisis-mag/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

⁷ For more on the issue see Shpend Kursani, “*Can there be institutions in Kosovo without PDK?*”, PrishtinaInsight, 9 August 2017. Available at: <http://prishtinainsight.com/can-institutions-kosovo-without-pdk/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

PDK-LDK Coalition Government

The political and constitutional deadlock that continued for six months ended up in December 2014 after international pressure and with an inter-elite political bargain that allowed two fierce political opponents to come together and form a new unpopular government. The VLAN opposition bloc had its first loss when the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) Isa Mustafa did a 180 degree turn and abandoned the coalition to become the lifeline of Hashim Thaci, enabling him to cling to power. The PDK-LDK coalition was highly criticized not only by opposition parties, but also by members of the power-sharing union on the basis that it was against the voter's will.⁸ However, Mustafa remained adamant to his decision, presenting it as the only solution for country's political deadlock. In fact, this highly unpopular coalition ended the institutional deadlock temporarily allowing Kosovo to continue its democratic consolidation and moving one step further in the process of European integration by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union (EU), and also by allowing Pristina to continue the dialogue on relations normalization with Serbia.⁹

However, the consensus reached between Thaçi and Mustafa was no salve for Kosovo's democracy since the picture that emerged from the last developments remains problematic. Critics argue that the two main political parties used their willingness for political cooperation as a card to convince a suspicious and highly frustrated public that they are working to push forward Kosovo's state building process and the European agenda. But in reality, this agreement benefited only the two main political parties, allowing LDK's leader to become country's prime minister and Hashim Thaçi to be elected as Kosovo's President, at the detriment of genuine democracy in the country. These political machinations that threatened country's political stability were considered ominous signs for the health of Kosovo's democracy. While the PDK-LDK deal did not contribute to party pluralism, at the same time the new government did not bring about long stability, as the subsequent parliamentary crisis left political scene highly divided into two adverse camps.

⁸ See Violeta Hyseni Kelmendi, "A bitter government coalition in Kosovo", Osservatorio Balkani e Caucaso, 11 December 2014. Available at: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/zone/Kosovo/A-bitter-government-coalition-in-Kosovo-157874> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

⁹ See Krenar Gashi, "Kosovo-Nation in Transit Report 2016", Freedom House, 2016. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2016_Kosovo.pdf (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

A Highly Divided Political Scene – Paralyzed Parliament

In 2015, politics in Kosovo were defined by a bitter confrontation between the ruling coalition and the opposition bloc. After some months of relative calm, tensions rose again in August 2015 when Pristina and Belgrade signed the agreement on the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. In September 2015, political polarization increased further when Vetëvendosje and other elements of the opposition – the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) of Ramush Haradinaj and the Initiative for Kosovo (Nisma për Kosovën) of Fatmir Limaj – mobilized themselves against the agreement around the claim that it was illegitimate and lacking democratic accountability.¹⁰ The dispute on the issue continued and key instrument used by the opposition was the disruption of parliamentary sessions by throwing eggs and setting off tear gas canisters, threatening to delegitimize Kosovo's political system. The fact that the opposition was able to create a bloc and block major legislation showed the general unpopularity of the governing coalition's policies and its failure to negotiate with opposition parties on the contested issues.

Kosovo's political deadlock continued during 2016 due to the hardness stances of the government and opposition parties, which made any negotiation on the issue unlikely. Opposition parties continued to express disapproval with government policies over the implementation of the agreement insisting on new elections, a referendum on the agreement or its renunciation based on the December 2015 Constitutional Court rule that the agreement needs to be amended to conform with Kosovo's constitutional standards.¹¹ Things were further complicated for the government of Isa Mustafa when a new controversial issue was added to the agenda. The issue over the ratification of the demarcation agreement between Kosovo and Montenegro exacerbated existing tensions with opposition politicians objecting it and accusing the government of selling national interests to its neighbor. These two highly-publicized and sensitive issues became impetuses for the boycott of the assembly by the opposition parties from March 2016 onwards as well as for the organization of anti-government demonstrations which broadened the gap between government and opposition, further paralyzing politics.

¹⁰ See Michael D. Kennedy, “*We are seeing you*”: *Protesting violent democracies in Kosovo*”, Open Democracy, 11 December 2015. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/michael-d-kennedy-linda-gusia/we-are-seeing-you-protesting-violent-democracies-in-kosova> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

¹¹ See “*The Constitutional Courts Decision on the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities*”, European Center for Minority Issues in Kosovo, December 2015. Available at: <http://www.ecmikosovo.org/en/Latest-News/The-Constitutional-Court%E2%80%99s-Decision-On-The-Association-Community-Of-Serb-Majority-Municipalities> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

Street Politics

In January 2016, the opposition staged a huge anti-government demonstration in the capital, Pristina. Tens of thousands of opposition protesters took the streets to voice their frustration with country's politics, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister's Isa Mustafa government in which Hashim Thaçi served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as for early parliamentary elections since according to them the executive had violated the country's constitution in reaching deals with Serbia and Montenegro. One month later, one other protest was called with many hundreds of opposition supporters camping out in tents in the capital's Skanderbeg square in an effort to prevent Kosovo's 120-member legislature from electing Hashim Thaçi as country's next president.¹² In the eyes of the opposition as well as of a considerable part of the public, Hashim Thaçi was considered responsible for signing agreements which goes against the interests of Kosovo and therefore they strongly rejected his candidacy for the presidency.

In spite of the strong objection of the opposition, the leader of PDK was elected Kosovo's president in February 2016, amid tear gas and in the absence of the opposition lawmakers after securing 71 votes in the third round.¹³ The rallies during his February election and April inauguration spiralled into violence and Kosovo saw the worst case of political unrest since it declared independence from Serbia in 2008.¹⁴ On its part, the government accused the opposition of being the political orchestrator of the violence in an effort to come to power, calling them to abandon street politics and return to parliament. The opposition justified the increasing intensity of protests in both parliament and Pristina's streets because earlier peaceful protests failed to deepen democratic accountability in Kosovo's legislative body. According to them, the opposition has little choice but to take its message to the streets as PDK-LDK government has attacked state institutions, leaving no more channels for the opposition to resort to. All in all, Hashim Thaçi's election as president triggered significant criticism from opposition parties and civil society who argued that the state was being captured by the PDK structures.

¹² See “*Kosovo Parliament elects Thaçi as new President*”, DailyMail, 26 February 2016. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3465254/Kosovo-elects-new-president-opposition-protests.html> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

¹³ See “*Hashim Thaci elected President of Kosovo with 71 votes after three rounds*”, Top Channel TV, 26 February 2016. Available at: <http://top-channel.tv/english/hashim-thaci-elected-president-of-kosovo-with-71-votes-after-three-rounds/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

¹⁴ See “*Anti-government protest turns violent in Kosovo*”, Voice of America, 09 January 2016. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/anti-government-protest-turns-violent-in-kosovo/3138257.html> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

Regardless of the opposition intentions and its nationalist campaign against the agreements, this mobilization added to the low participation of Kosovar citizens to general elections are indicative of the current state of society. At the heart of these protests does not lie only the Albanian anger over the agreement with Serbia and Montenegro but also lies the discontent with high-level corruption and disillusion with Kosovo's dire economic condition.¹⁵ The wave of discontent in the country is far deeper. It would be misleading to argue that there is crisis merely because people are protesting; rather, it is more plausible that people are protesting because there is a crisis. While political parties were creating and breaking their alliances, collective frustration was building up. After all, surveys have repeatedly demonstrated that Kosovars trust in their political institutions has hit rock bottom.¹⁶ The lack of faith in the direction their country was going has produced a large exodus of Kosovars citizens claiming asylum in European Union countries.¹⁷

Social discontent shows that Kosovars are disgruntled with their political representatives and desire to build their lives on institutions they can trust. Since the country's rule of law, independent judiciary and media freedom are severely weakened frustrated citizens appear to no longer trust the transformative power of democracy.¹⁸ Kosovars believe that their vote cannot change the situation in Kosovo (38 per cent) or do not know whether their vote can change the situation in the country (24 per cent).¹⁹ The increasing support for Vetëvendosje shows that there is still a growing concern that the longer the issues such as corruption, unemployment and economic development remain in limbo, the more the danger increases of national issues being hijacked by strong nationalists and extremists with serious consequences for moderate political forces and the country's stability.

One novelty of this last mobilization of Kosovars is the fact that it was not confined only to protests but was also followed by initiatives and efforts of nonpartisan groups and civil society to demand accountability and exposing corruptive affairs, as well as wrongdoings by public officials placing in

¹⁵ See Tony Barber, "Kosovars stage round-the-clock-anti-government protest", Financial Times, 22 February 2016. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e4a737e8-db90-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

¹⁶ See the last Public Pulse Report published by UNDP Kosovo, 22 November 2017. Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-pulse-xiii.html (last accessed on 30 November 2017).

¹⁷ See Marija Ristic, "Albania, Kosovo Top German 2015 Asylum List", BalkanInsight, 07 January 2016. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-kosovo-top-german-2015-asylum-seekers-list-01-07-2016> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

¹⁸ See Adelheid Feilcke, "Nationalism wins in Kosovo elections", Deutsche Welle, 13 June 2017. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-nationalism-wins-in-kosovo-elections/a-39214790> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

¹⁹ UNDP Public Pulse Report – November 2017, page 16. Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-pulse-xiii.html (last accessed on 30 November 2017).

this way limits on the authoritarian tendencies of political figures in power.²⁰ Although this civic mobilization was the largest that the country had seen since independence, internal developments, such as the snap elections, showed that the political class (both ruling coalition and opposition) had failed to grasp the message, leading to an explosion of the dissatisfaction smouldering among the citizens due to a number of unresolved issues (irresponsible governance, widespread corruption, abuse of power and clientelism) considered to be the root cause of the enduring malaise with Kosovo's democracy.

In subsequent months, the frictions between Vetëvendosje and the two other opposition parties became an official split when the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and the Initiative for Kosovo (Nisma) signed a pre-election coalition agreement, deciding not to support the protests organized by Vetëvendosje. Power struggles put an end to one of the strongest opposition blocs in Kosovo's politics.²¹ Truly, PDK-LDK coalition faced the strongest opposition than any government has encountered in Kosovo's nine years of independence, but Kosovo's democratic climate did not benefit from this opposition tactic. The opposition failed to stimulate the growth of real opposition politics hindering country's political and social development. In the second half of the year, the opposition ended the disruptive three-month boycott and the parliament resumed operation, continuing its legislative agenda. For a short period of time, the Kosovar parliament came back to some normality but with the same old business politics which led the country to another extraordinary election in 2017.

²⁰ See Krenar Gashi Nation In Transit Kosovo Report 2017. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2017_Kosovo.pdf (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

²¹ See Erjone Popova and Amire Qamili, "Power struggle splits Kosovo opposition parties", BalkanInsight, 22 April 2016. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/opposition-parties-official-divided-04-20-2016> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

PDK-LDK coalition collapse

The first dark clouds over the ruling coalition appeared in October 2016 when the leader of PDK Kadri Veseli, who had replaced Thaçi, supported the idea of early elections as the only way to bring “Kosovo back to normal political situation”.²² The main reason behind his statement was the tension inside the coalition over the ratification of the border agreement with Montenegro. Not only did the coalition lack the 81 votes needed for the ratification of the agreement but at the same time members of the LDK were reluctant to take the political responsibility by making the tough choice of navigating this highly sensitive issue. The reason may have been the weakened popularity of LDK due to voters’ dislike of its coalition with PDK in 2014. Mustafa’s return to PDK with the agreement for joint government was considered as a politically motivated move connected to his desire to remain in power affecting negatively party’s popularity. Therefore, the LDK leadership felt the need to compromise with the public on the issue instead of pushing its ratification in the parliament. PDK was dissatisfied with its partner’s reluctance to deal with the border demarcation agreement and the decision of Mustafa to withdraw it from the agenda.²³

In such an unstable situation from all points of view, Isa Mustafa’s government was defeated in May 2017 after MPs backed an opposition motion of no-confidence, becoming the third government in a row to fall without completing its four-year term. Of 120 MPs in parliament, 78 voted for the motion, with only 34 backing the government.²⁴ The motion was pushed forward by the Initiative for Kosovo (Nisma për Kosovën), backed by the the opposition Vetëvendosje party and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK). However, it was the main coalition party, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) that swayed the vote to pave the way for early elections. During the parliament session PDK and LDK become embroiled in a blame game over the failure of the government. Isa Mustafa considered the no-confidence motion as a “pamphlet without any argumentation basis”, adding its consequences will be “the country’s destabilization through creating a lack of trust in institutions, and an institutional vacuum”.²⁵

²² See “Veseli: early elections bring Kosovo “back to normality”, *Gazeta Express*, <http://m.gazetaexpress.com/en/news/veseli-early-elections-bring-kosovo-back-to-normality-171288/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

²³ See Marina Mikhaylova, “Kosovo government falls as ruling coalition partner PDK backs no-confidence vote”, *Business Intelligence for Southeast Europe*, 10 May 2017. Available at: <https://seenews.com/news/kosovo-govt-falls-as-ruling-coalition-partner-pdk-backs-no-confidence-vote-568065> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

²⁴ See Erjon Popova “*The Kosovo Assembly votes to dismiss the government*”, *Prishtina Insight*, 10 May 2017. Available at: <http://prishtinainsight.com/kosovo-assembly-votes-dismiss-government/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

²⁵ See Sylejman Killokoqi and Ljazar Semini, “Kosovo government falls after losing no-confidence vote”, *Associated Press*, 11 May 2017. Available at: <https://www.courthousenews.com/kosovo-government-falls-losing-no-confidence-vote/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

PDK's explanation that it supported the no-confidence motion because of the government failure to take big decisions did not convince and raised a number of questions of what was hidden behind the decision to vote against its partner especially having in mind the fact that the two parties had shared responsibility due to their coalition government. PDK's position to lead the country to unnecessary snap elections by supporting a vote of no-confidence in its own government can be viewed in light of their desire to change the political correlations, hoping to results that would bolster them politically and giving them more space to touch sensitive national issues. For some local analysts, the provocation of snap elections was very closely linked to the full functioning of the Special Court in charge of conducting trials for allegations stemming from the 2011 Council of Europe report, which alleges serious violations of international law.²⁶ Former KLA members who currently occupy public functions might be targeted by the court. Any postponement to the commencement of the court mandate and to the raise of indictments would give them enough time to stabilize themselves as stability factors in Kosovo building up a protection element/mechanism from any accusation that could come from The Hague.²⁷ This pragmatic political tactic is not new in Kosovo's politics, it has all happened before.

²⁶ See Ismet Hajdari, "Kosovo elections: A crisis "Déjà vu"", Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 04 July 2017. Available at: <https://rs.boell.org/en/2017/07/04/kosovo-election-crisis-d%C3%A9j%C3%A0-vu> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

²⁷ Ibid

Early elections – Widespread dissatisfaction with Kosovo's politics

On June 11th, 2017, Kosovo held its third early parliamentary elections. These elections were held to resolve the ongoing crisis emerging from several deadlocks in the Kosovar parliament. However, they did not manage to bring something new compared to the 2014 elections, at least regarding the results needed for the formation of a stable government. It took Kosovo three months to form a government after two failed attempts to elect assembly speaker.²⁸ The new element of these elections was the formation of political alliances based on parties' anticipation of securing a viable majority in the parliament, leaving apart ideology or policy goals.²⁹ In that context, the PDK formed a coalition with former prime minister and rebel leader Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and the charged with war crimes Fatmir Limaj's Initiative for Kosovo, which split from PDK only in 2014. The so called "war wing" coalition brought together three political parties with wartime credentials but with long-standing rivalries among them. The AAK has long been estranged from the PDK, although both grew out of the wartime Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).³⁰ Although one of Thaçi's close associate, Fatmir Limaj turned against him over disagreements on a number of issues. Both AAK and NISMA had been vocal critics of the previous government and the PDK state capture as part of the 2014 anti-Thaçi opposition bloc accusing him of being power-hungry and not a unifying individual, which is what Kosovo constitution requires. Analysts wonder if these political factors with complex past and very different strategies can find a common ground to cooperate.

²⁸ See "Situation in Kosovo, parliament one again failed to elect assembly speaker", Ora News TV, 10 August 2017. Available at: <http://www.oranews.tv/ora-english/situation-in-kosovo-parliament-once-again-failed-to-elect-assembly-speaker/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

²⁹ See "Kosovo's June 2017 Parliamentary Elections", National Democratic Institute, June 2017. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Kosovo%20June%202017%20Election%20Report_0.pdf (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

³⁰ See Bledar Feta and Kristina Zharkalliu "Kosovo's new coalition has no stable foundation", BalkanInsight, 08 March 2011. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-s-new-coalition-has-no-stable-foundation> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

Table 2. Parliamentary Elections in Kosovo - Results

Coalition/Parties	2014			2017			Seats Change
	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	
PAN coalition	n/a	n/a	n/a	245,627	33,74	39	n/a
Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)	222,181	30,38	37	n/a	n/a	21	(-16)
Alliance For the Future of Kosovo (AAK)	69,793	9,54	11	n/a	n/a	10	(-1)
Initiative for Kosovo (Nisma)	37,680	5,15	6	n/a	n/a	8	(+2)
LAA Coalition	n/a	n/a	n/a	185,884	25,53	29	n/a
Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)	184,594	25,24	30	n/a	n/a	27	(-2)
New Kosovo Alliance (AKR)	34,170	4,67	0	n/a	n/a	2	(+2)
Main parties running individually							
Vetëvendosje Movement	99,398	13,59	16	200,135	27,49	32	(+16)
SRPSKA LISTA	38,199	5,22	9	44,499	6,11	9	(0)

SOURCE: CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION

The PDK-led coalition came first with 33.74 per cent of the votes (39 of 120 seats)³¹, but lost considerable support. Therefore, the party's intention to reignite support through the snap elections failed, making it difficult for its leader Kadri Veseli to govern even with its planned coalition partners. The LDK of former Prime Minister Isa Mustafa, and their partners, the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR) of Behgjet Pacolli, and the newly established Alternativa of Gjakova mayor Mimoza Kusari ended third with 25.53 per cent of the votes (29 of 120 seats).³² Both PDK and LDK-led coalitions performed poorly when compared to the respective votes received by PDK and LDK alone in 2014 elections. The outcome was more or less anticipated, but few predicted as massive of a withdrawal of voters' support to Kosovo's main political parties. The result must be interpreted as more than a mere vote for rotation of power with new faces in politics; it was a vote for change and a protest against the way that PDK and LDK dealt with the political crisis. For many Kosovars, PDK and LDK have become the personification of old politics and the main obstacle for the country's further development.

The nationalist Vetëvendosje of Visar Ymeri, which run alone, achieved a remarkable breakthrough by increasing its share of the vote to 27.49 per cent (32 of 120 seats), as compared to 13.59 per cent (16 of 120 seats) in 2014,³³ challenging the long dominance of PDK and LDK. With these results Vetëvendosje consolidated its position as the country's biggest political party. Vetëvendosje is a parliamentary force that located its power and popularity outside parliament. With the combination of street politics and parliamentary manoeuvres, the party has managed to attract

³¹ See the official results published by the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kosovo. Available at: <http://www.kqz-ks.org/en/elections> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

³² Ibid









³³ Ibid

the support of many voters. The last four years the party has become a headache for both PDK and LDK by challenging the public anger on a number of issues through the card of nationalism. Party's senior figures, including its founder Albin Kurti, oppose the form the dialogue with Serbia and the decentralization process, government's main policy for integrating the Kosovo Serbs, have been shaped. By supporting Vetëvendosje in June 11th polls voters showed their frustration over a deep level of corruption³⁴ as Vetëvendosje is always campaigning as a strong-anti corruption platform. In this context, the party justified the decision to run alone in the elections as a political choice not to cooperate with Kosovo's old corrupt politics. This could explain the strong desire of PDK to remain in power and keep out Vetëvendosje because it fears that if the party of Visar Ymeri comes to power it might mean that senior mentors of PDK would be prosecuted for corruption, something which Vetëvendosje has discursively promoted. The non-inclusion of Vetëvendosje in the government could also please the international community because of party's aggressive and anti-international-community agenda. Vetëvendosje's initial policies include the organization of a referendum over the presence of international missions in Kosovo and the unification of Kosovo with Albania, two worrisome topics on regional and international level. Because of this stance, the international community sidelined Vetëvendosje for a long time, refusing any meeting with party's representatives.

³⁴ See Alan Crosby, “*Self-Determination party capitalizes on Kosovars’ desire to punish governing parties*”, Radio Free Europe, 16 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-vetevendosje-capitalizes-on-desire-for-change/28559391.html> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

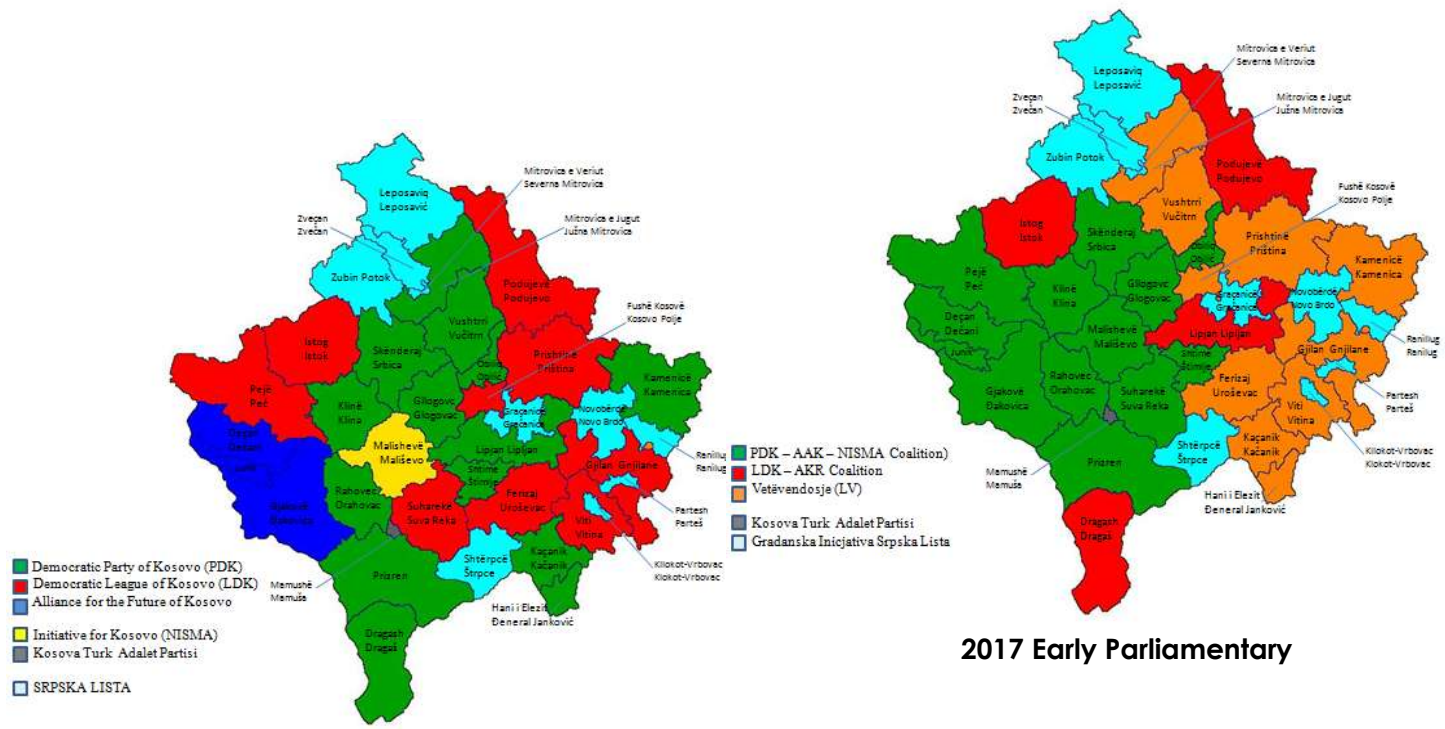
Figure 1. Seats of the Political Parties in the New Parliament



Political Party	Total Number of Mandates	Leader	Founded
 Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)	21	Kadri Veseli	1999
 Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK)	10	Ramush Haradinaj	2001
 Initiative for Kosovo (NISMA)	8	Fatmir Limaj	2014
 New Kosovo Alliance (AKR)	2	Behgjet Pacolli	2006
 Vetëvendosje Movement (VV)	32	Visar Ymeri	2005
 Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)	27	Isa Mustafa	1989
 Gradanska Inicijativa Srpska Lista	9	Aleksandar Jablanovic	2014
 Minority Parties	11	-	-

All in all, the elections results were evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with Kosovo's politics. Kosovars sent a clear and a strong message to the political class. They will not be satisfied only by a mere shifting of alliances, they are asking for radical political changes that will transform Kosovo into a country that will be genuinely ready to join Euro-Atlantic structures.

Map 1. Political Coalitions /Parties Performance in Country's Parliamentary Elections



2014 Early Parliamentary

2017 Early Parliamentary

Kosovo's new coalition has no stable foundation

Three months after parliamentary elections, Kosovo's political parties finally reached an agreement on forming a government. The winning coalition of the elections PDK-AAK-NISMA will govern together with AKR, which abandoned the pre-election coalition with LDK, plus various minority representatives. The new coalition government, with Ramush Haradinaj as prime minister and PDK's leader Kadri Veseli as speaker of the parliament, may still prove a first step towards re-establishing Kosovo's stability and for facilitating the start of a long-awaited process that will let Pristina to deal with citizen's concerns as well as with highly-sensitive national issues.

But there are strong reasons for reservations. The new government is a coalition of minority political interests, enjoying only a razor-thin majority with 61 out of 120 seats in the parliament. This new political amalgamation is not stable for political life because the possibilities of many MPs to change position on different controversial national issues are high. The AKR came at the bottom of the list of those parties that passed the electoral threshold, while its leader remains widely criticized for his alleged shady business deals with Russia and his controversial meetings with Milosevic during the 1990s. From their part, the PDK, AAK and NISMA will remain under a cloud for as long as the allegations over the involvement of former KLA members on war crimes continue to make the round. In addition, minorities have now gained a strong voice in Kosovo's new parliament, as PDK-led coalition looked to their representatives to give the ruling coalition the majority it needed. Therefore, there is a risk that the new ruling coalition could be derailed quickly, if the AKR or minority parties become disillusioned. It falls to Haradinaj's government to deal with the Serb issue in a very measured way, recognizing the importance of not angering Kosovars by seeming to lenient on national issues, while not upsetting Srpska Lista, its minor coalition partner, given Belgrade leadership's influence on them which can trigger the fall of the government at anytime.

Haradinaj's coalition will also face a strong opposition from the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Vetëvendosje movement. Having two large parties outside the government clearly benefits Kosovo's democratic climate, but it spells trouble for the government. The two main opposition groups, holding a total of 59 seats, see the new cabinet as nothing to do with Kosovo's interests but only serve the interests of certain individuals and groups. Vetëvendosje and LDK have stabilized their position as the main opposition players on the political scene, but analysts wonder if the two main opposition forces, political factors with very different strategies, can find common ground to cooperate in a constructive critic of the government. The new government is not threatened only by the opposition but also by fragmented relations and agendas between the members of the ruling coalition itself. This raises concerns that the new coalition does not guarantee any better governance than the last team, while its longevity is also questioned.

While perceptions persist that Kosovo's new coalition looks weak, the needs of the main actors suggest that neither party has any reason to upset the arrangement right now. No one wants to take the political responsibility of leading the country to another political crisis.

Key policy issues at new government's agenda

In the past three years, the political life in Kosovo was centered on an ever growing tension between government – the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) - and opposition parties – the Self-Determination Movement (Vetëvendosje), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and the Initiative for Kosovo (Nisma) – over key policy issues. Two international agreements Kosovo signed with its neighbors and an international agreement that Kosovo's supporters, the United States and the European Union had encouraged the government to adopt, remain a major talking point in the political and public debate, polarizing opposition, the coalition government and the public opinion in general. The popularity of the previous government was low, weakening its position in tackling these three controversial components: the demarcation of Kosovo-Montenegro borders, the establishment of an association of municipalities mostly inhabited by Serbs and the creation of a special court that will enable the international prosecution of war crimes in Kosovo.

- **The demarcation of Kosovo's border with Montenegro:** the border delineation was agreed in August 2015 and ratified by Montenegro's parliament four months later.³⁵ In Kosovo, the previous opposition bloc questioned the deal arguing it cedes territory to Podgorica, a claim that the previous PDK-LDK government rejected. The ratification of the agreement, which has been seen as a condition for the visa agreement with the EU to take effect, became a real headache for the government sparking huge protests organized by the opposition. The Kosovar government found itself between the calls coming from Brussels for the ratification of the agreement and the demands of those Kosovars who object it and call for a renegotiation. To resolve the dispute, Kosovo formed an expert commission to map Kosovo's territory which concluded that the country has had not lost any territory when it signed the agreement.³⁶ After the June elections, political correlations have changed and two former opposition parties (AAK and NISMA) which strongly rejected the agreement are now part of the government. For now Kosovo's new prime minister and the leader of AAK, Ramush Haradinaj remains adamant in his opinion for renegotiation.³⁷ In this direction, the new government dismissed the members of the Commission on demarcation of border with Montenegro in a

³⁵ For more details see Fjona Krasniqi “*The Kosovo-Montenegro border agreement: what you need to know*”, Open Democracy, 23 February 2017. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/fjona-krasniqi/kosovo-montenegro-border-agreement-what-you-need-to-know> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

³⁶ See Die Morina, “*Kosovo “lost no land” in Montenegro Deal*”, BalkanInsight, 21 February 2017. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-border-commission-seals-montenegro-deal-02-21-2017> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

³⁷ See “*New Kosovo PM to revise Montenegro border deal*”, BalkanInsight, 11 September 2017. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-new-pm-plans-to-revise-border-deal-with-montenegro-09-11-2017> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

bid to revise the deal³⁸, a move that pleased many Kosovar citizens but at the same time disappointed Kosovo's main international partners, the European Union and the United States of America. While Kosovo aims at the renegotiation of the agreement, Montenegro demands its reinforcement without showing any will for its revision.³⁹ In case that the two parts does not change their current official positions on the issue, there is a risk from an internal problem the border deal to become a bilateral dispute between the two neighbors, which for the moment is not profitable for none of the states. In addition, the longer the border issue remains at limbo, the more the difficulties increase for the elimination of visas for travel to the EU.

- **The establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo:** the Kosovar government has reached four key agreements as part of the EU-facilitated "Brussels Dialogue" with Serbia, including the establishment of an Association/Communication of Serb Municipalities that would enable the Serb-majority municipalities to extend their governing powers. The implementation of this agreement has become one of the most impending challenges for the previous government because the opposition, as well as a good portion of the society, are very much against it, arguing that such a structure could result in the creation of an entity similar to the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and will give Belgrade the chance to interfere in Kosovo's decision-making process keeping the former province in a legal limbo. The implementation of the agreement proved to be a difficult task but the opposition could abandon the hard stance on the issue if the December 2015 Constitution Court ruling is accepted. For a long time, Kosovo had slow down the process of establishing the association, waiting for a more appropriate political moment. Analysts support that with little more courage Haradinaj's government can implement the association agreement because Serb representatives have more trust on him and his partner Kadri Veseli.⁴⁰
- **The establishment of the Special War Crimes Court:** the establishment of the special EU-backed tribunal which will prosecute members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) suspected of committing crimes during and after the conflict in Kosovo has triggered controversy not only between the opposition and the government but also between the government and the EU. Initially, the Kosovar government was against the Court arguing that it would damage the image of Kosovo and would blacken the struggle of the KLA's ex-fighters. However, after strong pressure from the EU and after one successful attempt of the opposition to halt the

³⁸ See "Kosovo PM dismisses State Commission on setting border with Montenegro", Gazeta Express, 12 September 2017. Available at: <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/en/news/kosovo-pm-dismisses-state-commission-on-setting-border-with-montenegro-172970/> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

³⁹ See Die Morina, "Montenegro snubs Kosovo plea to review border deal", BalkanInsight, 27 September 2017. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-tests-montenegro-resolve-on-border-deal-09-26-2017> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

⁴⁰ See "High stakes for Kosovo: Haradinaj's government challenging agenda", Balkans Policy Research Groups, 29 September 2017. Available at: http://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Another-high-stakes-for-Kosovo-BPRG-2-NRAS-02.10_A4_01.pdf (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

creation of the court, Kosovo's Assembly passed the respective law and in January 2017 the new court became operational. The creation of the court was a risky decision for the governing party as several former KLA members occupy prominent public functions, including President Hashim Thaci. The division in parliament over the issue reflects division in Kosovar society and any attempt by the court to cast a shadow over the legitimacy of the KLA struggle for independence could have serious domestic repercussions. The International Community on its part insists that the special court is indispensable for strengthening rule of law and promoting Kosovar society's dealing with the wartime past. In April 2017, the Kosovo Constitutional Court ruled that ten provisions in specialist court's Rules of Procedures and Evidence need further consideration as they are not in line with Kosovo constitution, thus delaying the issuing of the first prosecutions.⁴¹

The cabinet of Ramush Haradinaj inherited a large and very challenging agenda full of agreements which have become a toxic political issue in country's democratic and parliamentary life. Some political forces insist on their implementation as a demonstration of Kosovo's readiness to fully cooperate with the international community and its neighbors, while the negative stance of other political parties is motivated by both power interests and legitimate concerns about the agreements' character. To infuse greater stability into his government, Haradinaj should find a way to sit on the same table with the opposition to work on the above-mentioned pressing issues and build a meaningful consultation with the citizens, opening the door for the visa liberalization which is a key priority for Kosovo. Only in this way, the new government will be able to convince its international partners that it is doing his homework, satisfying at the same time Kosovo's citizens. The key element for the stability of Haradinaj's government is the stance of PDK and party's political calculations, especially since PDK has already brought down two of its own governments in the past few years. The new government will not be short of other challenges since the EU's list of requirements for the Stabilisation and Association Process is lengthy and so are the country's social and economic challenges. Kosovo has to continue to deal with the legacy of the war, curb government corruption, build up institutions and develop the economy. The previous years, the political crisis absorbed a major part of the government capacities to focus on all these challenges.

⁴¹ See Marija Ristic “*Kosovo Special Court forced to revise procedures*”, BalkanInsight, 26 April 2017. Available at: <https://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-special-court-to-revise-rules-of-procedure-04-26-2017> (last accessed on 20 October 2017).

Conclusion

One of the factors that burdens Kosovo in its quest to consolidate a democratic society necessary for joining the EU is the role of the political class and the long-term domestic political instability. The early elections did nothing to resolve the issues that brought parliament to an impasse. Therefore, the political elite is obliged to take all necessary measures to avoid another election process since it will be only a waste of time for the country. It is up to them not to allow the latest elections to become the source of yet another crisis by seeking the reconciliation between government and opposition avoiding the political “convenience marriages” of the past. Only this will open the door of a stable government able to complete a full term in office. A stable and reform-oriented government and a constructive opposition would renew momentum in Kosovo, while the political and social stability will create conditions for the development of the economy. Any failure to form a stable government could lead the country further into chaos. At the same time, Kosovo may lose the opportunity to increase public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process in a period when citizens are desperately in need of political representatives and democratic institutions they can trust. The big question is whether the PDK-AAK-NISMA armistice can survive the challenges ahead, which is considered as the golden opportunity for Kosovar politics to mend the tarnished image of their democracy. But individual interests often prevail over national ones and the Kosovar political elite is uncertain about whether and to what extent is ready to end the political games they have been playing for the past four years. It is time for the Kosovar political elite to establish a clear stance when it comes to national interests, leaving behind the greed for power. This is the desire of the Kosovar people as revealed in the last parliamentary elections.

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