





POLICY PAPER

New Government in Kosovo: What Does It Mean for the Future of its Relations with the European Union?

VOCAL
EUROPE

*This Policy Paper was written by **Valentina Grganovic** | 9 June 2021

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCAL EUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevoCALEUROPE)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

1. Introduction

Kosovo, Europe's youngest nation and one of Europe's poorest economies¹, on February 14 2021 elected its new government. People of Kosovo were heading to the voting polls for the 6th time in the last 14 years. The February snap elections came after a hectic year that left the country not only in a health crisis caused by COVID pandemics but also a political one. However, after the election results were confirmed, the supporters of the Vetevendosje [Self-Determination, LVV] party were celebrating on the streets of Prishtina. It seemed as the sparkle for better days in Kosovo has started and got its confirmation during the victory speech by Albin Kurti, stating that "this great victory is an opportunity to start the changes we want"².

It is clear that Kosovar people are tired of the unfulfilled promises and political instability that was constant in the last years. Therefore, the new government and PM Kurti will face high expectations from their voters particularly regarding the economic instability. Moreover, on April 4, 2021, the new president was appointed in Kosovo. Vjosa Osmani, a reformist and a lawyer, was the acting president from November 2020 because her predecessor, Hashim Thaci, was being charged with war crimes³. Osmani was approved as a president with 71 votes while the ethnic Serb minority party and two more opposition parties boycotted the voting⁴.

This however closed a long institutional vacuum in Kosovo and for the first time, Kosovo is having a president, prime minister and speaker of parliament from the same party. According to some of the opposition parties and civil society organization, this can be intricate in a young and fragile democracy⁵.

Still, the win of the Vetevendosje party shook the ground of parties that have been predominating Kosovo political life since its independence in 2008 and, at the same time, injected a new wave of optimism in Kosovo society. One reason for this can be found in the fact that PM Kurti and his party during the campaign were primarily focused on the internal issues, restructuring of the public services and fighting against crime and corruption. However, Kosovo has to be focused on its Euro-Atlantic future and take into consideration relations with its neighbours.

Regarding this, the European Union will still have an important voice, particularly in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Therefore, communication with the new Kosovo government will be crucial, because "whether the election results were a support vote for LVV or a protest vote against the old

¹ The World Bank in Kosovo, "Overview", n.d., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kosovo/overview>

² Euroactive, "Kosovo anti-establishment party set for landslide win", 15 February 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-anti-establishment-party-set-for-landslide-win/>

³ DW, "Kosovo's former President Thaci pleads not guilty to war crimes charges in Hague court", 09 November 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/kosovos-former-president-thaci-pleads-not-guilty-to-war-crimes-charges-in-hague-court/a-55544470>

⁴ AlJazeera, "Kosovo parliament elects Vjosa Osmani as new president", 4 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/4/kosovo-parliament-elects-vjosa-osmani-as-new-president>

⁵ Reuters, "Kosovo parliament elects Vjosa Osmani as new national president", 4 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-president-idUSKBN2BRON2>

parties –the result is very clear”⁶. Since the new PM and his government did not set external relations as the main goal, it is vital to ask how are recent political changes in Priština affecting the EU-Kosovo relations?

2. Current State of Play

2.1. The main priorities of the new Kosovo government

Albin Kurti and his Vetevendosje started as a street movement when they were protesting against local elites and mainly international influence in Kosovo. From 2011 Vetevendosje entered Kosovo’s political arena and their primary goal was to fight against corruption, “accusing past leaders of squandering Kosovo’s first years of independence through graft and mismanagement while ordinary people suffered”⁷. However already in the elections of 2019 Vetevendosje showed as a strong opponent to the parties that captured the political scene in the last years, and 2021 confirmed LVV power.

Kosovo, like many other young states, from its independence in 2008 has a very fragmented political arena. However, Kosovo’s early assembly elections in February 2021 showed that this young democracy is ready for a change because for the first time ever one party gained 50% of the votes. LVV party with its leader, and today’s Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, won 58 seats in the 120-seat parliament. At the same time, it is crucial to underline that, according to the Kosovo constitution⁸ ten seats are reserved for the Serb minority and 10 more for other minorities (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians, Bosniaks, Turks, and Gorani).

Moreover, one minister should come from the Serbian community and one from another minority community. Other than being a strong change in Kosovo society, two old parties were left defeated. Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) got 19 seats and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) was left with 15 seats which caused the resignation of their leader, Avdullah Hoti, after the February elections. Despite this defeat, both parties promised not to obstruct the process of the appointment of the new government which was “a rare sign of political maturity in a post-war Kosovo and the wider region”⁹

In a country where none of the last five parliaments did not successfully finish their term, one would have thought that the campaigns and political promises would hardly reach their citizens. However, this landslide win of LVV was a product of the strong pre-election campaign that was based on the reforms, anti-establishment and anti-corruption approach. Moreover, during this campaign, Vetevendosje formed a coalition with a centre-right list led by Vjosa Osmani. Kurti strongly stated that one of his main priorities will be the fight against corruption which is widespread not only in

⁶ Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, a Member of the European Parliament, Standing Rapporteur on Kosovo, *Interview with author*, 21 April 2021.

⁷ Euroactive, “Kosovo anti-establishment party set for landslide win”, 15 February 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-anti-establishment-party-set-for-landslide-win/>

⁸ Constitution of Kosovo, n.d., <https://www.rks-gov.net/EN/f40/republic-of-kosovo/constitution>

⁹ Engjellushe Morina, “Kosovo snap election: A chance for action”, 17 February 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/kosovo-snap-election-a-chance-for-action/>

Kosovo but in many Western Balkan countries and it is often one of the main reasons why young people are leaving. Moreover, the Vetevendosje's campaign slogan was "*All and Rightly*" which gave hopes to people that their next government will fight for justice for everyone¹⁰. The second most-mentioned priority during the LVV campaign was economic development which was based on creating new jobs, better conditions for young people in Kosovo and "reducing inequalities and increasing the opportunities"¹¹. This economic progress is very needed in Kosovo, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic caused an even harder economic situation and worsened the social polarization. LVV as a socio-economically orientated movement promised to work on these matters mainly fighting unemployment and supporting new business.

2.2 The EU-Kosovo relations and future of the Belgrade-Pristina

March 2021 marked ten years since the EU started facilitating the talks between Kosovo and Serbia. Most of the EU member states recognise Kosovo's independence, five of them oppose that. So-called "hard" non-recognition states are Spain and Cyprus, and "soft" non-recognition states are Greece, Romania and Slovakia¹². What is more, at this moment many Kosovars doubt that the EU can mediate an end to the dispute¹³ because the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, and the EU special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, Miroslav Lajčák, are from non-recognizing states, Spain and Slovakia.

Despite the fact that the EU started to facilitate this dialogue with a focus on more technical issues like telecommunications, regional cooperation and freedom of movement, today the talks are more on a political level¹⁴. Up to date, there are 33 agreements concluded through these negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, but many of them were never implemented. Moreover, from late 2018 until the introduction of the new High Representative Lajčák in April 2020, this EU Dialogue was very stagnant. Lajčák is following a "comprehensive agreement"¹⁵ and "expects the sides to implement all agreements reached in the past" and unresolved issues are expected to be "resolved in parallel in the negotiations for a comprehensive agreement"¹⁶.

EU membership is one of the crucial carrots in this mediation process but also in other Western Balkan countries. In the case of Kosovo and Serbia, this carrot is conditioned with the normalisation

¹⁰ Perparim Isufi and Emirjeta, "Vllahiu Kosovo Parties' Glittering Promises Leave Many Voters Cold" 11 February 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/11/kosovo-parties-glittering-promises-leave-many-voters-cold/>

¹¹ <https://www.trtworld.com/europe/kosovo-swears-in-new-pm-who-promises-jobs-and-jabs-45231>

¹² Hartwell, Leon. "The Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue: Ripe for Resolution." <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEPA-Serbia-Kosovo-5.10.21-V2.pdf>

¹³ EURACTIV.com with Reuters, Kosovo president rejects EU mediator for talks with Serbia, 27 May 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-president-rejects-eu-mediator-for-talks-with-serbia/>

¹⁴ Martin Russell, Serbia-Kosovo Relations: Confrontation or Normalization? European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2019,

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf)

¹⁵ N1, EU spokeswoman tells Pristina daily only comprehensive agreement to be signed, 28 July 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a624408/EU-spokeswoman-tells-Pristina-daily-only-comprehensive-agreement-to-be-signed.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

NEW GOVERNMENT IN KOSOVO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF ITS RELATIONS WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION?

of relations between the two countries¹⁷. However, the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia is not the main requirement for the normalisation process¹⁸. Lately, the question of the land-swap was in focus of many EU and WB countries, where some EU Member States like Germany are strongly opposing it and also HR Lajčák called a territorial exchange “extremely dangerous” and added that „nothing is over until it’s over”¹⁹.

The dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade is significant for the EU because of the geostrategic position of the two countries but also because of the economic leverage. According to the data from the EU delegation to Serbia²⁰, foreign direct investment coming from the EU estimated for “almost 70% of total FDI coming to Serbia over the past ten years, from 2010 until 2019. In absolute terms, FDI from the EU countries reached over EUR 15 billion for the past ten years”. On the other hand, Kosovo’s largest export markets are the UK and the EU²¹.

In comparison to Serbia, and some other WB countries, Kosovo is still not considered as a candidate country (together with BiH), but the EU’s IPA II assistance to Kosovo from 2014 to 2020 was €602.1 million²². Still, what is considered as one of the main issues in Kosovo and for some of the Members of the European Parliament²³ is the fact that Kosovo is the only country from the WB region that still does not have an agreement on visa liberalization with the EU despite the fact that Kosovo has met all the requirements for this big and crucial step for its citizens in mid-2018.

Another crucial actor in this dialogue is also the US. During President Trump term his administration was very passive in promoting Kosovo’s independence and stating that the fears linked with a potential land swap are “exaggerated”²⁴. However, the new US Administration with President Biden created opposite opinions in Serbia and Kosovo. Despite the fact that Serbian President Vučić congratulated president Biden, before the elections Vučić was not very enthusiastic and stated that Biden’s actions “did not bring much luck to Serbia in the past.”²⁵ In Kosovo, the election of president

¹⁷ Conference on Accession to the European Union: Serbia. Brussels, 30 November 2015, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/AD-12-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

¹⁸ Martin Russell, p.7

¹⁹ N1 Belgrade, EU’s Lajčák: Land swap between Kosovo and Serbia would be hazardous, 27 January 2021, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/eus-lajcak-land-swap-between-kosovo-and-serbia-would-be-hazardous/>

²⁰ EU delegation to Serbia, Benefits from Serbia-EU Trade, 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/eus-lajcak-land-swap-between-kosovo-and-serbia-would-be-hazardous/>

²¹ Kosovo Agency of Statistics, International Trade Statistics in Goods, January 2020, <https://ask.rks.gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/international-trade-statistics-in-goods-january-2020>

²² EU, European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, Kosovo - financial assistance under IPA II, n.d., https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/funding-by-country/kosovo_en

²³ Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, Interview with author, 21 May 2020.

²⁴ Ivan Angelovski, Trump Ex-Adviser Bolton Laments Lost Opportunity on Kosovo, Balkan Insight, 15 July 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/15/trump-ex-adviser-bolton-laments-lost-opportunity-on-kosovo/>

²⁵ Ksenija Pavlovic McAteer, President Aleksandar Vucic aims to get Serbia back on the world stage and this time will not allow it to be cast as a villain, Pavlovic Today, 23 July 2020, <https://www.thepavlovictoday.com/exclusive-interview-president-vucic-aims-to-get-serbia-back-on-the-world-stage-and-this-time-will-not-allow-it-to-be-cast-as-a-villain/>

Biden was well welcomed²⁶ because of Biden's long connection with the region and even today's PM Kurti, before the elections advised Albanian diaspora to vote for Biden²⁷.

Despite the importance of this Dialogue presented here and the relations with the EU, PM Kurti during his campaign stated that the EU-led dialogue with Serbia will not be the priority of his government referring to the opinion polls where, for most of the Kosovar people, this dialogue stands on the sixth or seventh place of their concerns²⁸. Moreover, PM Kurti stated that “no further compromise can or will be done”²⁹ in this process. In Kosovo, the prevailing position is that Pristina gave more than Belgrade in this Dialogue, but experts from Kosovo believe that “while no Kosovo government has willingly made talks with Serbia a priority” they expect the incoming government to be “responsible”³⁰. Regarding the new US Administration, High Representative Lajcak stated that these two actors share the same goals in Kosovo and will work closely on building the “European future for Kosovo and the entire region of the Western Balkans”³¹.

Despite these statements from the new PM about the Dialogue with Serbia and that the external matters were not in the focus during the campaign, the new government and the change in Kosovo society that is connected to the latest elections could possibly make more in regard to the relations with the European Union. This is supported by the fact that, after many instabilities – in the last five years Kosovo had 4 Prime Ministers and 3 early parliamentary elections – Kurti's government has a chance to finish its term and fulfil the reforms needed to advance the talks with the European Union, internally and externally

3. Policy Recommendations

Based on the issues raised before, mainly in the sphere of the future priorities of the new Kosovo government and the interviews conducted for this paper, this sub-chapter proposes some of the recommendations for the Kosovo Parliament and the EU in regard to the latest changes in Kosovo:

1. Kosovo government recommendations

1.1. Anti-corruption and other internal reforms should go hand-in-hand

All the reforms mentioned in this paper and presented during the campaign of the new PM Kurti, have one common goal: not only to advance the country's status and economic developments, but they also answer requirements that the EU set for Kosovo in many documents like European Reform

²⁶ Albana Rexha, *Interview with author*, 06 May 2021

²⁷ Euronews Albania, US Elections, Albin Kurti to Albanian diaspora: Vote for Joe Biden, 16 October 2020, <https://euronews.al/en/kosovo/2020/10/16/us-elections-albin-kurti-to-albanian-diaspora-vote-for-joe-biden/>

²⁸ Perparim Isufi and Emirjeta, “Vllahiu Kosovo Parties’ Glittering Promises Leave Many Voters Cold” 11 February 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/11/kosovo-parties-glittering-promises-leave-many-voters-cold/>

²⁹ Perparim Isufi and Xhorxhina Bami, “Kosovo Parliament Elects Albin Kurti as Prime Minister”, 22 March 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/22/kosovo-parliament-elects-albin-kurti-as-prime-minister/>

³⁰ Perparim Isufi, “Kosovo Seeks ‘Reset’ of Decade-Old Dialogue with Serbia”, 16 March 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/16/kosovo-seeks-reset-of-decade-old-dialogue-with-serbia/>

³¹ Ibid.

Agenda. However, work on these reforms should have a horizontal approach³² where the anti-corruption agenda should go hand-in-hand with the implementation of the public administration legislation, improvement of the quality of education and healthcare. On top of that, the new government should promptly react to the pandemic crisis particularly in regard to vaccine supply.

1.2. Results-oriented government

Kurti's governments should be a "results-oriented government" in order to convey the message of a credible partner to the EU. This means that Kosovo has to work on the full implementation of the European Reform Agenda and national economic plan because, so far, all the previous governments have failed in these reforms. Moreover, the new government should have an "inclusive approach" and formulate alliances with NGOs, other parties in the government or individual MEPs in order to build a broad mandate³³.

1.3. Strong western-oriented approach

Despite the fact that internal reforms were the focus of the LVV's campaign and will be the priority in the upcoming months, there should be no deviations from the western pathways. Therefore, the Dialogue with Serbia should continue and the PM Kurti should have a positive discourse on the normalisation of the relations. Finally, the signal from the Kosovo government about the Dialogue with Belgrade should be clear to not give space to Serbia to move away from these negotiations.

2. EU Recommendations

2.1. Visa liberalisation process

Any further delay in the field of the Visa liberalisation process for Kosovo citizens will continuously damage the image of the EU as a credible partner to Kosovo. What is more, the EU can lose its credibility in the Western Balkan region which could harm its position as a global actor and exporter of governance. Shreds of evidence are saying that Kosovo deserves visa liberalisation and this long overdue is without justification³⁴. If this carrot is not provided, Kosovo government possibly will not take serious future requests or sticks. Therefore, there should be more pressure on the European Council about this issue³⁵.

2.2. EU facilitated dialogue: relations between Belgrade and Pristina

Until now one of the biggest issues about the Dialogue is that "it has been bound with non-transparent and non-inclusive lances"³⁶ where the citizens, as final beneficiaries are left out of the process. Therefore, the EU and both Serbia and Kosovo should work in the direction to make the process less isolated. The EU should also work and bring more pressure on both actors to find common expectations because at this moment for Serbia the normalisation of the relations through sectoral reforms is a priority. On the other hand, for Kosovo, the final goal is the recognition of independence. Therefore, "while these expectations are opposite, it is unrealistic that the dialogue will end soon"³⁷

³² Albana Rexha

³³ Viola von Cramon-Taubadel

³⁴ Albana Rexha

³⁵ Viola von Cramon-Taubadel

³⁶ Albana Rexha

³⁷ Ibid.

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCAL EUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevoCALEUROPE)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.