



MAKE IT OR BREAK IT: KOSOVO ELECTIONS AND PRISTINA-BELGRADE DIALOGUE

Kosovo-wide snap election is scheduled for 6 October. The international community has repeatedly been underscoring the need for the new government to resume the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. For this to happen, Pristina would have to suspend tariffs on goods originating from Serbia, while Belgrade is expected to halt its “de-recognition campaign of Kosovo”. A group of K-Albanian and K-Serb experts gathered to discuss the influence of Kosovo elections on the dialogue in Brussels.

In contrast to the previous election cycles, when topics of consolidating statehood and dialogue with Belgrade were at the forefront of electoral campaigns, in this campaign almost all political entities are putting more emphasis on the topics of good governance, rule of law, fight against corruption, health and education. Only AAK-PSD seems to be an outlier, as their campaign is based on strongly advocating adherence to the 100% tariff.

The rationale for such a turn is twofold. Firstly, the over-saturation of the Kosovo public with the dialogue-related issues resulted in a fact that it was more difficult to mobilize voters on such an agenda. Secondly, the imposition of the 100% tariff on goods originating from Serbia and an almost unison opposition to President Thaci’s “border correction” idea made political entities careful when discussing dialogue issues. Political entities are cognizant of the fact that they would possibly have to moderate their position in case they become members of a governing coalition and in charge of the dialogue with Belgrade. One thing is certain, whichever party forms the government, it will have a hard time revoking 100% tariffs in the future, unless it gets something tangible in return.

According to our interlocutors, LDK and VV are competing for the first place, but LDK is likely to come out victorious. LDK has largely refrained from commenting on dialogue issues in the electoral campaign. Vjosa Osmani, LDK prime ministerial candidate recently stated that her administration would reclaim the dialogue process from the President Hashim Thaci, adding that the dialogue is not an existential issue for Kosovo, as Kosovo can exist without Serbian recognition. However, it is still an essential step in the development of good neighborly relations between Belgrade and Pristina. LDK also appears to be the most favorable coalition partner to all other K-Albanian political entities.

It is LDK’s wish to try to form the government with VV. However, our interlocutors opined that there is a significant chance that LDK could also explore other avenues of cooperation. In their view, LDK might be open to forming a government with AAK-PSD plus NpK-AKR-PD, as well as the minorities. Such coalition appears to be a more internationally preferred option, particularly among those international players who object the “border correction” idea.

Despite LDK-VV attempts to form a pre-election coalition, VV is still perceived as an unreliable partner to the international community, even though it moderated its positions on the dialogue. Still, it is questionable how LDK-AAK government could be able to bargain and moderate its stance, particularly on the dialogue, especially on the topic of the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities, given the parties’ position on this issue. Such government would have strong opposition of VV, as well as PDK and possibly Serbian (Srpska) List.



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In case that VV wins the election, its natural coalition partner would be LDK, but coalition could also include NpK-AKR-PD to keep its right-wing secured from the attack from the parties that have their roots in the KLA (PDK and AAK). Such government would prefer having the Serbian List in the opposition, provided that at least one more K-Serb entity ensured an MP seat. It is unlikely that such government would want AAK-PSD in a coalition, as AAK is perceived as an unreliable coalition partner, while it would be hard to imagine VV working with PSD, due to its past. Our interlocutors opined that VV and Albin Kurti largely moderated their stances on many issues, including the dialogue with Belgrade, unification with Albania and Kosovo's symbols. Unlike his past views, when he called for the termination of the Brussels dialogue, Kurti now advocates for the continuation of the dialogue in three phases. The first phase would be a dialogue between the Government of Kosovo and K-Serbs, followed by a dialogue between the Government of Kosovo and the European Commission on the principles of the future talks and, finally, a dialogue between the Government of Kosovo and Government of Serbia. This has signaled a significant shift and looks like Kurti's attempt to appear more favorable to the international community. Kurti also said that he is willing to suspend the 100% tariff, while vowing to take reciprocal action against Serbia, which would be better accepted by the international community (this would include reciprocity toward "made in Serbia" products and vehicle license plates). According to our interlocutors, VV cannot be ignored in future dialogue, as it is the only party that could reach any compromise, including the Association/Community or even "land swap" even though it is currently standing against it. To some of our interlocutors, VV and Albin Kurti resemble SNS and Aleksandar Vučić in the post-2012 Serbia, who found it much easier to compromise with Pristina because of their nationalist background.

PDK appears on the verge of being left out of the government for the first time since 2007. According to the latest polls, it is lagging behind LDK and VV. Almost all K-Albanian political parties, including LDK, VV, and AAK, have reiterated their opposition to entering a post-government coalition with this party. A scenario which leaves PDK out of the government could also render President Thaci obsolete in the Brussels dialogue process, as he would lose his political clout. Our interlocutors agree that no one should underestimate PDK, but also underline that they are not as able to mobilize voters as in the past, nor they can inflict significant damage from the opposition side. There seems to be a "dark horse" scenario of PDK participating in the government with LDK, Serbian List and minorities in case that LDK "old guard" prevails over Vjosa Osmani and her allies in the party, but such scenario seems too far-fetched.

As it pertains to the Brussels dialogue, PDK seems to be more flexible than other parties, as the PDK candidate for prime minister, Kadri Veseli, recently criticized all of those who are vowing to uphold 100% tariffs after the election, for making false promises and deceiving voters. Some of our interlocutors opined that PDK might be supporting dialogue even if they became opposition, hoping that its constructiveness would be rewarded by the international community in the future.



Among the K-Serb political parties, the Serbian List (SL) is a clear favorite to win the majority of K-Serb guaranteed seats. Even though SL aims to secure all ten seats, it is more likely that SLS or Coalition “Freedom” (“Sloboda”) will manage to win at least one place. Our interlocutors agree that it would be important that at least one more K-Serb political entity enters the Assembly of Kosovo. Except promoting political pluralism within the K-Serb community, it could satisfy the legal requirement for the representation of K-Serbs in the Kosovo government in line with Article 96 of the Constitution in case that the Serbian List is left out of the government.

Even though the majority of the K-Albanian parties expressed their intention to form a governing coalition without the Serbian List, our interlocutors warn that such a decision would make K-Serb representation in government illegitimate. It could also make Belgrade less cooperative and receptive to international pressure. Through controlling the Serbian List, Belgrade is furnished with a substrate to control the K-Serb community ahead of the continuation of the dialogue and possibly reaching a legally binding agreement. The Serbian List fully supports Belgrade’s position in the Brussels dialogue, including a “delineation idea”. Unlike them, SLS and Coalition “Freedom” are vocal critics of such policy. SL participation in the LDK-AAK-PSD governing coalition should not be excluded, but SL would prefer to have PDK in the government, as it perceives it a more constructive partner in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Still, one should not overestimate the correlation between SL’s participation in the Kosovo government and its impact on the Brussels dialogue. Except losing out ministerial posts and funding that comes with them, SL would continue its hold of K-Serb majority municipalities and Belgrade-funded institutions which remain the key to control its clientelistic base. Furthermore, Belgrade would be hesitant to be perceived as dialogue spoiler in case that SL is not part of a governing coalition, as it fears losing the international support, which is one of the pillars of the current regime.

Whatever the outcome of the election and post-election coalition bargaining, the continuation of the Brussels dialogue would depend on Pristina’s ability to offer credible concessions that could pave the way to comprehensive normalization agreement. By the same token, key international actors, particularly the US and Germany, would have to create mutual consensus on the way forward. If domestic and international conditions do not align, the limbo of the “status quo” is looming.

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This publication (Make it or break it: Kosovo elections and Prishtina - Belgrade dialogue) has been produced with the support of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Its contents do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of EED. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in this publication lies entirely with the author(s).



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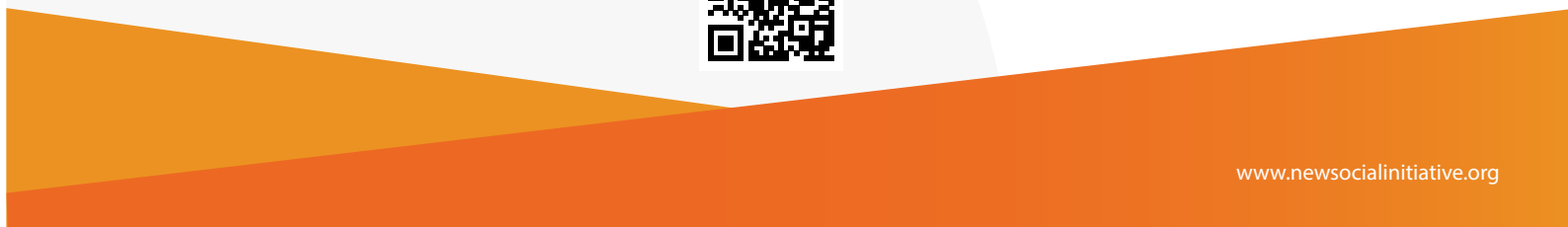
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