NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVE

DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES OF KURTI'S GOVERNMENT

The New Social Initiative (NSI) organized a discussion on February 13, 2020 in North Mitrovica with a number of civil society representative on the challenges confronting Kosovo's new government. Converting campaign promises into results, relations with the international community, and the dialogue with Serbia topped the list.

Many workshop participants said that the transition of power from the 'war parties' to more 'civic parties' marks the first real democratic political transition in the post war Kosovo. The change has instilled a feeling of hope and of a new beginning, but the new coalition faces an uphill battle in resolving the problems it has promised. Some speakers suggested that the government should carefully manage the peoples' inflated expectations to avoid a public disenchantment.

The international community seems to have some inflated expectations too. The US and many EU countries have called on the new government to repeal the customs tariff immediately and resume the dialogue with Belgrade. These countries do not support Kurti's announced plan to replace the tariff with reciprocity.

Only Belgrade seems to not have many expectations from the new government. Many Serbian officials are skeptical about a successful negotiation process with Kurti. Though it has signed two 'letters of intent' on connecting Pristina and Belgrade with a railway and highway, Belgrade does not consider it a return to dialogue, conditioning it with the tariff repeal.

This brief report is based on the workshop discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The report does not necessarily reflect NSI views. The European Endowment for Democracy supported the workshop.

CONVERTING PROMISES INTO RESULTS

A major domestic challenge for the new government is converting promises into results. Some speakers said that the distrust and suspicion between the Self-Determination Movement (LVV) and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) reflected during their three-month long coalition negotiations remains an obstacle to effective governance. However, the governing parties do have a common interest to cooperate and act as a unified team. "If the coalition fails to bring about results, both parties would be punished in the next election," a speaker noted. After all, some interparty distrust and suspicion is healthy in governance, allowing for stricter checks and balances within ministries. "It is much more difficult to abuse power when you have a rival watching over you and looking for any signs of mismanagement," a speaker noted.

LVV and LDK have a joint interest in completing the mandate. Both need time to prove to the public that they are different from the opposition parties. LVV needs to show it has sufficient governing capacity and commitment to tackle corruption and organized crime while LDK needs to detach itself from previous governments characterized by rampant corruption. The coalition's main challenge is the election of a new president in March 2021. If LVV and LDK fail to secure 80 votes for the quorum, the coalition falls and new parliamentary elections are held. The coalition together with the Serb List (SL) has 77 votes.

The coalition is expected to confront a strong and likely aggressive opposition led by former KLA strongmen. The now opposition parties control a lot of 'independent' institutions and agencies, including police, intelligence agency, judiciary, prosecutor's office, and many public companies such as the Post and Telecommunication of Kosovo. Many speakers expect that the depoliticization of these institutions would be characterized by major political confrontations between the governing and the opposition parties.

Prime Minister Kurti outlined in his acceptance speech in parliament a number of government policies, prioritizing rule of law and economic development, but not big infrastructure projects favored by previous governments. The opposition parties most likely will not support his policies, most of the speakers said. The biggest test is the replacement of the tariff on with reciprocity. Though Kurti has not yet introduced the reciprocity measures, the opposition parties have announced a "strong response in tariff's defense."

The relation between the coalition government and the SL is just as unpredictable. SL is part of the government but not of the coalition. Kurti sees the SL as Belgrade's mechanism to disturb Kosovo's internal stability while the SL considers Belgrade a natural ally. Many participants predicted a difficult relationship between Kurti and SL. However, some said if the Kurti manages to build a fair relationship with Belgrade, then his relationship with SL would be relaxed. Many participants were surprised with Kurti's reversed position from "no ministries" to "two ministries" for the SL. One ministry is a constitutional requirement but the second one was Kurti's decision. A speaker wondered whether this is an indication of Kurti's pragmatism and an effort to improve his relationship with the Serb community or is simply a result of international pressure.

CONFRONTATION OR COOPERATION

Though former prime minister Haradinaj officially resigned because of an invitation for an interview by the Specialist Chambers, the participants believe he resigned because he was not able to withstand the international pressure to suspend the tariff. The US and many EU countries reiterated their demand to remove the tariff as soon as the new government was sworn in. The majority of speakers did not expect Kurti to remove the tariff without some other measure. They explained that he could impose a number of reciprocal non-tariff barriers—such as on car plates, ID cards, diplomas—enough to satisfy the Kosovo public and not strong enough to irritate the international community. And perhaps good enough for Belgrade to return to the negotiating table.

Some participants said that Kurti seems to have a decent relationship with Germany, but not with the US's envoy Richard Grenell, who has initiated a rather ad-hoc dialogue between the Serbian and Kosovo. Strangely enough, two Kosovo civil servants who had not consulted the prime minister or their ministers signed the two 'letters of intent' on the highway and railway. Kurti cautiously warned the civil servants and the international community that there is a "new sheriff in town." The majority of participants said that if Kurti has to choose between "submission and confrontation, he would chose the latter," but in a much more subtle a calculated way then when he was in opposition. A speaker said that "Kurti is a reasonable guy, but you can not reason with the likes of Grenell; he is not interested in reasoning, he has demands." Some said that Kurti might drag the dialogue with Serbia until the US's presidential elections in November 2020, hoping that a new president may get elected.

The dialogue with Serbia is not the new government's top priority, but it is the international community's priority. Kurti may buy time until fall, but he has to confront Belgrade at the negotiating table sooner rather than later. Kurti has explained that he would be at the table but would like to first agree on a set of principles that explicitly exclude territory swaps. Kurti has also made it clear that he would lead the dialogue, not the president. Many participants were skeptical that "mutually satisfying compromises" are possible between Kurti and Vucic. "Kurti would not agree to anything short of recognition while Vucic would not agree to recognition short of partition." Some expected that the international community might go back to the two Germanys model or focus on reaching another Brussels type agreement without addressing the status.

Unlike president Thaci who believes Serbia's recognition is crucial, prime minister Kurti argues that Kosovo can do just fine without Serbia's recognition, believing that the non-recognition of Kosovo affects Serbia's future just as much as Kosovo's. "I am not going to beg Serbia for recognition," Kurti said recently.

A NEW OPPORTUNITY

Despite the many challenges listed in this brief report, the participants agreed that the new government represents a new opportunity for Kosovo. The majority of speakers believe that the Kurti government will not get corrupt, strong currency in Kosovo whose past governments have been characterized by major corruption affairs. Kurti may not be able to fulfill all his campaign promises, but people would be happy if they see that his government is doing its best and does not get corrupt.

Despite an uneasy relationship Kurti has had with the international community when in opposition, the participants expected that he would replace his past confrontation with cooperation. The participants suggested that the international community should offer greater support to the new government and give time to consolidate the institutions and show some results in such domestic issues as healthcare and education before it pushes it to a dialogue with Serbia. The participants said that Kurti and the SL should also begin to a build a relationship based on common interests.

The dialogue with Serbia is inevitable, so Kurti would have to engage in it, if not in the spring, definitely in the fall. The participants recommended that Kurti should assemble a professional team to prepare for the next phase of the dialogue. Many expected the process to be tense, long, and difficult. If not able to reach a final peace settlement, the parties should engage in advancing the normalization process, the workshop participants concluded.

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