



## BALKANS & EASTERN EUROPE August/1 2019

### **Elections in Kosovo: Haradinaj-Thaçi duel**

The Kosovar President, Hashim Thaçi, set the 6<sup>th</sup> of October as the date for snap elections, after the government collapsed in July due to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj. He left after he was summoned as war crime suspect by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC) – the EU-funded court investigating alleged crimes committed by members of the Albanian guerrilla during the war and post-war period from 1998 to 2000.

Haradinaj, a former UCK commander, said he resigned because he wanted to appear in The Hague, where the KSC is located, as a private citizen in order to preserve Kosovo's institutions honour. He tried to enhance his profile as responsible patriot ahead of elections, where he will run again as a candidate for the premiership. The chances he will keep his post are not necessarily high. According to polls, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the party he leads, will get only 12-14%. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), Thaçi's party and the main partner of the outgoing coalition, should win more or less the same amount of votes.

People are frustrated with the government. Failure to tackle corruption, a plague for the tiny and extremely poor Balkan country, impacted directly on the big promise made by the PDK-AAK electoral coalition in 2017 campaign to liberalise visa with the EU. Fighting corruption is the second condition on visa by the EU after the accomplished border demarcation agreement with Montenegro.

Moreover, the stalemate in talks with Serbia for normalising diplomatic relations eroded the credibility of the government, which had promised to make it a priority. One more reason that undermined the coalition strength resides in the personal rivalry between Thaçi and Haradinaj, rooted in war time) and brutally re-emerging during talks with Serbia. Thaçi favours the land swap proposed by the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, while Haradinaj rejects it, re-proposing the cleavage between a political leader and a heroic fighter. Diplomatic sources reveal that Thaçi and Vučić had actually produced a draft that was ready to be signed once the exact lines delineating precisely the new border near several villages had been defined.

The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Vetëvendosje! (Self-Determination) are topping the polls. They both are supposed to get 20-22%. Over the last two years, they have intensively cooperated in Parliament against the government. There are rumours about their intention to form a coalition after the vote. However, their ideological platforms are deeply different on several issues, like economy and Serbia. The LDK, that formed a government with PDK in 2014-2017, took part in dialogue with Belgrade. Self-Determination, a nationalist movement, opposes it and still pushes for unification with Albania.

Another aspect that creates tensions between the two parties is the legacy of Ibrahim Rugova, the founder of the LDK and the champion of the nonviolent fight against Serbia in the Nineties. Albin Kurti – the Self-Determination front-runner – strongly criticized Rugova’s passive resistance at that time. As a student leader, he organized violent protests against Serbian authorities in Kosovo. The LDK asks Kurti to pay homage to Rugova’s tomb on the Velanja Hill in Pristina, a thing that Kurti has not yet done.

The glue between LDK and Self-Determination could be a common coordinated effort to dismantle the “state within a state” created by PDK over the years. Thaçi’s party has ruled the country since its independence in 2008, filling institutions and state agencies with its members, who have accumulated power and privileges, say both Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osmani, the LDK candidate for the post of prime minister, the first woman who runs for such a position in Kosovo.

As for the PDK candidate, the party unanimously picked Kadri Veseli, the speaker of the parliament. A powerful politician, he was close to be the AAK-PDK choice for the post of prime minister in 2017, but in the end Haradinaj prevailed. During the recent campaign, Veseli stressed the need to fight against nepotism and presented an anti-corruption plan. It sounded absurdly ironic to LDK and Vetevendosje.

However, anger against PDK is not enough to form a stable coalition, and for sure PDK and AAK does not want to be sidelined. They have resources to mobilize voters (Veseli himself got 129,000 votes at previous elections) and influence talks to form the government. One thing is certain: whoever will rule the country will face the burden of talks with Serbia. Fixing Kosovo depends on it.

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