

Kosovo

October 2019 Parliamentary Elections



Photo Credit: Emerging Europe

Snap elections for Kosovo's parliamentary Assembly took place on October 6, 2019, offering the country a new opportunity to move forward with pressing governance issues alongside normalization of post-war relations with Serbia. Based on preliminary results, opposition parties--Vetevendosje (VV) and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)--were the largest vote winners, each at approximately 25 percent, and are expected to form a governing coalition in the

coming period. The Central Election Commission's preliminary results separated first-place Vetevendosje and second-place LDK by some 6,000 votes. LDK's petition for a full recount was rejected.

After 12 years in government, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) will move to opposition, having obtained 21 percent of the vote, as will outgoing Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), which has registered 11 percent. Srpska List secured all 10 seats reserved for the Kosovar Serb minority.

Final results are expected to be certified in the first week of November following the adjudication of complaints or appeals. Vetevendosje and LDK have commenced negotiations to form a ruling coalition, with Vetevendosje leader, Albin Kurti, as the prospective prime minister. Coalition talks may be influenced following the final tally of diaspora and provisional ballots.

Elections were called following Prime Minister Haradinaj's resignation in July following a summons to appear before the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague in connection with alleged war crimes by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). This was Kosovo's fourth consecutive snap election in the past decade.

Most parties opted to run alone rather than in coalition. The official 10-day campaign environment was caustic, with parties trading corruption accusations. Negotiations with Serbia on normalizing bilateral relations also figured prominently. The parties put forward platforms on unemployment, corruption, and education and health sector reform - key issues for voters according to NDI polling.

The election administration and voting process represented steps forward in election integrity when compared to previous cycles. According to [Democracy in Action \(DiA\)](#), a coalition of citizen election observers, *“The early [parliamentary] elections were conducted in a peaceful and democratic spirit, devoid of any serious irregularities or incidents that could affect the integrity and trust of the public towards the electoral process as a whole. Elections were managed in accordance with the highest standards and pursuant to the legal framework.”* The international community likewise offered positive assessments of the overall process.

Nevertheless, [DiA](#) and [EU observers](#) noted deficiencies in their preliminary post-election statements. Heavy influence from Belgrade on Kosovar Serbs to support Srpska List undercut the notion of free voter choice. Public broadcasters refused to air a Srpska List ad, *“When Serbia calls, I give my vote”*, citing contravention of legal statutes prohibiting incitement of inter-ethnic tension. Voter intimidation incidents were reported around the country. Inaccurate voter lists also remain at issue. Official turnout on election day was around 45 percent; unofficial estimates place actual turnout between 70 to 80 percent. The election complaints body fined political parties more than 360,000 euros for violations during the campaign period, suggesting improved enforcement of campaign finance laws.

In what amounted to a vote for change, Vetevendosje and LDK promoted lead candidates who, unlike the outgoing ruling parties, are not veterans of the 1999 conflict. Vetevendosje’s founder, leader, and prime ministerial candidate, Albin Kurti, who was a prisoner of war in Serbia in the 1999 conflict, has previously called for unification with Albania and rejection of negotiations with Belgrade. For many voters searching for alternatives and souring on stalled negotiations with Belgrade, Kurti and the VV, having never served in government, symbolized change. Vetevendosje’s success hinged on organized grassroots outreach and mobilization of Kosovo’s large diaspora vote. LDK’s prime minister candidate, Vjosa Osmani, was the first woman to head a major party ticket in parliamentary elections. LDK ran on what it labeled the failures of the previous government, but struggled to connect with voters as an agent of change.

Kurti has ruled out including Srpska List in a government. The Constitution mandates at least one minister from the Kosovar Serb community. If that proposed minister is not an elected parliamentarian, the ministerial candidate must be formally endorsed by Kosovar Serb members of parliament - all of whom belong to Srpska List. Both VV and LDK have telegraphed willingness to remove a 100 percent tariff on products from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in connection with restarting negotiations with Belgrade on normalizing relations. Doing so may help bring Srpska List on board with approval of the government, even if the ministry designated for a Kosovar Serb representative remains vacant.

Coalition negotiations between VV and LDK on government formation thus far have focused on reducing the number and size of ministries; nominating women to a minimum 30 percent of ministerial positions; and producing a joint government platform. VV and LDK are expected to divide 12 ministries evenly -- at five each -- with the other two going to Kosovar Serb and non-Serb minority representatives. LDK is expected to hold a deputy prime minister position and the parliamentary speakership.

Both Kurti and Osmani have rejected changing the borders with Serbia, which until now has been the only apparent suggestion to reach an agreement with Serbia under a negotiation process to normalize post-war relations, known as the Brussels Dialogue. A U.S. diplomat recently appointed by the White House as a special envoy to the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations visited Pristina in the days following the elections, meeting with Kurti, Osmani, and President Hashim Thaci to stress the urgency of reaching an agreement with Serbia.

Kurti has indicated that he seeks a more representative and inclusive process, consulting with members of the Kosovar Serb community, beyond Srpska List and authorities in Belgrade, and has underscored that the content of an agreement with Serbia is more important than the timeline to reach one. A majority of Kosovars, according to NDI public opinion research, concur with this point.

Restarting negotiations with Serbia, which holds parliamentary elections next spring, will join anti-corruption and economic policy atop the new government's agenda. Understanding the desire of voters for change, the government will have a premium to deliver reform. NDI public opinion research shows that 50 percent of Kosovo's young people, who constitute a majority of the overall population, are considering emigration. Kosovo must undertake coordinated economic development and education reforms to counteract one of the greatest challenges to Kosovo's young democracy.

The democracy agenda in Kosovo is large. Government must continue to build transparency, accountability, and the rule of law while it seeks to create jobs, reform education and healthcare, and contend with emigration flows. Inter-ethnic reconciliation is crucial in a period of intense political dialogue around negotiations with Belgrade to normalize relations. New challenges, such as disinformation that exploit ethnic and partisan cleavages, as evidenced in NDI election analysis, must be tackled. With a new government in the making, Kosovo has a new opportunity to build democratic stability as a multi-ethnic society.