

# Kosovo's early elections are reviving its 'war' and 'peace' camps

**ISE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/19/kosovos-early-elections-are-reviving-its-war-and-peace-camps/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/19/kosovos-early-elections-are-reviving-its-war-and-peace-camps/)

2017-5-19

*Kosovo is due to hold early elections on 11 June, following a vote of no confidence in the government.*

**Krenar Gashi** writes that the elections have encouraged a recalibration of Kosovo's party system, with the revival of the division between so called 'war' parties and 'peace' parties that has its roots in the aftermath of the Kosovo War in the late 1990s.



Credit: Wikipedia / Tobias Klenze (CC BY SA 2.0)

On 15 May, Kosovo's Prime Minister, Isa Mustafa, went to Parliament hoping to pass a controversial policy, but returned home jobless. A motion of no confidence sponsored by the opposition parties and voted for by Mustafa's governing coalition partners brought his government down. As Kosovo now finds itself bracing for the impact of early elections, scheduled for 11 June, the political scene is enduring peculiar shifts which are bringing the country's politics back to the post-war period.

The quarrel between Mustafa's Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and his partners, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), centred on the ratification of an agreement that Kosovo reached with Montenegro regarding border demarcation. The agreement's ratification, which has been stipulated as a condition by the European Union for visa liberalisation for Kosovo's citizens, was strongly rejected by the opposition.

Using an old Albanian nationalist discourse of 'losing the land', the three opposition parties – the Self-Determination movement (LVV), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and Nisma, a party that emerged from a PDK wing – managed to build resistance to the policy, claiming that Kosovo would be giving up some of its territory to Montenegro under the agreement. Consequently, some of the MPs from the governing coalition parties publicly rejected the agreement, and Mustafa's government did not have the two-thirds of votes in the Assembly needed for

its ratification. The insistence of the EU and the US that the agreement was just and would not damage Kosovo in terms of territory were more or less futile.

The fact that the EU put the demarcation of the border as a condition for visa liberalisation is no less controversial. Kosovo is the only Western Balkan country whose citizens still require visas to travel to Schengen countries, a policy which the EU has lifted for Ukraine and Georgia recently, both of which have far more serious border issues than Kosovo does. This hypocritical approach by the EU has further fuelled deep divisions over the issue, to the extent that the PDK decided to support the opposition's motion and start an early election campaign by blaming Mustafa for failing to ratify the agreement.

Given the unpopularity of the LDK-PDK government, which many in Kosovo have seen as an 'unnatural' grand-coalition between two rivals, early elections were most likely inevitable. While most of the parties supported the idea of holding an early election jointly with the local and mayoral ones scheduled to take place in November, the PDK preferred an alternative option, in no small part because several mayors have been either convicted or indicted for corruption and abuse of power, which could damage the party in the national campaign.

What followed the fall of the government, however, was an interesting shift of the political scene through the negotiation of pre-election coalitions. Seeking to expand its electorate, Mustafa's LDK reached an agreement with the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR) run by businessman Behgjet Pacolli, a party which failed to reach the 5 per cent threshold in the last election, but which is believed to have grown its support to some extent since. They also reached a coalition agreement with the newly established party Alternativa, run by Mimoza Kusari Lila, formerly of the AKR, and Ilir Deda, formerly of the LVV.

For the LDK, which had won 33 out of 120 parliamentary seats in the 2014 elections, this was a strategic move, as it will enable the party to overtake the PDK, which had won 36 seats in 2014. Programmatically speaking, the liberal-leaning AKR and Alternativa would fit with the LDK's centre right ideas and the self-proclaimed conservative profile of the party. However, having been criticised heavily throughout his mandate, Mustafa chose not to be nominated for the position of Prime Minister, for which the party nominated Avdullah Hoti, current minister of finance, who is known as a scholar and an efficient technocrat, but who lacks charisma and popular support.

Mustafa's moves and coalition agreements put the PDK in an awkward position. Although the PDK won the 2014 elections, it could not form a government as all other parties united in an anti-PDK coalition, leaving the country in deadlock. A 2014 decision by the Constitutional Court, however, gave the PDK the right to appoint the speaker of the parliament and to form a government, with the ruling based on the principle that they were the 'victor' of the elections, even if they lacked a majority. Furthermore, the Court ruled that any coalition reached after the elections would not be assigned this 'victor' status, even if such a coalition contained the vast majority of parliamentary seats. This controversial verdict, which overcomplicates the electoral and government-formation processes, encouraged the LDK to break their coalition with the other parties and join the PDK in an 'unnatural' coalition.

The ruling may well put the PDK at a disadvantage this time, however, as they will likely end up as the second party in this election due to the LDK's coalition agreements. Furthermore, the party has 'lost' its funder and prominent leader Hashim Thaci, who is serving as Kosovo's President and has resigned from the party organisation. The new leader, Kadri Veseli, has acquired influence within the party but still suffers from a poor public image, given he ran the PDK's shadowy intelligence service SHIK, which was linked to criminal activities including post-war assassinations in Kosovo.

Veseli has moved to reach an agreement with the AAK, which is run by former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, and Nisma, run by former PDK seniors Fatmir Limaj and Jakup Krasniqi. Veseli even gave up his aim of becoming Prime Minister and nominated Haradinaj for the post. Tensions between these two parties and the PDK, however, are still high, thus the coalition agreement caught many by surprise. Programmatically speaking, the PDK's centre and the AAK's centre-right profile could be a match, in contrast to Nisma's self-proclaimed social-democratic profile. Policy-wise, however, it remains highly unclear how the AAK's strong opposition of the demarcation of the border

with Montenegro could be reconciled with the PDK's conviction to pass the policy as soon as possible. The coalition, thus far, is not driven by policy ideas but rather by a straightforward attempt to win power.

With two coalitions already in place, the only Albanian political party that decided to run by itself in the elections is the LVV. Labelled by some as 'radical' and 'nationalist' and often mislabelled as 'anti-European', the party remains controversial with some sections of society. Owing to the spotless performance of the Pristina mayor Shpend Ahmeti, the LVV has the greatest credibility when it comes to fighting corruption in the public sector. The party's historical association with violence, however, make many voters cautious, and so does their dearth of political pragmatism.

The social-democratic programme of the LVV is combined with a revived nationalism, with many of its prominent figures seeing the Republic of Kosovo only as a transitional phase before the country can unite with Albania, which remains the movement's political end goal. In spite of the programmatic controversies that exist, however, support for the LVV might well increase, especially since the fight against corruption and organised crime is an increasingly high priority for many voters. The movement's candidate for Prime Minister is its founder and 'spiritual leader' Albin Kurti, a fairly inflexible politician, although in the eyes of many, Pristina's mayor Ahmeti would have been a better choice given his moderate profile.

With only three main competitors in the race, at first sight it might appear that Kosovo's party system is starting to reshuffle along ideological lines. Once one digs deeper into the coalition arrangements, however, tensions between the 'newlywed' parties suggest a bleaker interpretation. On the surface, the pre-election coalitions could be seen as a positive development, particularly given Kosovo's political system guarantees an extensive diffusion of power. Owing to constitutional provisions that guarantee 20 out of 120 parliamentary seats to parties representing national minorities and a fully proportional electoral system with a single district, none of the current competitors are expected to win a majority of seats and to be able to form a government on their own. A post-election coalition is therefore likely to be needed. The Constitution also requires the government to include parties representing Serbs and other non-Albanian ethnicities.

But what the country is likely to witness in the short, ten-day long campaign, is an intensification of accusations against political rivals, with echoes of the country's post-war discourse. The PDK coalition consists of the so-called 'war-wing' parties, namely parties led by politicians associated with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), all of which claim the historical legacy of the KLA's fight. The LDK coalition, on the other hand, represents the so-called 'peace-wing'.

The divisions between these two discourses go back as far as the late 1990s, when the 'peaceful resistance' to Serbia's rule over Kosovo, led by the LDK and Kosovo's late President Ibrahim Rugova, was matched by an armed resistance from the KLA. The war-wing vs peace-wing cleavage dominated Kosovo in the aftermath of the 1998-99 conflict all the way to its Declaration of Independence in 2008.

Further pluralisation of the political scene since independence has led to a slow evolution of Kosovo's party system. Parties today are still defined not so much by their ideas, but rather by charismatic leaders with powerful informal networks of supporters. But pluralisation has meant less power, less clientelism, and more importance attached to the ideas put forward in party programmes. The revival of the 'war vs peace' debates, which are likely to characterise the upcoming elections, would represent something of a 'devolution' of the party system, as would the resurfacing of the LVV as a third-runner in the race.

That said, these shifts may not last long. Following the elections, MPs are mandated individually, which means they can detach themselves from coalitions, create separate parliamentary groups or align with others, something which Kosovo has witnessed in the past. And the crude Machiavellian politics that opened the way to early elections in the first place are likely to intensify when the dust settles after the vote.

*[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

---

## **About the author**

**Krenar Gashi** – *Ghent University*

Krenar Gashi is Basileus Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. [@krenarium](#)



-