



Elections with big stakes

Key Finding Report

February, 2024

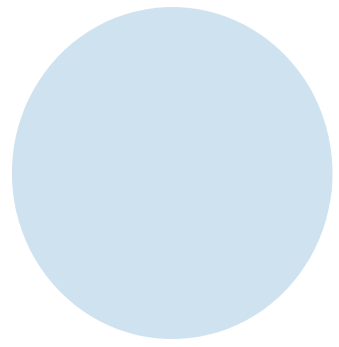
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Elections with big stakes

2024 will be highly challenging for the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. In addition to the U.S. and, to some extent, the E.U. Parliamentary elections, parliamentary elections in Kosovo will be an important factor. Despite the sure victory, the Kurti/Self-Determination Movement may lack the requisite support to independently form the government, necessitating a coalition with key opposition figures. It is crucial to acknowledge that, owing to the exhibited, predominantly alienating management style of the ruling structure, such a coalition could prove highly unstable and prone to rapid collapse. Moreover, suppose the confrontational style of the current government persists. In that case, the USA might exert more decisive pressure on Albin Kurti and high-ranking members of LVV, possibly leading to individual sanctions. The likelihood of such developments is higher in the wildcard scenario where LVV is not part of the next coalition government. Finally, as it seems from this perspective, Kurti will aim to hold elections in the second half of 2024 after it is clearer what the European Parliament will look like.

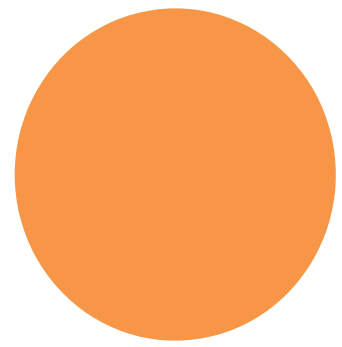
On the other hand, Serbia is awaiting the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections scheduled for November. It is not undisclosed that Vučić is inclined towards supporting Trump, albeit discreetly, given the previous unsuccessful outcomes of his openly endorsed candidates. The structures in Serbia lean favorably towards the Republicans, exemplified by the close relationship between Vučić and the former special envoy of the U.S. President for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, Richard Grenell. Grenell has recently demonstrated an understanding of the Government of Serbia's views and has not concealed his dissatisfaction with Kurti. Also, during the Trump administration, Vučić negotiated with Hashim Thaci about the famous 'land swap,' and Belgrade sees the return of Trump and Grenell as an opportunity to renew the dialogue on this issue or at least some similar, more creative, alternative solutions.



From the perspective of the Serbian community, a substantial difference in approach is observed between the current government, led by Kurti, and its predecessors, even those presided over by former leaders of the KLA. The predecessors demonstrated a greater understanding of the position of Serbs in Kosovo, approaching sensitive issues with more caution and pragmatism, whereas Kurti is characterized as an ideologue.

However, the elections in Kosovo could potentially offer a resolution to the prolonged period of crises that has shadowed the dialogue over the past 2.5 years. Assuming that the current Prime Minister Albin Kurti's party remains in power after the elections, with the possibility of forming a coalition with more cooperative options, this development could potentially initiate forming the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities. However, this process is anticipated to be protracted, involving the review of the statute for its constitutionality and legality, which could impede the entire procedure. Functional municipalities in Serb-majority areas are deemed necessary for forming the Association/Community, posing an additional challenge. The participation of current Albanian-majority municipal assemblies in the north of Kosovo in forming the Association/Community is considered implausible. Additionally, with the next regular local elections not scheduled until the following year and the ongoing crisis in the process of replacing mayors, no imminent changes are foreseen in municipal assemblies.

The most significant wildcard of the 2024 election season is a moderately likely scenario in which LVV, despite winning the elections, fails to form the government, leading to broader involvement from PDK, LDK, AAK, NISMA, and other smaller political options. While this scenario may promise an immediate cessation of new crises, challenges, particularly those associated with the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities, may persist.



Dialogue as a tool, not as a means!

The segment of society most adversely affected by each new crisis, with dwindling numbers, is the Serbian community in Kosovo. Conversely, escalating tensions align with Pristina's interests. Kurti appears to have sensed that international actors are either disinterested or powerless to intervene, capitalizing on this situation. He perceives a level of betrayal, believing that international actors are not exerting sufficient pressure on Serbia to fulfill its obligations under last year's agreement, compounded by the absence of punitive measures following the attack in Banjska.

Constantly causing crises is immanent in Kurti's being. He is a man of action, not a man of the status quo. He is comfortable as long as he is in a position to enjoy power, i.e., his popularity among the people is high.

Kurti strategically employs dialogue as a power source, given the neglect of all other aspects of life, including the economy and social policy. The decision regarding the dinar is positioned to consolidate this power under the pretext of upholding the rule of law. It is conceivable that Kurti may be compelled to yield under pressure from the international public. However, the West appears reluctant to apply stronger and more concrete pressure to maintain a delicate balance, mainly due to the absence of sanctions against Serbia after Banjska. Simultaneously, there is apprehension that a more stringent approach could be perceived as open animosity towards Kosovo rather than directed at Kurti as an individual and the current holder of power. A particularly problematic period for dialogue could be the month of August. Namely, the mandate of the special envoy for dialogue, Miroslav Lajčák, and the mandate of the American ambassador to Kosovo, Jeffrey Hovenier, ends around the same time. There is concern that a political-security vacuum will be created during that period and that no one will prevent or manage a potential escalation.

Overall, the situation is alarming, with potentially worse developments lying ahead. If Kosovo and Serbia do not take a more constructive approach, serious escalation is imminent.



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This report is based on the discussions, which were held under the Chatham House Rule. The report does not necessarily represent the views of NSI or of individual participants. It is simply a brief summary of the discussions.