

KURTI'S GOVERNMENT - A PREMATURE CELEBRATION?

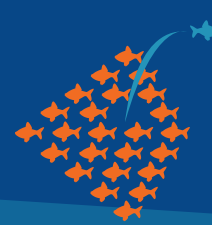
The post-election coalition in Kosovo was thought to be a matter of relative certainty ever since election night. Yet the delays in the process of the election certification and coalition formation have put certain things into questions – if not the certainty of a VV-LDK coalition, then at least some of the details related to its functionality. Most participants in the discussion group **expect a coalition agreement to be reached fairly soon and that some form of accommodation will be found to include the Serbian List.** At least one participant suspected that Hashim Thaci might yet pull some move to prevent government formation.

However, the discussion group was **generally pessimistic over what Kurti can achieve in a context of the high expectations** his win has created. The reasons listed were not only related to the political constraints of governing as part of a coalition, but also because of Kurti's political style of **preferring confrontation and spectacle over substance.** As one participant said: "He will not be a problem solver but will do shows like Vucic. He is not the person who will worry about things like garbage on the streets." A majority of those who spoke agreed that Kurti will focus on things that are highly visible and popular, especially those that would strike at corruption. Some thought that this would focus on assaulting oligarchs or veterans case, while others thought this means targeting networks of nepotism in public institutions. It is for this reason that, as one participant said, Haradinaj and Thaci "are already putting people in place to blackmail the next government".

Participants in the discussion group were divided into how much Kurti can convince the public that he is achieving some kind of success considering the constraints and how long the government will be able to last. Namely, the key question disputed was: **can Kurti consolidate his power from power or will he flop?** Some drew parallels with Shpend Ahmeti's governance in Pristina and the crash after initial high expectations. One participant noted that he cannot do much on the rule of law because of LDK. Others questioned whether VV has the human capacities within its ranks to deliver. Another commentator fretted that Kurti will tumble because of his inability to make compromises. But another part of the group was less skeptical about Kurti's political prospects. This is partly because of his skill at selling political narratives. "They have a good way of gas lighting and they will maintain the hype", said one participant. Another optimist added Kurti will, in any case, be a success because of the low popularity of the opposition. "The government might fall but he will rise", the participant said. "Even Shpend Ahmeti won a second mandate by doing nothing in the first."

EXPECTATIONS ON KURTI'S APPROACH TO RECIPROCITY, SERBIAN LIST AND INTERNAL DIALOGUE

Discussants of the group attempted to decipher the way in which Albin Kurti will work with the Kosovo Serb community and address issues related to their concerns. First and foremost, there is the issue of taxes on Serbian goods and the meaning of Kurti's proposal to replace

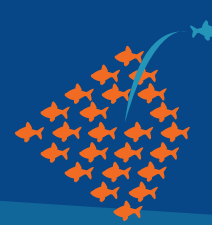


the taxes with “reciprocity”. There seemed to be a **general consensus that Kurti will find a way to make sure that the taxes do not remain an obstacle to the dialogue**. One participant noted that this is precisely the reason reciprocity as a term has been “intentionally left vague and unclear.” Another one thought that Kurti will nevertheless have little space to maneuver with reciprocity because many of the measures will be harsh and repressive to Kosovo Serbs. “I don’t expect him to make harsh moves with Kosovo Serbs”, said one Kosovo Serb participant. Another Kosovo Albanian participant seemed to agree and suggest that Kurti can sell that story. “Kurti can sell any narrative to Kosovo Albanians.”

There were sharp divisions between discussants on how Kurti’s relation to the Serbian List will work. There were those who thought that the **Serbian List will do everything in its power to sabotage Kurti’s government**. “I see a pact against Vetevendosje and Serbian List will be a part of it”, the participant said, by pointing out that many Serbian List figures are already developing exit strategies and positioning themselves in Serbian institutions. This participant expected that the Serbian List will do a similar scenario as they did with the demarcation with Montenegro, where they allowed one Gorani MP to vote for the government, but that they will not then actively participate in it, just as they did not over the past year. Another discussant agreed: “They will give minority support, but things are going in the direction of disintegration”.

But another participant was less skeptical in suggesting that **both sides will find a way to diffuse the tensions**, which was already visible in their changed discourse, especially after they have been exposed to international pressure. The suggestion is that Albin Kurti will include the Serbian List in the government but will build a story in which he will say that he is not letting them play Belgrade’s game. There was also a suggestion that there were internal disagreements within the Serbian List and competing interests, some of which have an interest in preserving influence over certain public institutions. The cleavage between the Srpska lista north and south interests were mentioned, although it was generally believed that these differences will be kept within the party and that the Serbs from the south have little leverage. The third current of thought in the discussion was that the **Serbian List is getting disproportionate attention** and that what it says or does ultimately does not matter.

Albin Kurti has suggested that he will initiate a process of internal dialogue with the Kosovo Serb community, but a majority of participants were **very skeptical that that has any chance of succeeding**. Some Kosovo Serbs view Kurti’s attempt to sidestep Serbia and talk to local Serbs as ill-intentioned: “Kurti wants to strip us from our source of power so he can play with us”, said one participant. Another one was skeptical that anything was possible bottom-up: “How is that possible? We know who controls things here”. A third participant noted that Serbs in the north live in a state of capture and don’t really stand a chance. Asked specifically whether there is a chance for Albin Kurti to be accepted in the north for a visit, the discussants were sceptical. “He can but he needs to send strong signals”, said one participant. Another one noted that the internal dialogue has now the interest of the international community and that it has to be initiated from communities and only backed by politicians. “Kurti has a chance of being part of it if he abandons his policy on language, Brussels dialogue and the talk on unification with Albania.”



NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVE

EXPECTATIONS ON BRUSSELS DIALOGUE

Participants in the discussion were generally in agreement that Albin Kurti is **more pragmatic and open to the dialogue than is generally thought** and that he has the political capital and ability to change his narrative. “Kurti can sell any narrative”, one participant said. But there were disagreements on how he will approach the dialogue in terms of the discussed solutions. He has outlined a few key principles, but it is unclear what they mean in practice. One participant noted that Kurti will seek to prolong the dialogue and in this effort he will be supported by Germany. But another participant was not so sure and noted that Kurti has even started to shift his narrative on border correction slightly, when he suggested that Albanians “will not give up Mitrovica for national unification” (which some have understood as openness to border changes that don’t include Mitrovica).

Generally, expectations on the success of the dialogue are very low and almost all participants agree that **Kosovo and Serbia will in the foreseeable future remain in the current state of relations**. One participant noted the security risks involved because of the fact that, while Thaci and Vucic showed signs of coordination and communications, the energy and tensions between Kurti and Vucic are very spontaneous, which could create risks. Many things will need to happen for a new dialogue process to start, including government formation in Kosovo, elections in Serbia and clarification on whether the Balkans have a European perspective or not. One participant noted that nothing meaningful will happen until February, another one predicted the spring. But almost none dared to suggest there will be an agreement. One participant nevertheless suggested that he could foresee **a type of agreement that does not involve recognition**.

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<http://newsocialinitiative.org/>



@NSIMitrovica



@newsocialinitiative.nsi



Čika Jovina V/117, North Mitrovica



www.newsocialinitiative.org



office@newsocialinitiative.org

