



Kosovo's Election: Early Results May Signal Major Changes

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On October 6, 2019, Kosovo held its fourth parliamentary election since declaring independence from Serbia in 2008 (Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence). Opposition parties' strong performance may result in the [most consequential](#) government turnover since independence, with implications for the future direction of the European Union (EU)-[facilitated dialogue](#) to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The United States has long supported Kosovo's political and economic development, and U.S. officials and many Members of Congress support and have closely followed the dialogue.

Results

Kosovo's early parliamentary election follows the [unexpected resignation](#) of outgoing Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj in July 2019. The [results](#), while fragmented, are considered to be a victory for the two largest opposition parties. The left-wing Self-Determination (Vetëvendosje) party placed first with 25.49% of votes, followed by the center-right Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) with 24.82%.

Vetëvendosje leader Albin Kurti has begun [coalition talks](#) with LDK's Vjosa Osmani, who led the party's election list. A Vetëvendosje-LDK government would hold a slim majority of the National Assembly's 120 seats (results are not yet finalized).

Analysts assess that corruption and economic conditions were among key voter [concerns](#). The outgoing governing parties, often referred to as the *war wing* because their leaders battled against Serbian forces during the 1990s-era independence campaign, have long held sway in politics. Given their long tenure in office, many critics associate them with "[endemic government corruption](#)" and nepotism. [High unemployment](#) (about 30% overall and 50% among youth) and poverty also fueled voter dissatisfaction.

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Vetëvendosje has never been in national government. The party grew out of a street [movement](#) critical of Kosovo's ruling political factions and the international community's administration of Kosovo following the retreat of Serbian forces in 1999. The party at times has been criticized for using [violent tactics](#), taking an uncompromising position on negotiations with Serbia, and advocating Kosovo's eventual [unification](#) with neighboring Albania (a majority of Kosovo's population is ethnic Albanian). Vetëvendosje's supporters—and Kurti himself—contend that the party has since [moderated](#) and is prepared to lead a responsible, responsive government [focused on](#) economic and social reforms, as well as strengthening the rule of law.

Test of Kosovo's Democracy

Some viewed the election as a successful test of Kosovo's young democracy. The EU Election Observation Mission [positively assessed](#) the “vibrant and competitive” election, noting that it was “well administered and transparent.” Other observers praised incumbent parties for accepting their losses, in particular the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), which has been in all government coalitions since independence.

By contrast, many observers expressed concern over the election process in northern Kosovo, where ethnic Serbs form a majority. Serbia's [influence](#) there is considered to be strong and wielded in part through the Serbian List party. The EU mission described the campaign as “marred by intimidation” against non-Serbian List candidates and an “uneven playing field.” Serbian List [won](#) overwhelmingly in the north and is expected to gain the 10 seats in the National Assembly reserved for ethnic Serbs.

Dialogue Outlook and U.S.-Kosovo Relations

A Vetëvendosje-LDK government could affect the tenor and future of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Since its launch in 2011, the EU-facilitated dialogue has resulted in numerous technical agreements but thus far has fallen short of a permanent settlement resulting in Serbia's recognition of Kosovo. The dialogue has been suspended since November 2018, when Haradinaj's government imposed tariffs on Serbian imports in [response](#) to Serbia's ongoing [campaign](#) to undermine Kosovo's international legitimacy. Vetëvendosje has been critical of the dialogue in the past. In a postelection [interview](#), party leader Kurti stated his intention to review existing agreements reached through the dialogue and said that he would not immediately lift tariffs.

A Vetëvendosje-LDK government could revisit controversial developments in the dialogue. In 2018, Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić raised the prospect of redrawing the Serbia-Kosovo border as an approach to normalizing relations (sometimes described as a *land swap* or *border adjustment*). Analysts believe such a proposal could entail transferring Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo to Serbia. To the surprise of some, the Trump Administration signaled its [willingness to consider](#) such a proposal, breaking with long-standing U.S. and European opposition to redrawing borders in the Balkans. Germany and some other European countries remain opposed due to their concern that it could set a dangerous precedent and destabilize neighboring countries. Opposition parties in Kosovo, including Vetëvendosje, expressed [opposition](#) to any partition.

Kosovo considers the United States to be a crucial international partner. Nevertheless, bilateral relations grew somewhat [strained](#) when the Haradinaj government repeatedly spurned U.S. (and European) calls to lift the tariffs against Serbia. Some were dismayed by what they perceived as U.S. [pressure](#) on Kosovo to cede part of its territory to Serbia [against the wishes](#) of much of the population.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [appointed](#) Deputy Assistant Secretary Matthew Palmer as Special Representative for the Western Balkans in August 2019, and President Trump named U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell as Special Envoy for the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue in October. These appointments may signal the Administration's interest in a [greater U.S. role](#) in negotiations and its desire

to reach a [quick settlement](#) between Kosovo and Serbia, whose unresolved dispute is considered to pose a risk to regional stability.

Congressional interest in Kosovo, which dates back to Yugoslavia's disintegration, remains strong. Many Members support the EU-facilitated dialogue and have [urged](#) Kosovo and Serbia to resume talks during visits to both countries. Among countries in the Western Balkans, Kosovo receives the highest amount of U.S. foreign assistance. About \$50 million was appropriated in FY2018. The Senate Appropriations Committee recommended a funding level of \$38.5 million for Kosovo for FY2019 ([S.Rept. 115-282](#) to S. 3108). The Administration requested \$26.25 million for FY2020. Additional assistance is provided through a \$49 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Threshold Program launched in [2017](#), and the MCC Board recently selected Kosovo to participate in a [compact](#).

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