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Kosovo

Kosovo: a historic turning point

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After its overwhelming victory in the early parliamentary elections held on 13 February 2021 in Kosovo (1.8 million inhabitants, 90% Albanian), the Vetëvendosje (VV) party – the name means “Self-determination” - completed the consolidation of its institutional powers on Sunday 4 April 2021. Winning nearly 50% of the vote in February, it was far ahead of all the institutional parties resulting from the previous phases of the independence struggle: on the one hand, those whose leaders originated from the former guerrillas of the Kosovo Liberation Army, the UCK, in particular the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK, 17.32%) of the former president Ashim Thaçi, (who had resigned in November 2020 awaiting trial for war crimes) but also the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK, 13.18%) of the late president and pacifist Ibrahim Rugova (see below “Historical landmarks and main institutional parties in Kosovo”).

With 58 seats in the new parliament (out of 120) Vetëvendosje (VV) received massive backing from émigré and women voters. It now controls all the institutions of power: the presidency of the parliament has gone to it by right and its charismatic leader Albin Kurti (aged 42) formed his government on 22 March. But they still had to win the presidency of the country which requires the backing of a qualified majority in parliament, while the opposition boycotted this vote. In the event of failure after three votes, the country would have been forced to hold new legislative elections. [1] VV presented as candidate a figure who had helped it achieve victory by her campaign against corruption and had quit her party - the (centre-right) LDK: the popular lawyer and feminist Vjosa Osmani (aged 38). And in the last ballot, on 4 April, Osmani was elected, supported by VV, ethnic minorities and 3 deputies from her former party, the LDK.

From now on, VV will have to apply the main thrusts of its electoral campaign against corruption and for social rights while the pandemic has killed nearly 1,800 people, worsening the economic, social and health crises in one of the poorest countries on the European continent: the average wage is around 500 euros and the unemployment rate for young people is around 50%, which drives them overwhelmingly to emigrate to Switzerland or Germany. All this in a context of uncertainty on the international status of Kosovo, whose parliament voted for independence in 2008.

What status?

Serbia denounced the vote on the grounds that Kosovo was not a republic but a province of Serbia in the former Yugoslavia. For their part, the separatists stressed (among other arguments) the status of “quasi-republic” acquired under Tito's reign in the 1973 Constitution - which gave Kosovo the same rights as republics within the collegiate presidency, and autonomy of management, independent of Belgrade. But they also underline the nullity of UN resolution 1244 (which explicitly wanted to avoid them having a tête-à-tête with Belgrade) after the end of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Belgrade however persists in upholding it (with the support of Russia on the UN Security Council): it advocates radical autonomy for Kosovo within Serbia. Behind the games of liar's poker, in truth, from the time of the Rambouillet negotiations (1999) whose failure was followed by the NATO war, the leaders in Belgrade were already ready to recognize to the Albanians a broad autonomy to organize and finance themselves the “autonomous” institutions and public services (health and education) in Kosovo! This was accompanied by a discourse of “historical sovereignty” whose real issue was the north of Kosovo: it was about ownership of the mines of the Trepça complex (which the Nazis also wanted to keep in their hands during the carve up of Yugoslavia in World War II), associated with predominantly Serbian communities and with great vestiges of the Orthodox patriarchy. All monetary, commercial, political and repressive measures (including assassinations of rebellious Serbian leaders) taken by Belgrade since the 2000s and within the framework of negotiations with Pristina are aimed

at control over this northern part of Kosovo.

Meanwhile, the independence rejected by Belgrade is not recognized by the United Nations (but it is by 93 of its 193 members). It is also not officially recognized by the European Union (although only five members are opposed: Cyprus, the Spanish state, Greece, Romania and Slovakia). In contrast, the EU has opted for a “pragmatic” approach (avoiding discussing “status”), playing on the carrot of membership as pressure on the leaders in Belgrade and Pristina to find common ground. With this in mind, the EU has explicitly included Kosovo in the “stabilization and association process” that it has established with the so-called “Western Balkan” countries since the end of the NATO war - and confirmed at the Thessaloniki Council of 2003. Peaceful relations between neighbours are part of the “road map”, in particular in the perspective of a free trade area.

Vetëvendosje's political course

VV was founded during the protectorate, in 2004, succeeding an associative movement (Kosovo Action Network) favourable to direct democracy. It then had an “ethno-nationalist” profile and advocated union with Albania (not without nostalgia for the period of Enver Hoxha). It stood for the first time in the 2010 parliamentary elections where it won 12.7% of the vote: with 14 deputies out of 120 it rose to third position on the Kosovar political scene, ahead of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) led by former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj. In 2014, the vice-president of VV won the mayoral elections in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. This marked the start of a decisive anchoring of the party in action on the ground, with concrete left-wing dimensions in terms of demands.

Its discourse became more social, and it systematically denounced corruption - without sparing those who had long been untouchable because they were associated with the country's liberation struggle. Its spectacular and continuous actions in this area have earned it growing popularity. It also objected to orientations that advocated the transfer of populations to new ethnic borders as a condition for Belgrade's recognition of Kosovo's independence.

While rejecting this logic, VV moved towards a policy of democratic popular sovereignty responding to the concrete needs of the population of Kosovo - by addressing itself in particular to the various minorities, in particular Kosovo Serbs: the search for an understanding with them was privileged over “agreements” with Belgrade. And its intransigence towards the former leaders of the armed struggle, now prosecuted, no doubt gave credibility to the discourse.

The current electoral victory therefore comes after several years of local anchoring of the party thanks to its successes in municipal elections - notably in Pristina; but also, after a weak majority in the legislative elections of 2019 which allowed Albin Kurti to accede to government responsibilities. However, this occurred within the framework of a precarious alliance of VV with the centre-right LDK. Kurti became head of government for around 50 days amid some popular disillusionment with the weakness of the social policies implemented. It was a motion of censure initiated by the LDK which brought him down in March 2020. In the background were some spectacular actions carried out by Kurti (earning him a conviction) on border issues linked to the secret negotiations of former President Thaçi with Belgrade.

A new phase: promises and uncertainties

Will the relationship of forces created by the new elections allow VV to apply its program more independently? VV has made many promises: to dissolve the Privatization Agency, create a sovereign fund for the management of

public enterprises, ensure free tuition fees for students, parental leave and social protection services, especially for single mothers and the elderly. It won a massive vote from the diaspora (a third of the population, which brings in 60% of the country's budget) and women (61% against 47% of men.) - in particular thanks to the involvement of the new president. Kurti says, with her, that he wants to "put an end to the old regime", that is to say what he calls the "establishment" of institutional parties. He promises to meet priority social demands - including having vaccinated most of the population within a year. Will the generous distribution of vaccines by Serbia to its Balkan neighbours in the recent phase be an instrument of "dialogue" with Pristina?

Kurti speaks in favour of integrating Kosovo, with the entire Western Balkans, as a whole, into the EU. But this is a logic at odds with the practical guidelines of the EU. His alliance with the new president Vjosa Osmani marks at least three major changes in the political scene: the rise of women (in addition to the presidency, and the high participation in the poll, a third of parliamentarians are women), a change of generation, with two leaders aged around forty, and the end of the reign of "the commanders". But three questions also represent major trials to come.

On the one hand, how will VV work internally? Recently in particular, there have been conflicts of orientation made opaque by conflicts between persons. This issue sparked "a self-destruction of the party" in 2018 for lack of democratic means of expressing disagreements - especially with regard to the main leader, Arbin Kurti. And the internal functioning of a party in power generally has rapidly visible consequences also on its relations with its allies and with the "civil society" which elected it.

On the other hand, will the social promises be implemented and with what means - given Kosovo's relationship of international dependence with the EU and the United States - and therefore also its uncertain "status"?

Finally, and associated with this issue, how will VV defend the "sovereignty" of Kosovo - particularly in terms of social rights? This raises political and socio-economic questions at different articulated territorial scales.

The former workers of the mines of Trepça, Albanians or Serbs, are without unions able to defend their rights. Miners in neighbouring Albania, "adrift" after thirty years of privatization, have faced the same situation - and are trying to respond by self-organizing a new union. [2] But beyond trades unionism, who were and are the "legitimate owners" of these "common goods"? The not only illegitimate but illegal character - in view of the old constitutions - of the post-1989 privatizations in the countries formerly claiming to be socialist remains a blind spot in the balance sheets of this phase, resurfacing in many conflicts. The competitive "free trade" advocated by the EU could be opposed to many alternative logics of "pooling" resources and rights. VV has promised a questioning of privatizations, but how?

9 April 2021

Historical landmarks and main institutional parties in Kosovo

In 1989, Serbian President Milosevic abolished the status of quasi-republic which was recognized to Kosovo in the 1974 constitution. The Albanians of this autonomous province of Serbia decided to boycott all official institutions now controlled by Belgrade. From 1991, the dismantling of the Yugoslavia of Tito (who died in 1980) was materialized by the declarations of independence of the former republics (except Montenegro and Serbia which remained associated in a rump Yugoslav federation).

1. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) headed the pacifist resistance. The centre-right LDK was founded

in 1989 by Ibrahim Rugova, novelist, a former member of the League of Communists, nicknamed “the Gandhi of the Balkans”. In September 1991 the Kosovar Albanians (after a clandestine referendum) proclaimed the “Republic of Kosovo”. This was organized by shadowing all official institutions - with parallel schools and health institutions, presidential and parliamentary elections. Ibrahim Rugova was elected president and there were hopes for international recognition of the “republic of Kosovo” in a context of “neither peace nor war”.

2. From the armed struggle of the UÇK (Kosovo Liberation Army) to the PDK (Democratic Party of Kosovo).

Faced with the international recognition received by Milosevic during the Dayton accords of 1996 (ending three years of ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and Herzegovina and establishing its new constitution) Rugova's pacifist strategy was criticized. by the “Popular Movement for Kosovo” which decided to launch an armed struggle and created the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK). This aimed to win the solidarity of the villages against the repression of Belgrade, then the support of the USA: the latter treated the guerrillas as “terrorists” initially, then recognised them as representatives of the independence struggle. They became the armed wing of NATO in the field in 1999, after the failure of the Rambouillet negotiations.

The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) was founded on 14 May 1999, becoming the political counterpart of the UÇK.

3. From Kosovo under a protectorate in the rump Yugoslavia to independence.

After three months of an undeclared NATO war, *UN Security Council resolution 1244*, supported by Moscow and signed by Belgrade, put an end to the conflict and established (with the UN) a supposedly provisional international protectorate (including institutions whose control would evolve in an evolutionary manner bringing together NATO, the UN and the EU). **Kosovo was endowed with autonomous status as a "province of Yugoslavia" (to avoid it being under direct Serbian rule).** In 2006 this status lapsed when Montenegro proclaimed its independence.

In February 2007 Martti Ahtisaari, UN special envoy appointed by Kofi Annan, drew up a project for Kosovo's independence under international supervision. It was vetoed by Belgrade (which demanded the application of resolution 1244 in the new context, with autonomy for Kosovo in Serbia).

In February 2008, the Kosovo parliament took up the terms of the Ahtisaari project and proclaimed the country's independence, supported by much of the EU and the United States.

- The PDK was second behind the LDK until 2007.
- It then became the first party in the country to express the nullity of the status of autonomy within a Yugoslav framework - in the face of the final dismantling of the federation.

From 2016 several dozen of its members were prosecuted for corruption and war crimes. The PDK is also suspected of having ordered political assassinations against members of the LDK and is accused by the Council of Europe of having participated in the trafficking of organs taken from prisoners during the war against Serbia (1999). Its leader **Hashim Thaçi**, one of the UÇK commanders, was elected President of the Republic from 7 April, 2016 (after three ballots without an adequate majority) until his resignation on 5 November, 2020 following his indictment by the Special Court in The Hague (KSC) - a Kosovar body of law made up of international judges (the KSC sits in The Hague to protect witnesses; but it is responsible for investigating crimes committed by pro-independence Kosovars, mainly against Serbs, Roma and Kosovar opponents of the pro-independence guerrillas).

– **The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK)**, on the right, was formed on 29 April 2001 following an alliance between several formations, under the leadership of **Ramush Haradinaj**, one of the historical leaders and former senior officer of the UCK. The latter, elected Prime Minister in 2004 after having entered into an alliance with the LDK, was forced to resign after three months, due to his indictment by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). He was acquitted (on appeal) in 2012. Ramush Haradinaj again became Prime Minister in September 2017 at the head of a coalition of five parties including the **Serbian List (SL), based in the majority communities in the north of the country, reputed to be remote-controlled, by Belgrade**. But he had to resign in July 2019, after being summoned before the special court for Kosovo, which suspected him of war crimes. [3]

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[1] Initially, a candidate is required to receive at least 80 votes, equivalent to two-thirds of the 120 members of the Assembly, in order to be elected. However, if no candidate succeeds during the first two rounds, a third round is held between the top two candidates of the second round, and the requirement is reduced to a simple majority of 61 votes. If the third round also does not produce a successful candidate, the Assembly is dissolved, with new elections to take place within 45 days.

[2] See “Albania: Newly built on shaky ground”, J-A Dérens and L. Geslin, <https://mondediplo.com/2020/09/11albania>

[3] See <http://csamary.fr> for articles on the former Yugoslavia and its dismantling.