

Kosovo Assembly election result deepens crisis over independence

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The result of Saturday's Kosovo Assembly election has deepened the crisis over independence. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), political successors to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), secured 34 percent (about 220,000 votes) as against 22 percent for the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), in power since the NATO intervention in 1998. The PDK does not have a majority and may be forced into a coalition with the LDK.

There was a record low turnout—43 percent of the province's 1.5 million voters—down from 80 percent in elections soon after the Kosovo war. The slump in votes is mainly due to haemorrhaging of support for the LDK—it received 45 percent in the last election in 2003—a sign of widespread hostility to endemic poverty and corruption in the province. Doris Pack, head of the European Parliament team observing the poll, noted that “the worryingly low turn-out reflected the population's disappointment in the performance of their elected representatives and the uncertainty regarding their future.” In addition, most of the 120,000 members of Kosovo's Serb minority followed appeals from Serbia to boycott the election.

Nevertheless, former KLA leader Hashim Thaci, who is expected to become prime minister, declared his party's vote of less than 15 percent of the population as a mandate for independence from Serbia. “The citizens of Kosovo sent the world a message.... The strongest message was that Kosovo is ready [for] independence,” he declared.

Thaci says the Assembly will declare independence immediately after December 10, the deadline for a “troika” of mediators from the United States, the European Union, and Russia to report to United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on efforts to reach a compromise between Serbia and Kosovo's 90 percent ethnic Albanian majority. However, two years of negotiations have failed to bring about a settlement so far, and the two sides are said to be as far apart as when they first started talks.

The issue of independence for Kosovo has enraged Serbia, inflamed tensions between the United States and Russia, split Europe, and encouraged secessionist movements elsewhere to press for independence. There is widespread fear of further instability and violence whether independence goes ahead or not.

Serbia's minister for Kosovo, Slobodan Samardzic, warned, “If the independence of Kosovo is recognised, it would not be the final stage of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, but the first stage of new disintegration and secession in the Balkans.”

Branislav Ristivojevic, spokesman for the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), led by Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, said, “The whole world order would crumble, everything that was built in the past 50 years would be meaningless. All the flash points in the world, not just in the Balkans, would erupt.”

If Kosovo declares independence, Serbia could respond by claiming part of northern Serb-dominated Kosovo, and the remaining half of Kosovo's 120,000 Serbs who live in scattered enclaves might flee there. Troops serving in NATO's Kosovo stabilisation force, KFOR, have already drawn up plans to increase patrols, seize police stations and seal the border with Serbia from December 10.

A raft of other separatist claims could follow, including from Serbs living in the Republika Srpska region of Bosnia. European Union foreign ministers this week noted “grave concern” about the country's rising political and ethnic tensions as a result of the worsening economic situation and were forced to extend the 2,500-strong troop presence there. The commander of the EU forces in Bosnia has warned that Europe will have to send in a lot more troops “in the event of another outbreak of war.”

Pressure for secession is also coming from ethnic Albanians living in the Presovo Valley in southern Serbia and in Macedonia, where the country's 25 percent Albanian minority staged a rebellion in 2001. Further afield, many separatist regions—including the former Soviet regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria—are looking to Kosovo as a model to resolve their own conflicts.

Kosovo is above all a volatile arena for great power rivalry between the US, which is asserting its power in former Soviet republics and spheres of influence, and Russia, which, encouraged by rising oil revenues and the crisis in Iraq, is seeking to realise its own aspirations as a regional and world power.

President George W. Bush promised Albanian Prime Minister

Sali Berisha in June that Kosovo would be independent by the end of 2007. The US has already said it will immediately recognise Kosovo following a declaration of independence. It has pressured the EU to do the same and carry out its responsibility to appoint a special representative to oversee the transition to full statehood along the lines envisaged in the “conditional independence” plan published by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari earlier in the year.

Russia claims that independence would be a contravention of international law and backs Serbia, which is proposing a “broad autonomy” for Kosovo instead. It forced the West to put the Ahtisaari plan on hold after threatening to veto the plan at the UN Security Council in August.

The future status of Kosovo has created divisions among EU members on the issue seen as “key to the credibility of Europe’s foreign policy.”

“We are doing all we can to persuade the Kosovars not to make a unilateral declaration,” Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn said. “A unilateral declaration would be quite, quite bad. There’s a certain explosiveness in this region.”

Reports suggest 22 of the EU’s 27 member states are prepared to recognise Kosovo without waiting to secure everyone’s consent. Britain and France are most prepared to recognise Kosovan independence, but Spain, Hungary, Greece, Cyprus and Romania are reluctant because of ties to Serbia or fears that it could encourage a wave of separatism in their own countries.

Germany’s position is less certain, as there is more pressure domestically not to become involved in an independent Kosovo without a new UN mandate. *Die Welt* said that “these elections are not the end of the Kosovo crisis, but only a passage toward heavy conflict that can also be bloody, and whose consequences will not be limited to the Balkans.”

Frankfurter Rundschau complained, “Kosovo is not a democracy at all. The power is not with the people but with international diplomats” and characterised Thaci’s DPK as “a client party with mafia overtones.”

Wolfgang Ischinger, the German diplomat leading the “troika” negotiations for the EU, has tried to float a so-called “status-neutral” proposal to try and delay a decision on Kosovo’s final status. But Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica rejected it as just another name for independence, which had already masqueraded as supervised independence, limited independence, confederation and different variations of the model of two German states.

For most Kosovans, life has become unbearable and is a major reason for the low election turnout.

A *Kosovo Poverty Assessment* report published by the World Bank last month states that agriculture remains at subsistence level and industrial output has stagnated. Although the province has some of Europe’s biggest mineral reserves, they lay untouched, beset by pollution problems, ownership arguments and ethnic rivalries. Brown coal deposits are the fifth largest in

the world, and there are substantial deposits of lead, zinc, gold, silver and rare metals worth billions of dollars. The largest company and exporter in Kosovo before the Kosovo war, the Trepca mining complex, was taken into a form of receivership in August to protect it from creditors (including, it is said, the British company that owned it before its nationalisation in 1945-1946) and pave the way for its privatisation. The situation is further complicated by the mine’s location—in the north of the province stretching from the Kosovo Albanian area through the Serb enclave into Serbia proper.

Some 45 percent of the population in Kosovo is poor—surviving on less than 43 euros per adult per month—and another 18 percent are vulnerable. Those that are better off are so mainly because of remittances from relatives working abroad. Nearly 80 percent of the population have experienced a decline in living standards since 2003. Poverty is so widespread and all encompassing that the province has the lowest levels of inequality in Europe, but the gap between the richest and poorest is growing. About 30 percent of workers are unemployed and real wages are stagnant. Social assistance programmes “have had little impact on improving the welfare of the population.”

To make matters worse, the price of food has soared recently. A standard loaf of bread, for example, now costs 0.5 euros, up from 0.25 euros in August, and could rise to 0.7 euros next year. The government has no storage facilities for wheat and other vital commodities, and only 3 million euros in its emergency fund. It blames the problems on the rise in world wheat prices and the Serbian government for putting pressure on companies in Serbia to stop trading with Kosovo.

The magazine *Balkan Insight* quoted one foodstore owner in the capital Pristina, who said, “With the steep rise in prices, people can’t afford to pay for the goods they buy, and I am forced to let them buy things on credit, so they can pay me later.” The magazine also quoted Alma Gjekaj, a young woman from Pristina, who said she had to leave a lot of items off her usual shopping list because prices have soared. “I just don’t know how I will manage.... We can’t cope with these prices.”

“I don’t trust anybody anymore, the government keeps lying all the time, and I am tired of living like this,” she added.



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