

# Espresso.Insight

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## SPECIAL EDITION – SERIES OF ESPRESSO INSIGHTS

### Domestic Politics

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# Group for Legal and Political Studies

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## SPECIAL EDITION – SERIES OF ESPRESSO INSIGHTS

2020 has been a year to remember, especially in Kosovo. In this Espresso.Insights series, GLPS recaps and analyses the main events in the fields of politics, law and society that have affected the country this year and identifies the challenges ahead of 2021. In part 2, Mehdi Sejdiu analyses Kosovo's internal political dynamics in a year that has brought about many unexpected domestic changes.

### #KOSOVOin2020: The COVID-19 pandemic

*By: Mehdi Sejdiu - Group for Legal and Political Studies*

2020 has been tumultuous for the domestic scene in Kosovo. The small country in the Western Balkans has experienced three governments in a year, the resignation of its president, the resumption of the dialogue with Serbia, an agreement with Serbia in the White House and indictments of senior Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) figures. All while managing and battling the COVID-19 pandemic. To digest all of these events we summarized the key events that shaped Kosovo in 2020.

#### Albin Kurti becomes Prime Minister

A Vetëvendosje government headed by Albin Kurti was sworn into office on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February with 66 votes in favor, replacing the caretaker government of Ramush Haradinaj, who himself had resigned on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2019. The VV-led government was formed five months after [the elections in October 2019](#) in which it edged the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) after a very competitive campaign. The delay of the government formation came due to the late certification of results and lengthy coalition talks between VV and LDK.

The Kurti government was formed by a coalition between VV, LDK and ethnic communities. The cabinet had 15 ministries, including five women ministers, making it the smallest and the [most gender-balanced](#) government in Kosovo's history. The first decisions of the new administration included halving the government's salaries (previously raised by Haradinaj) and dismissing the boards of several public enterprises including KEK, Iber Lepenc, Infracos and Telecom. Kurti likewise planned to replace the 100-percent tax on Serbian and Bosnian goods, imposed by the previous government, with economic reciprocity, however, this move was strongly opposed by junior coalition partner LDK, as well as by US Special Envoy to Kosovo, Richard Grenell.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, LDK Interior Minister Agim Veliu claimed on TV that he was in favor of declaring the state of emergency in Kosovo due to the country's first Coronavirus cases. The idea of a state of emergency was seen as politically motivated, since it would transfer the executive powers from Prime Minister Kurti to his political rival, President Hashim Thaçi. Kurti dismissed Veliu shortly thereafter, and LDK held an extraordinary meeting where it decided to leave the coalition government and initiate a motion of no-confidence against Kurti's executive. The LDK leadership declared that the government was "putting in danger Kosovo's relations with the United States", being the deteriorating relationship with Washington the main reason of withdrawal. The no-confidence vote succeeded on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> of March and the VV-led government fell. Kurti kept functioning as a caretaker prime minister until June.

After Kurti had been ousted, President Thaçi requested a name to form the new government from LVV who was favoring new elections. According to the [2014 decision of the Constitutional Court](#)

the winning party/coalition of elections has the exclusive right to name twice their candidate for the formation of the government and only then a candidate outside of the winning party (LVV) could propose a candidate. However, the constitution does not specify any deadlines or time limits for the formation of the government. Nevertheless, Thaçi decided to essentially “skip” LVV after exchanging [letters with Kurti](#) and give the mandate to Hoti on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April. The move was deemed illegitimate by Kurti, but was later endorsed by the Constitutional Court.

### **The (un) elected Hoti government is sworn into office**

A new government, this time led by LDK official Avdullah Hoti, was sworn into office on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June following the successful no-confidence vote, the government formation succeeded the Constitutional Court’s decision to not hold new elections after a motion of no-confidence, and to allow the second biggest party to form a government. Thus, Prime Minister Hoti’s government became the first in Kosovo to be formed without prior elections. Hoti’s cabinet is composed by LDK, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA) and ethnic minorities. It has 16 ministries and 49 deputy ministers. In terms of government size, the number of ministries was kept low, but the number of deputy ministers [is the second highest in post-independence Kosovo](#). Some of the key policies of the incoming government were managing the COVID-19 crisis and the ensuing economic recession, continuing the dialogue with Serbia, and signing a US-mediated deal with Belgrade in September.

In July, the representatives of Serbia and Kosovo met for the first time after a 20-month diplomatic hiatus. In parallel to the traditional dialogue sponsored by the European Union (EU), another dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia was launched by US Special Envoy Richard Grenell. The 4<sup>th</sup> of September, under the auspices of US President Donald Trump, a deal with a list of pledges from [Kosovo and Serbia towards the United States was signed in the White House](#). The list of pledges included a hodgepodge of policy goals featuring infrastructural projects, an economic zone, gay rights, Hezbollah and a [moratorium](#) which stops Kosovo from seeking membership in international organizations and also Serbia’s de-recognition campaign. The agreement was not historic but drew a lot of media attention, and it remains unclear whether it will be implemented at all under the [new Biden administration](#).

The EU-led dialogue continued in Brussels with several meetings between senior officials of both states, however amounting to little progress. In October, EU representatives vowed to establish the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM) in Kosovo, with final details to be negotiated in Brussels. [EU Special Representative for the Dialogue, Slovak diplomat Miroslav Lajčák](#) came forward with the idea that Kosovo would need to change its constitution to align it with the international agreements signed in 2013 and 2015, where the creation of the ASM was envisaged.

### **Senior KLA figures indicted by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers**

Following their arrest on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of November, President Hashim Thaçi, Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) leader Kadri Veseli, former president Jakup Krasniqi, and VV MP Rexhep Selimi, were transferred to the Detention Facilities of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague. Their [confirmed indictment](#) for crimes committed during the Kosovo War stated “that the war crimes of illegal or arbitrary arrest and detention, cruel treatment, torture, and murder, and the crimes against humanity of imprisonment, other inhumane acts, torture, murder, enforced disappearance of persons, and persecution were committed from at least March 1998 through September 1999”. All four of the accused pleaded not guilty to the indictment charges.

After the confirmation of his indictment, President Thaçi officially resigned from his position and was replaced by the Speaker of the Assembly, now acting President, Vjosa Osmani. These indictments were [criticized](#) for distorting history and omitting facts to present a biased case. The Kosovar public also sees the Specialist Chambers as [unjust](#) since, as a transitional justice mechanism, it has an ethnic character by only focusing [on alleged](#) crimes committed by Albanians.

### Local Elections in Besianë/Podujevo and North Mitrovica

Early local elections were held in two municipalities, Besianë/Podujevo and North Mitrovica, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November. Both former mayors had left their seats vacant for taking over ministerial positions in the government. The elections were initially scheduled for March but were postponed for the end of November due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The election process was managed well by Kosovo's Central Election Commission, which applied new Coronavirus regulations during the process. There were no incidents and election results were [certified soon after](#).

In the Serb-majority municipality of North Mitrovica, Milan Radojevic of the Serb List (SL) won a landslide victory with 89.5 percent, confirming SL's status as the dominant force in Kosovo-Serb representation. It remains however concerning that there is no political pluralism in the Serb-inhabited areas of Kosovo, or local voices that have different views from those in Belgrade.

In Besianë/Podujevo, VV's candidate Shpejtim Bulliqi managed to win 51.9 percent of votes, leaving behind LDK's candidate Nexhmi Rudari, who gathered 35.8 percent. By winning more than half of the vote, Bulliqi avoided a possible run-off. The electoral loss dealt a huge blow to LDK, which considered the municipality as a traditional stronghold where it had governed for the past 20 years. The political game of thrones LDK played in Prishtina could have inadvertently damaged the party electorally.

### What to expect for 2021?

2020 has been a rollercoaster year for Kosovo and its domestic politics. It has witnessed three governments, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Specialist Chambers indictments, the resignation of President Thaçi, the so-called White House agreement (statement of commitment) and local elections.

In the following year, Kosovo hopes to rebound its economy after the COVID-19 recession this year and start vaccinating its population. After Until April 2021, LDK has to find a compromise with opposition parties for the election of a new president and it also has to vote the budget for 2021. Failure to do so would send the country to new early elections.

In autumn 2021, new local elections are likely to drastically change Kosovo's electoral map. LDK, who performed well [in the 2017 local elections](#), is currently losing its popularity at the [central level](#). Similarly, PDK will have to campaign without its two most important political leaders, Thaçi and Veseli.

2020 has been an unstable year for Kosovo in terms of public health, economy and governments. It will be up to Kosovo's political actors in 2021 to ensure economic recovery, public health management until the population reaches herd-immunity with the vaccination of its population and political stability with a representative government and a president that represents the unity of the people.



## Espresso.Insights

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