

All in? Kosovo, Albania and the prospects of unification

On 14 February, Kosovo held snap parliamentary elections which the main opposition party, the left-wing nationalist Self-Determination Movement (LVV), won by a landslide. The victory was historic, as it dismantled the hegemon of the two parties that have dominated the post-war landscape, namely the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), neither of which will form part of the next government for the first time since 2001.

This is significant not only for the domestic affairs of Kosovo, which LVV aims to transform through institutional and economic reforms, but also its geopolitical relations. This was not a central plank of LVV's electoral platform, but it is an elephant in the room given its uncertain implications for Kosovo's relations with Serbia, which inform whether Pristina can achieve full recognition of its 2008 independence – and thereby consolidate its territorial integrity, a necessary condition of moving towards eventual membership of the European Union.

Two days after the election, the leader of LVV and its prime ministerial candidate, Albin Kurti, said in an [interview with Euronews](#) that in the event of a referendum in Kosovo on unification with Albania, he would vote in favour. Kurti heavily caveated his statement, but as an experienced political operator he would likely have been aware of the headline that the media would pick out.

Reheated arguments

Though controversial, the public declaration of this stance is nothing new. Unification has been at the back of the collective Albanian mind since 2001, with the assumption being that once Albania and Kosovo became members of the EU, borders would be redundant. As territorial disputes in the Western Balkans grind on, and EU enlargement slows, this is currently a remote prospect.

Yet it remains a convenient geopolitical reference point. Former president and PDK founder, Hasim Thaci – who is currently on trial in the Hague for alleged war crimes – [stated](#) in 2019 that unification may be desirable if integration with the EU remained slow. Likewise, the leader of the Alliance for Kosovo (AAK) and former prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj, [said](#) only in January that if Kosovo is blocked from its desired Euroatlantic path, it might as well hold a referendum on unification.

It is also a common refrain in Tirana, where Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama went as far as to [propose](#) in November 2018 that a strategic document be jointly prepared to map out how unification may be achieved by 2025.

This was at a time when, following the formation of Haradinaj's government, Pristina unilaterally imposed 100% tariffs on Serbian imports as a quid pro quo for Belgrade's own longstanding embargo on Kosovar goods and services. Shut off from its main trading partner, the Kosovar parliament [approved a resolution](#) to form a customs union with Albania. Although positively received by Tirana, this initiative was a reheated one that, despite repeated statements of willing, has yet to be realised.

Paradigm shift?

As such, Kurti's comments are in themselves far from anomalous within Kosovar public discourse. And although LVV is a party that is nominally, if paradoxically, nationalist and unionist, championing a tough negotiating line with Belgrade, its predecessors in government were similarly ambivalent on this issue. In this sense, a paradigm shift from conciliation to confrontation is not underway.

Where the victory of LVV is significant is in the party's systematic approach to the issue of relations with Serbia. In particular, it advocates the "principle of reciprocity." This was already evident during its brief spell in government between February and June 2020, when the party refused to lift the 100% tariffs imposed by the Haradinaj government until Belgrade lifted its embargo – which was known to be more than just a remote prospect. Its junior coalition partner, LDK, promptly ousted LVV from office amid lobbying by the Trump administration, thereby making way for the US-brokered negotiations that led to the signing of the Economic Normalisation agreements with Belgrade.

Such politicking will not be possible as LVV enters into government with double the vote share – and seats – that it had one year ago. Furthermore, Vjosa Osmani – a former LDK member who merged her own list with LVV – is acting president and has far more sympathy with the incoming government than Hasim Thaci did. For now, LVV has the political capital to manoeuvre domestically as it sees fit.

Flogging a dying horse?

Negotiations are not dead, but the goalposts are unlikely to be moved back and forth by Pristina anymore. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who is preparing for a bumper round of presidential, parliamentary and Belgrade city elections in April 2022, is highly unlikely to offer concessions to Pristina, especially as relations cool even further.

Certain negotiating items will thus resemble dying horses. Territorial swaps were politically problematic even when they were mooted in 2017-18 and are highly unlikely to be tabled again. The addition by Pristina of an additional layer of executive power through the Association of Serb Municipalities would have the potential to split LVV.

The Biden administration will adopt a more multilateral stance, but it is unlikely to be able to end the stalemate. As Belgrade and Pristina dig in, even the items contained within the Economic Normalisation agreements will fall by the wayside, including the restoration of highway and railway traffic between their capitals, the (re)construction of cross-border infrastructure and joint feasibility studies.

Amid this backdrop, symbolic gestures of aggression are possible. The most probable would resemble the Belgrade-Kosovska Mitrovica incident in 2017, when a train graffitied with Serb nationalist slogans attempted to cross into Pristina. Armed conflict is highly unlikely, as it is in the geopolitical interest of neither side.

Waking dreams

As Kosovo remains stuck in groundhog day, there is ostensibly logic for Pristina in turning to Albania, not least the shared language and culture. Yet unification, in as far as it is likely, will only occur in the longer term. There are four reasons for this, some of which Kurti mentioned to Euronews.

First, geopolitics is not a priority of the incoming government, at least not during its first legislative term. LVV wishes to concentrate primarily on the institutional and economic reforms on which it based its election campaign, improving the integrity and strength of the justice and law enforcement systems on the one hand, while developing domestic capital and social welfare through targeted state interventions on the other. This will be challenging, not least due to the current economic climate and covid-19 pandemic.

Second, unification faces two legislative obstacles within Kosovo. According to the [constitution](#), Kosovo is a sovereign independent state that may not join another country. Changing the two relevant articles in the constitution would require a two-thirds majority in parliament which, while not impossible to assemble, would be unlikely to be a swift process. Another obstacle is that unification falls under laws deemed to be of “vital interest,” which may not be voted upon in referenda. A further constitutional amendment would therefore be necessary.

Third, the taking of steps towards unification would not change the reality that Serbia continues to regard Kosovo as its de jure territory. Kosovo has not achieved full

international recognition, which complicates its legal status. The rights of the Serb minority in the north are not resolved. Not only would unification fail to resolve these issues, but the geopolitical inheritance of Tirana would also be unenviable, with its participation in EU economic programmes likely to be frustrated, to say nothing of its membership prospects.

Fourth, popular support for unification appears to be ‘soft’ both in Kosovo and Albania. When the Open Society Foundation (OSF) conducted a [poll](#) in 2019, the headline findings were striking: 75% of Albanians and 64% of Kosovo Albanians stated that they would vote in favour of unification in a hypothetical referendum. But when OSF dug deeper, asking whether the respondents would be prepared to pay a tax to enable unification, that collective conviction appeared to weaken, with only 29.5% of Albanians and 43.5% of Kosovo Albanians respectively agreeing.

In this sense, respondents in both countries appear to be in step with their ruling elites, who are prepared to pay lip service to a shared dream but take pause when confronted with the practical reality of its realisation.

This does not reflect cynicism so much as it does frugality in two upper-middle income economies. According to [IMF data](#), Kosovo’s GDP amounted to USD 8 billion 2019, compared to Albania’s USD 15.4 billion. This in itself is not much, but relative to its population of 2.9 million, Albania punches below its weight, with GDP per capita of USD 5.7 billion – not far ahead of Kosovo, which cashes USD 4.4 billion with a population of 1.87 million. Slovenia, with its population of 2.1 million, has GDP per capita some five times that of its Albanian peers.

A shot in the dark

Outside of the precedent set by EU integration, the only other example of unification in Europe between two states is that of West Germany and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). This has crucial differences with Albania and Kosovo, as it involved the institutional integration of a communist with a capitalist state. West Germany was much wealthier than the GDR, with its [GDP per capita in 1989](#) amounting to nearly four times more. And some [65% of the EUR 2 trillion](#) that it is estimated to have spent on unification funded the upscaling of social spending.

The political and social complications of German reunification aside, if Albania and Kosovo were to match German spending on infrastructure relative to their respective populations, regardless of burden-sharing, the bill would be USD 16 billion. Given limited fiscal capacity, external financing would be required – but if unification were

conducted under internationally contentious circumstances, such support would likely not be forthcoming.

Then there is the question of power-sharing. Unlike with German reunification, Albania and Kosovo are – nearly – equal partners. When speaking of unification, Kurti tellingly referred to a “federation” rather than a unified state with centralised governance. Pristina is wary of being subsumed into yet another state in which it is ruled from a distant capital, neglected as the provincial periphery. And even now there is political disequilibrium, with Kurti and Rama publicly having [little time for one another](#).

Managing expectations

Unification is therefore a process that is highly unlikely to move quickly. In as far as it does occur, it will consist of targeted regulatory and institutional harmonisation. Bilateral trade is an area in which there is a lot of low-hanging fruit, which the GAP and RIINVEST think tanks identified in a [2020 policy memo](#). This could pave the way for a customs union if one is not agreed wholesale. Snowballing efficiency gains would allow trade relations, which are currently modest, to expand and deepen, creating incentives for further integration in the longer term.

Foreign policy is another area in which Tirana and Pristina could further coordinate, although agreement on the adoption of a common position is unlikely. Embassy-sharing is a possibility, but this is a common practice for small- to mid-sized states that have limited interest in some of the countries in which they maintain a diplomatic presence.

A policy area in which an upset could occur is that of currency. Albin Kurti previously [stated](#) that he would be open to the idea of adopting the Albanian lek as the national currency, as there is a degree of uncertainty around Kosovo’s right to use the Euro. Adopting the lek, either unilaterally or with Tirana’s approval, would not grant the Central Bank the ability to determine monetary policy, but it would likely lower prices. However, adoption of a new currency would require constitutional change – and Kurti stated that he did not believe it was a priority.

Moving with the tides

Pristina’s room for manoeuvre on unification with Albania is thus constrained by a multitude of factors. Such a policy shift, like any other geopolitical hot potato in the Western Balkans, does not exist in a vacuum. It would have a domino effect with regional implications. And in order to be viable, it would need to address Belgrade’s

concerns with respect to the Serb minority in Kosovo, which in turn would impact upon the rights of ethnic minorities throughout the region – from Serbs, Albanians, Bosniaks and other minorities pocketed across Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina.

This underlines the fact that a federation of Kosovo and Albania cannot be realised without a wider regional settlement, which would require a new international approach to the Western Balkans by national as well as external stakeholders, such as the EU, US and Russia.

It remains to be seen whether the change in Pristina's geopolitical concept will inform a wider structural shift in the approach of international patrons to the region, or simply reinforce the existing stalemate.

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