

Comment: Kosovo Leaders Risk Damaging EU Hopes

Author: [Bekim Çollaku](#)

By ignoring international advice to involve all major parties in a new post-Haradinaj government, the current coalition is taking a big gamble.

This week, Kosovo's assembly formally voted to elect a new prime minister, after Ramush Haradinaj resigned from his post due to the Hague tribunal indictment.

On the day he resigned, Haradinaj publicly nominated Bajram Kosumi to take over and lead a "new" government.

It has become obvious since then that Haradinaj's decision will be carried out, as his party colleagues lack the courage to analyse whether Kosumi is, in fact, the right man for the job.

Kosovo's assembly, therefore, will have done nothing except rubber stamp a decision taken weeks ago by a former prime minister.

By doing so, the assembly is blessing a new captain for an old ship. How far he will be able to sail with this old ship remains to be seen.

But what is clear is that for the second time in a few months, Kosovo's leaders have failed to take seriously into consideration the recommendations of the international community on the formation of a government.

Three months ago, the international community and the European Union made it clear they favoured a grand coalition, having in mind that this year will be crucial owing to the likely start of talks on final status.

The idea was that only an inclusive, strong, stable and efficient government would be in a position to tackle the difficult challenges ahead.

Instead, the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, AAK, went ahead and created a narrow coalition, leaving out two major parties, the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, and Veton Surroi's ORA.

The resulting LDK and AAK coalition then went further, by putting forward as candidate for prime minister a man already under investigation by the Hague tribunal – a fact that was known to the public when Haradinaj was chosen.

Once more, the international community and the EU warned Kosovo's institutional and party leaders that they should consider other candidates but their voices were not heard.

Everyone knows what happened three months later. March saw the indictment against Haradinaj, followed by his resignation and surrender to the tribunal.

Thanks to his own calm actions and people's maturity, the situation remained stable, undermining claims that violence might ensue if the premier was indicted.

The emerging situation offered Kosovo's political leaders a fresh chance to reflect more seriously on the composition of a new government.

The position of the international community and EU was consistent with the views they had expressed three months earlier. Again, they sought a broad coalition government.

To make sure the leaders in Kosovo heard their voice, the EU sent Javier Solana, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, to deliver the message in person.

At the same time, Kosovo's opposition parties once more argued for the formation of a broader coalition government. Again, their will was ignored.

The decision-makers did not heed any of these recommendations, arguing that it was in Kosovo's interest to carry on with the old, narrow LDK-AAK coalition.

A blind desire to retain all the power in their hands prevailed against the argument that this was the time for national unity.

Some officials have defended the LDK-AAK coalition by saying it was created "purely out of the will of the political parties involved" (in other words, it was not created by external pressures). This is fair enough, but those officials fail to mention what lay behind this "will of the parties".

Analysts have identified several factors. One was a desire to avoid charges being made against Haradinaj through the simple expedient of making him prime minister. Supporters of this idea failed to realise the tribunal would not be affected by such factors.

The second was the desire of the two coalition parties to grab most of the national "cake" for themselves.

As things stand now, the first reason for keeping the coalition going has vanished. The second, however, still stands and underpins the coalition's continuing survival.

Another set of arguments in favour of the current coalition is that government ministers feel able to carry on even without the personal presence of Haradinaj.

They fail to understand that the cornerstone of the coalition was Haradinaj himself. Without his wisdom and sense of leadership, their will power alone will not suffice.

The most comic argument that government officials have put forward in favour of the current coalition involves a comparison they like to draw between the achievements of the LDK-AAK coalition and those of its predecessor, led by Bajram Rexhepi.

One wonders what they mean when they claim that the LDK-AAK government did more in three months

than Rexhepi's government did in three years.

In fact, the progress recorded under Rexhepi's broad coalition government was fundamental to all the positive events that followed.

Rexhepi's government was inclusive, comprising a number of Serb representatives, and it opened a dialogue on practical matters with Serbia and an internal dialogue with the Serbs in Kosovo.

It had established all the working groups needed to implement the standards plan and had set a time frame for the start of talks on final status. It had, in fact, paved the way towards EU integration.

If the immediate goal of Kosovo is independence from Serbia and the ultimate goal is EU integration, it should be of concern to Kosovars that their leaders have started turning their backs on advice coming from the international community.

In spite of that, the high-risk show that opened three months ago is about to enter its second act. While Kosovo's citizens seem confused, both the opposition and the international community remain pessimistic members of the audience.

Only those who are running this performance seem enthusiastic about it carrying on. "Do not disturb," they say – just sit back and enjoy the show!

Bekim Çollaku is Assistant Lecturer at the Political Department of the University of Pristina and was formerly political advisor to prime minister Bajram Rexhepi.

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