



# Local Elections in Kosovo: Another ‘new party’ that will quickly fade away, or a ‘normalisation’ of the political conflict?

Election Analysis

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# Local Elections in Kosovo: Another ‘new party’ that will quickly fade away, or a ‘normalisation’ of the political conflict?

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## Introduction

Kosovo held well-organised local elections on 17 October 2021. Since 2007, local elections in Kosovo have involved two ballots, one for the municipal assembly (voters should pick only one candidate from an open party list) and another for mayors. On 14 November, mayoral runoffs were held in 21 out of 38 municipalities. These were Kosovo’s seventh democratic municipal assembly elections, and the fifth mayoral elections.

Albanian majority municipalities saw very competitive elections, which resulted in a massive victory for the opposition parties. In Serbian majority municipalities, all new mayors came from the Serbian List (*Lista Srpska*, LS) endorsed by the government of the Republic of Serbia. Only in the small municipality of Klllokot had LS to wait for the runoff to have its candidate confirmed for mayor.

In what follows, we first provide the context for these elections, then discuss the results and the factors that contributed to them, and hypothesise on their implications for the nation-building and democratisation processes, including possible transformations in inter-party competition.

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### **The context of the elections**

Kosovo’s local elections have a peculiar aura. Back on 28 October 2000, only about fifteen months since June 1999, when a NATO air campaign brought to an end the military conflict between Kosovo’s Albanian ethnic majority and the Serbia-dominated rump Yugoslavia, municipal assembly elections kick-started Kosovo’s democracy. These elections were organised by the United Nations Mission (UNMIK), which was charged to administer and, in the process, build Kosovo’s institutions of self-governance. The Serbian minority boycotted the election, whereas the Albanian majority experienced high tensions between its main party blocs. On the one side, a bloc of parties founded by the former leadership of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK), consisting of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (*Partia Demokratike e Kosovës*, PDK) and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (*Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës*, AAK) claimed credit for the armed insurgency (1998-99) that had triggered NATO’s intervention; on the other, a bloc led by the Democratic League of Kosovo (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*, LDK) claimed equal credit for the internationalisation of the Kosovo problem and for organising Kosovo’s peaceful resistance (1990s) in the shape of a ‘parallel state’, a unique non-violent movement that challenged Belgrade’s rule – after the forceful cancellation of Kosovo’s constitutional autonomy – through organising parallel education, health and poverty relief services. With a record-high voter turnout at 79 percent (Table 1), LDK surprised by resoundingly beating the ‘war’ bloc, and went on to remain the most-supported party until a few months before independence in 2008. The fierce competition, which began to relax over time, meant that Kosovo’s monist experience was over, and meaningful pluralism was taking place.

In more recent elections, however, the protagonist has been a party that started competing only in 2010, the Self-Determination Movement (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje*, LVV). When the first post-war elections were held, its founder Albin Kurti, a student union leader turned assistant for UÇK’s spokesperson, was still a political prisoner of war held in Serbia. During the state-building process under UNMIK, LVV emerged as a grassroots movement organising youth protests against the international administration and calling for self-determination instead of an international protectorate. After entering Kosovo’s Parliament in 2010, LVV spent the next decade in opposition, chiefly by articulating an anti-corruption discourse against the rule of the ‘war wing’ parties, which by then had gained dominance after the death of LDK’s leader Ibrahim Rugova in 2006. LVV also advocated for Kosovo’s unification with Albania.

In October 2019, LVV won a snap parliamentary election and in February 2020 entered a coalition government with LDK as a junior partner. However, the government collapsed after just 53 days in office. Encouraged by the Trump administration<sup>1</sup>, LDK initiated a successful no-confidence motion and subsequently created its own government coalition with smaller parties, with the indirect backing of the opposition PDK. The then President Hashim Thaçi, the former UÇK political leader, had led PDK for about sixteen years. Trump was seeking an international success on the eve of the US presidential elections, and Thaçi was a key stakeholder in favour of those efforts. The White House organised a meeting between Kosovo and Serbia for late June 2020, but the meeting dramatically failed to take place as the

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<sup>1</sup>The Economist. 2020. *Did America help oust Kosovo’s reformist government?*, April 4 2020 (accessed 22 November 2021).

Specialist Prosecutor's Office in The Hague announced that it would indict President Thaçi for war crime charges while he was on the plane to Washington DC. He subsequently resigned, and was later transferred to the Specialist Chamber's detention in The Hague.

The collapse of the LVV-led government coalition coincided with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus halting the government's dynamic initial response. With Thaçi resigned, the LDK-led government could no longer rely on the support of PDK. The government failed to pass a bill on Economic Recovery through the Parliament for nearly six months and in seven attempts. Finally, on 21 December 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that the LDK-led government had been elected irregularly in the Parliament, resulting in snap elections. The public was dismayed, while a major LDK figure, Vjosa Osmani, and her party loyalists joined LVV's list. On 14 February 2021, LVV won the biggest majority ever recorded for the past two decades – an overwhelming 50.2 percent – and formed a new government on 22 March 2021. Osmani became Kosovo's new President. The dramatic result led to internal leadership changes, first in LDK and then in PDK. Both parties had lost votes, but PDK had also lost its key leadership due to The Hague's indictments.

LVV's fresh national electoral success was widely expected to be repeated heading into the local election. Yet the result turned out to be even more surprising than that of the first 2000 election, both for observers and for the parties themselves.

#### **Election results: Massive loss for LVV**

LVV lost badly. It garnered only 168,223 municipal assembly votes, 270,112 (or about 27.5 percentage points) down from what it had received in the parliamentary elections eight months earlier (Table 1). It won one more mayor (total 4) than it had won in 2017, but it lost in the main cities, with the exception of Gjilan.

Several factors explain LVV's loss. One of them is that President Vjosa Osmani was not involved in the election, since the Constitution prohibits the chief of state to hold party positions. Without her in the campaign, her loyalists (a breakaway faction from LDK) were hardly visible in LVV's campaign and many of her supporters may have returned to voting for LDK to support its new leadership team, which consists of younger, mainly mainstream right-wing economists.

In the months preceding the election, COVID-19 infections had surged. Deaths reached a record high 450 in September alone.<sup>2</sup> The surge was a result of the relaxation of movement restrictions during the summer with an eye towards allowing travel for Kosovo's diaspora, who, in addition to providing around 30 percent of Kosovo's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), had massively voted LVV in the parliamentary elections. Although Kosovo reached good statistics for administrating the first and second vaccine doses by October, it took months for the government to sign vaccine purchasing contracts and control infections. LVV's mayoral candidate for the capital Prishtina was also its Minister of Health during the surge, and he led in the first round but then lost in the runoff to a well-articulated architect, who returned from London to compete on behalf of LDK.

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<sup>2</sup> Johns Hopkins. 2021. *Kosovo* (accessed: 22 November 2021).

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LVV’s popularity was also undermined by a controversial government decision not to move forward with the financing of a gas pipeline project by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) that would have connected Kosovo with a US-backed gas infrastructure through North Macedonia and Greece. While the government said it needed more time and information to decide on the project’s usefulness, MCC financing deadlines were nearing,<sup>3</sup> and the decision was criticised by civil society and the opposition as strategically mistaken,<sup>4</sup> since the project was supported by the main sponsor of Kosovo’s independence – the US. Without citing the gas project decision, Joe Biden’s White House subsequently did not invite Kosovo (along with Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) to a summit of democracies planned for December 2021. The invitation was later extended to President Osmani, but the talk about it was a reminder that LVV’s tense relationship with the US Department of State did not end with the Trump administration, and in fact has a longer history.<sup>5</sup> Even though these were only local elections, Kosovo’s public is highly sensitive on positions towards and from the US and these events may have affected voter attitudes.

Table 1: Election results 2000-2021

Year	Type of election	Participation	LDK	PDK	AAK	LVV	LS*
2000	Municipal assembly	79.0%	58.0%	27.3%	7.7%	-	-
2001	Parliament	64.3%	45.6%	25.7%	7.8%	-	11.3%
2002	Municipal assembly	53.8%	45.8%	29.5%	8.8%	-	-
2004	Parliament	53.5%	45.4%	28.8%	8.3%	-	0.2%
2007	Municipal assembly	39.4%	22.2%	39.3%	12.1%	-	-
2007	Mayors	39.1%	7	18	3	-	-
2007	Parliament	40.1%	22.6%	34.3%	9.6%	-	-
2009	Municipal assembly	44.7%	24.5%	31.7%	15.9%	-	-
2009	Mayors	44.6%	7	15	7	-	-
2010	Parliament	45.3%	24.7%	32.1%	11.0%	12.7%	-
2013	Municipal assembly	46.3%	25.6%	27.1%	14.0%	8.2%	-
2013	Mayors	46.3%	9	10	3	1	-
2014	Parliament	42.6%	25.2%	30.3%	9.5%	13.6%	5.2%
2017	Parliament	41.3%	25.5%	33.7%		27.5%	6.1%
2017	Municipal assembly	44.1%	24.0%	22.1%	13.3%	15.7%	4.9%
2017	Mayors	44.1%	8	5	7	3	10
2019	Parliament	44.5%	24.5%	21.2%	11.5%	26.3%	6.4%
2021	Parliament	48.8%	12.7%	17.0%	7.1%	50.2%	5.1%
2021	Municipal assembly	41.6%	22.9%	21.8%	12.2%	22.7%	7.2%
2021	Mayors	41.6%	8	8	5	4	10

Source: Central Election Committee (CEC)<sup>6</sup>

\* A list of Serbian parties, endorsed by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, competed with other names such as “Povratak/Return” (2001) prior to independence. Participation numbers for mayoral elections are from the first rounds. In 2017, PDK and AAK competed in one coalition in parliamentary elections. Own calculation of municipal elections results based on CEC documents

But beyond these broader external and conjectural determinants, factors within LVV were also detrimental to its electoral result. With many of its key leadership figures invested in running the central government, LVV offered a poor batch of mayoral

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Economy. 2021. *Government of Kosovo and MCC sign an Aide Memoire to deepen cooperation* (accessed: 22 November 2021).

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Hasani, Enver. 2021. *Pipes*. *Koha.net*, 16 November 2021 (accessed: 22 November 2021).; Kosovo Parliament. 2021. *Parliamentary debate called by opposition concerning Government’s decision on the gas project* (accessed: 20 November 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Bami, Xhorxhina and Përparim Isufi. 2021. *Kosovo’s Kurti has Hill to Climb in US Relations. Experts Warn*. *BalkanInsight*, 16 November 2021 (accessed: 20 November 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Central Election Committee. 2021. *Election results* (accessed: 20 November 2021).

candidates. While this may indicate a bigger issue in attracting professional personnel, some candidates were chosen from above against local preferences. Two of its main mayoral candidates, in Mitrovica and Gjakova, had been mayors before, representing the New Kosovo Alliance (*Aleanca Kosova e Re*, AKR), founded by the businessmen Behgjet Pacolli, who built his fortune through the 1990s privatisations in Russia. One of these candidates, while working at AKR, had overseen the privatisation of former social enterprises in Kosovo – a key issue against which LVV had mobilised in the past, and an inconsistency that the opposition reminded it of.

In addition, LVV's local governance in the recent past, such as in Prishtina and Prizren, had failed to impress. While no major corruption scandal has hit the government under its leadership, its central level governance began to resemble its experience at the local level – a more or less correct management of the status-quo, without any major and obvious transformative project. When it suddenly realised the very poor results it received during the first round of the mayoral elections (17 October), to the surprise of many the government engaged in policies it had formerly criticised the PDK-led government for, such as raising pensions with an ad-hoc EUR 100 for the month of November 2021. While the justification was that this was a reaction to the recent inflation, the decision clearly had an eye on the second and decisive round of voting in the main cities on 14 November.

Within the Serbian minority, the elections results were unsurprising. They were won by the LS, endorsed by the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The smaller parties, which emerged around and after independence and preferred to work with Kosovo institutions without Belgrade's directives, such as the Independent Liberal Party (SLS), have effectively become irrelevant since 2014. LS won 10 municipalities, some of which are fairly small and the product of decentralisation implemented in exchange for Western support for Kosovo's independence.

### **Consequences of the elections: Is LVV fading away or is the political conflict transforming beyond traditional cleavages?**

In the short term, the electoral shock may reflect on the central government's position in the ongoing normalisation negotiations with Serbia, a process mediated by the European Union. The US administration has recently nominated two ambassadors, in Prishtina and Belgrade, who have both been involved in the region since the 1990s, something that has been taken as a sign that the Biden administration may increase efforts<sup>7</sup> to ensure a normalisation agreement is reached. LVV may now be pressed to commit to the process in good trust and to ensure that other societal voices are included in the negotiation, something Kosovo has implemented both during the Rambouillet (1999) and Vienna (2006-2007) negotiations. This would make LVV to converge more substantially with other parties in the nation-building of Kosovo. With the recent decline in its popularity, the leadership of LVV will find it hard to avoid taking responsibility in the negotiations, as this would very likely be seen as another sign of incompetence. In a recent interview, the Kosovo Premier and president of LVV, Albin Kurti, said he expects an agreement with Serbia during the current mandates

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<sup>7</sup> Server, Daniel. 2021. [A serious nomination that doesn't guarantee success](#). *Peacfare.net*, 15 October 2021 (accessed: 20 November 2021).

of Joe Biden, Joseph Borrell and himself.<sup>8</sup> But this is a tricky trade-off for LVV since Kosovo is encouraged to be flexible,<sup>9</sup> that is, to give something in exchange for recognition from Serbia, while LVV has mobilised very successfully in the past against a 2015 agreement on creating an Association of Serbian-majority municipalities in Kosovo and against an agreement of the same year on the border demarcation between Kosovo and Montenegro. A deal would thus ironically see LVV making potentially the most painful concessions from the Albanian majority perspective. Yet, barricading behind inflexible, nationalist positions may keep Kosovo in the status quo, and that is hardly what the electorate would want.

LVV may further use the normalisation process with Serbia as a tool to mobilise support and investments in key sectors such as heating and electricity, water, and railways. In addition, in the long-term, it remains in a strong position to advance a left-wing alternative in Kosovo’s politics – LVV is an observant member of the Socialist International and a member of the Progressive Alliance.

During the past two decades, the main party blocs in Kosovo – on the one hand, PDK and AAK, and on the other, the LDK and its satellites – have dominated politics with similarities in ideology but differences in style and base of voters. While the UÇK originated in left-wing (Albania-inspired) illegal movements of former political prisoners in socialist Yugoslavia,<sup>10</sup> the parties emerging from it were clearly oriented from the outset as right-wing (AAK) or were at best ambiguous (PDK until 2011, when it finally positioned itself as a right-wing, conservative party). During its time in government after independence, the biggest of these parties, PDK, advanced infrastructure projects but at the same time quickened the privatisation of former state enterprises. LDK was the first of all these parties to position itself on the right-wing. Applying Herbert Kitschelt’s typology of party cleavages, both PDK (including its later breakaway faction the Social Democratic Initiative (*Nisma Social Demokrate*, NISMA)) and AAK would be best described as clientelist parties, often using favours as “incentives that bind people to a party”; LDK, meanwhile, was in its best days a charismatic party “rallying around a leader”, namely the late Rugova.<sup>11</sup> After Rugova passed away, LDK has been struggling to regain its feet. However, from the cleavage or at least from a relevant divide perspective,<sup>12</sup> there was more to the conflict between these two blocs. PDK and AAK garner most of their support in the more rural areas that were poorer during socialism (prior to 1989) and where the armed conflict (1998-1999) was more intense both in terms of human casualties and infrastructural damage, while LDK support used to be strongest in regions that fared better during socialism and among people directly associated with the organisation of the ‘parallel

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<sup>8</sup> Baliu, Doruntina / Berisha, Ibrahim and Bujar Tërstena. 2021. Kurti: Kemi pritur rezultat më të mirë në zgjedhje [Kurti: We expected better results from the elections]. *Radio Free Europe*, 16 November 2021, (accessed: 19 November 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Zeqiri, Ardita. 2021. Jeffrey Hovenier Confirmed New US Ambassador to Kosovo. *Prishtina Insight*, 19 November 2021 (accessed: 19 November 2021).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Judah, Tim. 2020. *Kosova*. Botimet Artini, Prishtina, 122-126; and Schmidt, Oliver. 2012. *Kosova*. Koha, Prishtina, 269.

<sup>11</sup> Kitschelt, Herbert. 1995. Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions. *Party Politics* 1(4), 448-449.

<sup>12</sup> Deegan-Krause, Kevin. 2013. *Full and Partial Cleavages*, in *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, edited by Berglund, Sten / Ekman, Joakim / Deegan-Krause, Kevin and Terje Knutsen. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 35–50.

state' during the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, an important dimension of the political conflicts were narratives of merits in the independence movement, which itself also had a socio-structural dimension.

Unlike elsewhere in post-communist Southeastern Europe (SEE),<sup>14</sup> none of Kosovo's main parties of the past two decades was a direct legacy of the League of Communists of Kosovo. The leadership of the 'the war wing' had no association to the League of Communists or affinity to its heritage.<sup>15</sup> Despite its voter basis in pluralism and its initial start as a collective social movement, the LDK also tended to distance itself from the League of Communists, embracing right-wing ideology and later associating with the European People's Party. The father of Ibrahim Rugova, LDK's co-founder and historic leader, was allegedly executed by communist partisans during the Second World War, and his body was never found;<sup>16</sup> this memory should have played a role in Rugova's political attitudes and actions. As a right-wing party, LDK was not in a strong position to advance the interests of its electoral base among the more urban population, such as through redistribution and social services, as similar parties have done elsewhere. Instead, as the main parliamentary party during the decade of institutional-building under UNMIK, LDK was a crucial local agent in facilitating the introduction of neoliberal social policies designed by global organisations such as the World Bank and backed by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU).<sup>17</sup> Along with widespread corruption, this social policy – later coupled with PDK-initiated programmes favouring former UÇK members and supporters – has contributed to an outcome in which Kosovo has one of the highest levels of social inequality in Europe.<sup>18</sup> This argument has been successfully taken up by LVV. As a result, over time, and most visibly in February 2021, very large shares of traditional LDK supporters switched their vote for LVV.

LVV resembles LDK's past in its reliance on a charismatic leader. Premier's Kurti's strong grip on the party led to a major rift in 2017, when a faction consisting of key figures, including the mayor of Prishtina, left LVV and took control of the Social Democratic Party (*Partia Social Demokratike*, PSD). PSD remains a small party outside the Parliament, but it maintains a key platform of criticism of Kurti and LVV. Another breakaway LVV mayor who joined PSD competed against his former party in the October/November elections. While the mayor had advocated a major reform in education in Kamenica, trying to assemble pupils from faraway villages in larger schools to provide them with opportunities for group-learning, LVV successfully competed against him by promising (and then implementing) the reopening of schools

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<sup>13</sup> Mustafa, Artan. 2021. *Cleavages: Explaining the Social Basis of the Political Conflict and Political Change in Kosovo*, in *Forging Kosovo: Between Dependence, Independence, and Interdependence*, edited by Hajrullahu, Arben and Anton Vukpalaj, Bern: Peter Lang, 71-99.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Pop-Elches, Grigore. 2008. A party for all seasons: Electoral adaptation of Romanian Communist successor parties. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41 (4), 465–479.; Kitschelt, Herbert / Mansfeldova, Zdenka / Markowski, Radoslaw and Gabor Toka. 1999. *Post-communist party systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Strohle, Isabel. 2016. *Of social inequalities in a socialist society: the creation of a rural underclass in Yugoslav Kosovo*, in *Social Inequalities and Discontent in Yugoslav Socialism*, edited by Archer, Rory / Duda, Igor and Paul Stubbs. New York: Routledge, 125.

<sup>16</sup> Krasniqi, Milazim. 2017. *Sekretet që nuk i mori me vete Ibrahim Rugova [The secrets that Ibrahim Rugova did not take with him]*. Prishtina: Kosova Pen Center, 60-61.

<sup>17</sup> Mustafa, Artan. 2020. 2020. Kosovo's social policy during self-management, UNMIK and independence: Persisting high inequality and social exclusion. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 29(1), 96-108.

<sup>18</sup> Eurostat. 2021. Database - Income and living conditions (accessed: 19 November 2021).



in very rural areas. This was directly in conflict with its progressive mission statements. Since the split, LVV finds it more difficult to attract professional independent personnel, who may hesitate to work with Kurti.

While Kurti and some other figures in LVV have clear left-wing affinities, the party and its leadership is an amalgam of several political orientations including social-democrats, anti-establishment youth, former left-wing political prisoners (most of them splinters from PDK), second or third generation scions of former communist establishment figures, and neoliberal former AKR officials, among others. While sending signals of rapprochement to the Islamic Community of Kosovo, the party leadership has stayed away from LGBT parades, unlike other Kosovo leaders. Curiously, key government ministers leading the economic and social protection sectors have been educated as and self-declare as right-wingers. During recent months, LVV has introduced a universal cash child benefit and has extended maternity benefit to all unemployed mothers, but at the same time has agreed a 47 million euro loan from the World Bank to help reform the social assistance programme towards “improving targeting”.<sup>19</sup> Targeting in social policy and among social-democratic parties is not the most preferred approach, especially from the perspective of developing or transitioning countries, which may also lack capacities to implement it adequately.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas that amalgam might have been necessary for LVV to ensure a large-scale victory, most new parties in Central and Eastern Europe that have ascended to power through anti-corruption/purity discourses have quickly faded away after their experience in government.<sup>21</sup> In the rare cases where those new parties have survived, they did so by moving towards resembling mainstream parties, if not what Kitschelt calls a “programmatically” party model, integrating supporters of traditional parties through a programme-oriented policy approach, and party organisation allowing for leadership resource creation. Charismatic leadership seems to be both an advantage for the early success of a new party, and a challenge for the party’s future subsistence. Evidence from SEE suggests that new parties are continually substituted by even newer parties.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, LVV’s reliance on a charismatic leader, mixed policy signals and lack of commitment in negotiations with Serbia could prove harmful to its future.

The question remains whether LVV will become another party to fade away, or if it will reform into a social-democratic party. Having lacked a left alternative for two decades, Kosovo might need it, as the political discourse is growing increasingly sensitive to issues that require programmatic clarity. For example, in the campaign for mayoral elections in Prishtina, the LVV candidate articulated commitment to building new public facilities for Early Childhood and Education and Care (ECEC) services, while the LDK candidate supported parent subsidies for using private services. Exit polls have indicated that LVV garners most of its support from those directly interested in redistribution such as women, urban populations and,

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<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers. 2021. *Minister Murati signed the agreement for the “Social Assistance System Reform Project in Kosovo” with the director of the World Bank for Kosovo* *Massimiliano Paolucci* (accessed: 17 November 2021).

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Fischer, Andrew M. 2018. *Poverty as ideology*. London: CROP ZED.

<sup>21</sup> Houghton, Tim and Kevin Deegan-Krause. 2020. *The New Party Challenge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Houghton and Deegan-Krause, *New Party Challenge*.

increasingly, the more senior population.<sup>23</sup> Such voting structuration is new in Kosovo's politics. The fact that the former 'war wing' and 'peaceful wing' parties – PDK, AAK and LDK, all embracing right-wing ideology – overcame their grudges and successfully mobilised in support of each other's candidates in major cities shows that developments in local elections can lead to the next stage of Kosovo's democratisation: a party conflict along ideological lines, or, in this sense, a 'normalisation' of the conflict.

### Conclusions

In October-November 2021, Kosovo conducted very well organised and competitive local elections. Shockingly, the municipal assembly vote tally of the ruling LVV decreased by 270,000 (61.6 percent) votes compared to the parliamentary elections held just eight months earlier. COVID-19 and other conjunctural factors could have impacted the results, but much more important factors were LVV's lack of mayoral quality candidates, limited governance success at the local and central levels, and policy ambiguities. Freshly reformed right-wing opposition parties presented better mayoral candidates and supported each-others' candidates in runoffs. Ideologic consistency and recent voter preferences could become transformational for Kosovo politics, embedding policy competition along programmatic lines. Yet transformation will depend considerably on whether LVV will move away from its strong reliance on a charismatic leader towards a more programmatic party, and whether it will remain stuck in policy ambiguities, the political status quo, and populist nationalism even at the risk of fading away.

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<sup>23</sup> RTV Dukagjini. 2021. Debat Plus me Ermal Pandurin - EXIT POLL-i per Zgjedhjet Lokale 2021 (accessed: 19 November 2021).

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