

# opini3n

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## KOSOVO MAKES PROGRESS DESPITE THE DIFFICULTIES

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**I**n the space of three days Kosovo, Europe's youngest country, has once again hit the headlines. This time it has not been so much a result of the just-held first elections since independence as of the appearance of a report that accuses the winner, outgoing Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, of very serious crimes.

The ballot of Sunday 12 was not exempt of controversy, in particular in the two districts where Thaci's Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) has strong support and where reports of electoral manipulation have proliferated, fuelled by numerous observations of fraud and incredibly high turnout percentages (Kosovo's emigration figures are astronomical so there are many more people in the census than those who can actually vote, which is why the figures of a 94% turnout registered for the municipality of Skenderaj and 86% for that of Glllogovc look so implausible). Again, the Vetevendosje (Self-determination) movement which, inter alia, campaigns for unification with Albania, has made a forceful entry into parliament. As if all this were not enough, in the northern zone, under Belgrade's control, the turnout of the Serbian population was close to zero.

Less than forty-eight hours after the polling stations were closed there appeared a report, produced by a Swiss senator and endorsed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in which the winner of the elections on Sunday 12th and the likely new Prime Minister is accused of engaging in criminal activities on an enormous scale (drug trafficking, contraband, and so on). The most horrific of the accusations is that Thaci has been dealing in vital organs extracted from the prisoners taken in his activities as a guerrilla leader. The charges against him have been circulating for some time now and the new report calls for an in-depth inquiry with the full collaboration of the Albanian and Kosovo governments, without any interference from backer states, in particular the United States.

Disheartened after last July's ruling from the International Court of Justice in The Hague put paid to their conviction of the total illegality of Kosovo's independence, those who oppose Kosovo's recognition as a State might now feel vindicated. The facts could be read as showing that Kosovo is an unviable, ethnically excluding state, backed by Albania and the United States and tailor-made for a criminal organisation.

It would not be very wise to draw such hasty conclusions, however. The elections may be tarnished by allegations of manipulation but they have also demonstrated a general functioning graded as good by a great number of observers, while the turnout (48%, which would be much higher if one takes into account the considerable proportion of the population that is living abroad and therefore unable to vote) has been significantly greater than that of the polls of three years ago. The result is a parliament with real options, without an absolute majority and with levels of plurality and representativeness comparable with those of other neighbouring states. In Kosovo, as in Serbia, some people take issue with the internationally-recognised borders and call for modifications in keeping with ethno-national designs (Greater Serbia or Greater Albania). The main point, nonetheless, is that these are minority claims in both places. It is worrying that parties with leaders brought to trial in the International Court of Justice, for example Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo and Vojislav Seselj's Serbian Radical Party, are still garnering the support of 10% of the electorate. Yet this does not make Kosovo and Serbia criminal states per se.

The Serbians in the north of Kosovo, who are totally dependent on Belgrade and cut off from the rest of the country, did not vote. In contrast, the Serbs in the rest of Kosovo (representing two thirds of the total Serbian population) turned out in similar (or even higher) proportions to their Albanian neighbours (50% in Novo Brdo, 49% in Štrpce and 41% in Gračanica), even though there were some complaints of manipulation in their municipalities. These Serbs, who live in ill-named enclaves – ill-named because there is no physical separation today between the towns of Serbian majority and their surroundings of Albanian majority and people freely circulate between them – thus showed their desire to integrate with the institutions of an independent Kosovo. Their fifteen members of parliament might even come to give the Serbian minority the status of arbiter in the Government coalition.

As for the possible criminal activities of Thaci and his associates and the charges of Albanian connivance, an independent international inquiry with the full cooperation of both Albania and Kosovo is essential, while their international patrons, especially the EU and the US, must convince both governments to ensure that it happens. The victims were Kosovars (ethnically Serbians, although there were also some Albanians who were labelled as "collaborationist"). Any attempt at purging with regard to responsibilities for criminal activities of this nature could well be something the country cannot undertake alone because of the magnitude of the crimes and the high profile of the accused, but the international community can provide effective support through the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (which is presently trying the former prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj) or the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).

In any case, it would not be just to blame the majority of Kosovo's population for the unlawful practices of which they would have been victims. Let us not forget that if Thaci and the other leaders of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), including Haradinaj, who is presently being tried, took power in Kosovo it was after the failure of the supporters of non-violent resistance. Headed by Ibrahim Rugova the latter carried out, between 1989 and 1998, the biggest campaign of civil disobedience in the history of Europe, surpassing even the Danes' peaceful resistance to the Nazi occupation. Complete abandonment by the international community thrust the Albanian Kosovars – who massively opted for non-violent means in their struggle of more than ten years against the intolerable apartheid inflicted upon them – into the military option of the Kosovo Liberation Army. This option had achieved only minority support among Albanian Kosovars until the brutal campaign of reprisals and ethnic cleansing engineered by Milosevic's Yugoslavia in 1998 and 1999. An inquiry that could

bring to light the intolerable practices and possible criminal connections between the former Kosovo Liberation Army and its old heroes now turned into politicians is indispensable. Whatever the result turns out to be, however, it cannot cast doubt on the right of the Kosovars to live in a state that is independent of the Serbia that, in the name of a mythologised national history, attempted to eradicate from Kosovo 90% of its inhabitants. This is a right that the Serbian Kosovars whom Belgrade has not managed to segregate, as has been done with those in the north, increasingly seem to be accepting with their integration into Kosovo's young, still tottery democracy.