

Kosovo: Spring of the great loneliness - On the opposition bloc split

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What was predicted to be “The Kosovar Spring” in fact turned out to be opposition’s “Spring of the great loneliness”, if we can raise an analogy with one of the masterpieces of the Albanian novelist, Ismail Kadare, *The Winter of the Great Loneliness* in which he describes Albania’s break with the Soviet Union in 1961 and the solitude of the country, which had just turned its back on the Warsaw Pact.

A similar kind of solitude is now being felt by the Kosovo opposition despite early hopes that the entire spring will be a season of demonstrations against the government and the newly elected president, Hashim Thaçi. But when no one expected it, the opposition bloc split and its constituent parts began to fight bitterly, coming under the mockery of the government, under the sting of analysts, under the criticism of the international community, and under the mistrust of masses of the people.

But, in retrospect, how was this opposition bloc forged? Unnatural in appearance, this bloc was born out of the necessity to oppose the governing coalition, which had received 2/3 of the Kosovo vote. Realizing that alone none of the opposition parties would succeed in shaking the foundations of this government, three of them – Albin Kurti’s Self-determination! movement, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo” (AAK) led by Ramush Haradinaj (former prime minister and one of the most famous ex-commanders of KLA) and Initiative for Kosovo of Fatmir Limaj (another famous ex-KLA commander and former member of Thaçi’s Democratic Party) – established a common front with these parties’ student organizations and some civil society groups to confront Hashim Thaçi and Isa Mustafa’s government. A casus belli was found in the form of the government’s international agreements with Serbia over the Association of Serb-majority municipalities and the border demarcation with Montenegro. And as it was expected, these topics “turned on” the masses.

But why do we say that the merger of the three opposition parties in a single front was unnatural in the first place? The Self-determination movement, since its founding in 2005 and especially since entering in the Parliament in 2010, is noted for civic activism, with a special concentration on topics of corruption and nationalism, accusing of national treason most other parties while at the same time claiming to champion social causes and declaring themselves a leftist party. A frequent target of their accusations were the two parties with whom The Self-determination entered into a bloc: Haradinaj’s AAK and The Initiative of Fatmir Limaj (the latter being accused by Self-Determination of being the most corrupt of Kosovo politicians when he was minister in Thaçi’s PDKgovernment).

Additionally, AAK and The Initiative had emerged as parties from the war with Serbia and were led by former KLA commanders who had adopted a (neo)liberal economic orientation and who advocated sound cooperation with the international community, which the Self-Determinists called a neocolonial power in Kosovo. These two parties also accepted “The Ahtisaari Plan” against which the Self-determinists objected so fiercely that, in one of its protest against this plan, on February 2007, two protesters were killed by the international Police.

So, in a word, this union was politically and ideologically unnatural, but given the concrete situation

of a seemingly omnipotent and invincible majority, the merger passed with little criticism from the public. Support for the opposition was growing with the protests in January and February 2016 bringing to the streets about 40 thousand protesters (with the opposition claiming the number to be over 100 thousand protester while police counting only 8 thousand). Whatever the number, it is important to note that at the time the opposition was gaining support from almost the whole of civil society. The possibility of early elections began to be seriously floated, with expectations that the united opposition parties would emerge out of them as the largest political force in the country.

Just at this time, when the united opposition had its peak in public opinion and just as everybody was considering the possibility of early elections certain, the topic of distribution of seats in a potential new government emerged. So here, as we say in Albanian, "the saw faced the spike". Ramush Haradinaj, known for his obsession with returning to power as a prime minister, agreed to relinquish this position and agreed to support Albin Kurti as the united opposition's PM candidate in case of early elections.

However, Haradinaj sought guarantees from Self-determination that in case the united opposition did not receive +50% of the vote, it would succeed in recruiting a new governing partner outside of the three parties and some civil society groups, which would compete with a joint list. If Self-determination failed in this, Haradinaj asked that, during the second attempt, as is required by the law, he would become the PM candidate. Self-determination refused.

At this point, a whole avalanche of mutual recriminations ensued. Self-determination accused Haradinaj that he split the united opposition for the sake of securing the position of the prime minister for himself. It then recalled older accusations that Haradinaj had been active in the ransom business (something that, while being together in block with him, they had apparently forgotten), that he was flirting with PDK (Thaçi's Democratic Party) for a possible coalition, that Haradinaj was afraid of the tear gas in parliament, etc. For its part, Haradinaj's AAK alleged that Self-determinists operate stealthily and high-handedly, camouflaging their members as civil society figures and imposing their talking points on the other two parties. In all this turmoil, the third and the smallest party, The Initiative took Haradinaj's side and claimed that if they go to the polls together with AAK, they would emerge as the second largest force in the country, thus plunging Self-determination in "a spring of the great loneliness."

At the end of the day, considering the situation on the ground, the likelihood of early elections has seriously diminished unless it suits Thaçi's PDK. Now that Thaçi has consummated the LDK (The Democratic League) vote to become president, PDK could consider stealing the votes of its traditional ally/rival, the LDK of the Prime Minister Mustafa and the late President, Ibrahim Rugova.

Indeed, what are the chances that the new PDK leader, Kadri Veseli (former chief of the Information Service of KLA and PDK's éminence grise) would still maintain and even increase PDK's vote in case of early election? Can we take into consideration the fact that in the last parliamentary elections, in 2014, of 222 thousand votes cast for PDK, he took only 54 thousands while Thaçi took 166 thousands? Is this a sign that the PDK electorate itself has doubts about Veseli, too? Would the possible arrest of a number of local party figures on corruption charges affect the PDK vote given the fact that it has had the lowest electoral swing since the elections of 2000? Does PDK consider that the time has come or not to sanctify its status as the first party of the country?

The answers to these questions within the PDK will determine whether there will be any early elections. If so, the opposition, divided as it is, is unlikely to avert yet another PDK victory.

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P.S.

* LefEast. May 9, 2016:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/kosovo-spring-of-the-great-loneliness/>

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