

# Kosovo's troubled local elections highlight the problems caused by leaving the territory's legal status unresolved

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*Kosovo's local elections on 4 November were overshadowed by violence in several Serbian-dominated areas. **Daniel Silander** outlines the background to the elections and gives an overview of some of the factors which underpinned the violence. He argues that the on-going indecision over the territory's legal status has had a damaging effect on Kosovo's development. This has undermined attempts to strengthen Kosovo's political system and economy, ensuring that the territory's population remains deeply divided.*



The [local elections](#) in Kosovo on 4 November included runoffs for the mayoral posts in most of the country's 39 municipalities. Two alarming signs were observed: the low voter turnout of about 46 per cent in Kosovo, and only 20 per cent in the northern parts of Kosovo; and the violent attacks on all three polling stations located in Serbian-dominated northern Mitrovica. The election outcome questions how far Kosovo has come in state and democracy-building – the nation continues to be in deep political and economic despair.

## Background to the elections

Violence and ethnic tension continue to influence Kosovo. Tear gas attacks, followed by destroyed ballot boxes in northern Mitrovica, a Serb-dominated area, left the election results in this part of Kosovo highly questionable. After more than a decade of oppression by Belgrade in Kosovo, years of developments of undercover activities in the territory, and months of armed clashes between state forces and Kosovo's paramilitary groups, NATO launched military air raids in spring 1999 as a direct consequence of the fruitless talks within the UN Security Council on how to stop the violence. On June 12, 1999, NATO operations resulted in a cease-fire and opened the way for UN Security Council Resolution 1244 to free Kosovo from Belgrade's authority in favour of the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) – the largest UN mission ever – to promote a multi-ethnic, democratic, peaceful and prosperous Kosovo.



Kosovo and Albanian flags on sale in Pristina, Credit: David Bailey MBE (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

On 17 February 2008, Kosovo decided to declare its independence after years of frozen diplomatic talks within the UN Security Council. The UN Special Envoy for Kosovo sought a final agreement on how to settle the dispute, but after about 18 months of diplomatic talks, the Comprehensive Proposal declared it was impossible to find a common agreement. The only viable option for Kosovo, it was argued, was independence that would initially be supervised by the international community.

From an academic perspective, the decade of interim UN governance seemed to be doomed at its inception. The UN required Kosovo to meet standards (democracy and good governance) before the UN Security Council would commit to solving the issue of Kosovo's political and legal status. The UN policy, [Standards Before Status](#) (outlined by the former international governor of Kosovo Michael Steiner in 2002/2003) embedded a paradox; Kosovo's

permanent status seemed to be a precondition to developing democracy and good governance. Although the UNMIK was initially necessary to secure peace and order, assist displaced persons, and promote institution building, the UNMIK had become obsolete long before 2008. For years, the UN policy prevented Kosovo from initiating reforms to meet UN demands.

## **Kosovo's elections**

Four factors contribute to the recently obstructed popular election in Kosovo, which are rooted in the years of international indecisiveness over the territory's legal status. First, the postponed decision on Kosovo's status has impeded any chances of ethnic reconciliation. It has caused ongoing hostilities, amalgamates deep wounds that remain from the war, and reminds both sides of the lingering uncertainty between the two. The lack of international decisiveness has promoted an ethnically divided region with Serbs, prevailing in northern Mitrovica, and isolated in enclaves elsewhere, that are protected by international forces. The result is parallel societies that are based on radical nationalists on the one hand, and aggressive nationalism on the other.

Second, the postponed decision on Kosovo's status has obstructed efficient international aid and left the region in economic despair, to be misused by radical forces on both sides. The unsolved issue of statehood provoked Kosovo Albanians to change their view of the UNMIK from liberator to occupier. It decreased legitimacy for the international community and led to growing tension between UNMIK structures and the self-governing institutions of Kosovo.

The international indecisiveness also had a negative economic impact, leaving Kosovo as one of the poorest regions in Europe, with extremely high unemployment, a widespread black market and no organised social and economic benefits for job seekers. Kosovo's socioeconomic despair is a result of challenged aid from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. It is also a result of postponed international (and domestic) private investments and entrepreneurship, with investments being held back due to uncertainty over Kosovo's future. The political and legal uncertainty regarding private and public ownership of land and enterprises, the recognition of locally issued certificates of origin, export rules, and regional trade have all undermined economic development.

Third, the unresolved status of Kosovo has paralysed any development of a democratic civil society. Instead, the uncertainty has led to single-issue-based, ethnically homogenous nationalist movements dominating the region's political scene. While a dynamic civil society is essential for a vital democracy, Kosovo consists of a political culture that, beyond anti-Serbian and anti-Albanian voices, is symbolised by widespread feelings of powerlessness and 'voicelessness' in politics.

Fourth and finally, similar to the status of its civil society, party politics in Kosovo has lacked popular support, organisational cohesiveness, and clear-cut party policies, while also allowing for pervasive corruption. These parties have typically symbolised national movements with few suggestions for viable reforms. They feature embedded militarised factions that are rooted in the war structures of the 1990s. Such radicalisation and militarisation within the political system has continued to be nurtured by uncertainty over Kosovo's legal status.

Last week's local elections in Kosovo were troubled by popular disengagement and violence. Overall, Kosovo seems to continue to be dominated by radical nationalism, which marginalises citizens and keeps a better political future just out of their grasp. The roots of the turbulent elections are found in the historical legacy of communist rule and the civil war, but also in the international community's indecisiveness in deciding upon a permanent status for Kosovo. The overall lesson learned from Kosovo may be summarised by quoting [Francis Fukuyama](#): "Before you can have a democracy, you must have a state, but to have a legitimate and therefore durable state you eventually must have a democracy".

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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