

Five lessons from the mayoral run-off elections in Kosovo



Mayoral run-off elections were held in Kosovo on 19 November, with voters going to the polls in 19 municipalities. [Blerim Vela](#) gives an overview of the results and highlights five key lessons from the contests that provide an insight into how politics functions in Kosovo.

On 19 November, voters in 19 municipalities in Kosovo voted in mayoral run-off elections. The [preliminary results](#) were published by the Kosovo Central Election Commission before midnight and offered no clear overall winner. However, there are certain political parties that should be pleased with the electoral results, namely the Serbian List (LS) and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK). The LS continues to dominate in all 10 municipalities with Kosovo Serb majority populations, while the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) won the most number of municipalities among Kosovo Albanian parties.

However, while the LDK managed to win in [Vushtri](#), thanks to a wide coalition with other opposition parties, it [lost an important municipality](#) to the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and [a smaller one to the AAK](#). The latter managed to [increase the number of municipalities it manages](#) from three to seven, with the most important achieved in [Gjakova](#) where it won against the only female incumbent mayor and candidate in the contest. The Self-determination Movement (LVV) managed to keep hold of the capital [Prishtina](#) and won in the second biggest city of [Prizren](#) as well as a smaller city in [Kamenica](#) despite facing a wide coalition against its candidates. The once powerful PDK has now been rooted out from most of Kosovo and is confined to five municipalities in the [central region](#). However, beyond the results, there are at least five important lessons that can be learned from the elections.

Candidates

One of the key factors contributing to good results in mayoral run-off elections in Kosovo is the selection of a candidate that is best suited for the municipal context. This was proven in the electoral competition for the mayor of [Prishtina](#), [Prizren](#), [Ferizaj](#) and [Gjakova](#). These candidates share some common features: most of them are knowledgeable about the problems in their municipality beyond the generic approach of promoting capital projects or big spending projects, and they were able to better articulate their programme to the public. On the other hand, the two surprising PDK candidates – [Valdete Idrizi](#), running for mayor of South Mitrovica and [Shaqir Totaj](#), running for Prizren – most likely lost because of the negative perception of voters towards their party and the leadership that nominated them. Both of them would have probably achieved a much better result if they had decided to run under the banner of another party.

Coalitions

Bearing in mind the small difference between the candidates in some mayoral competitions, paradoxically, the runoff confirmed the importance of achieving adequate local coalitions. The victories achieved in many cities have been the result of organic links between coalition partners based on mutual trust and responsiveness to the municipal context which tap into the general political trend calling for change.



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This was the case for the mayoral battles in the municipalities of [Vushtrri](#), [Prizren](#), [Ferizaj](#) and [Klina](#), where opposition parties united around a candidate challenging the incumbent parties. On the other hand, there were examples of unprincipled coalitions between the PDK and LDK in [Prishtina](#) and [Kamenica](#) that failed to materialise due to difficulties associated with forming coalitions among parties that have long traditions of animosity. These coalitions were perceived by voters as serving office-seeking goals rather than addressing the needs and interests of citizens.

Media and TV debates

Due to the format of the TV debates that took place between candidates and the lack of expertise by TV moderators and invited panellists, the debates did not prove useful in clarifying programmatic aspects, but rather were used as platforms for attacking stances and initiating false news. In the upcoming municipal elections, it would be good if TV outlets reach an agreement to split TV debate topics that they will scrutinise with the mayoral candidates (for instance, a TV debate could deal with education, another with health, and so on). In this way, citizens will find it easier to judge the rationality and feasibility of the programmes presented. In addition, such an approach would allow TV moderators and panellists to focus on a particular area of expertise and not to try to appear as experts on every topic.

The election campaign and management of expectations

The electoral race in the largest urban centres in Kosovo revealed the great potential of targeted and contextualised campaigns and counter-campaigns. This was particularly apparent in the mayoral race for the capital [Prishtina](#) where it seems there was a coordinated effort among various party structures and economic interest groups (albeit with a long history of animosity such as the LDK and PDK).

This campaign started six months before the official campaign was launched and it culminated with the usage of fake news targeting specific voter groups (the most read news portal in Kosovo published almost 2,000 news items against the incumbent candidate, at times without any facts supporting the claims it made). In addition, most political parties in Kosovo seemed to be unable to set realistic and attainable goals ahead of the elections. In many cases their unrealistic expectations simply set themselves up for failure.

Lower turnout and voter polarisation along city-village lines

Although there was a widespread belief and conviction that low turnout favours the incumbent candidates, in many municipalities there has been a change despite a low turnout ([Prizren](#) is a clear example). Political parties that based their election projections using this principle therefore risked losing the race. The key to securing victory in such cases seems to have been the creation of momentum for change, effective concentration of party and political resources, and the establishment of coalitions that could prop up the vote.

The other fact that was exposed in the mayoral runoff elections is that in some key municipalities there is a clear polarisation between the preferences of voters living in urban and rural areas. This could be explained partially by the fact that voters in the city are less dependent on clientelistic networks than rural ones. Moreover, this was the case despite the fact that some of the incumbent mayors (like [Shpend Ahmeti](#), the Mayor of Prishtina) have had a balanced policy of capital investment in urban and rural areas.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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