

## Women's In/Security in Kosovo's 2025 Elections

Written by Lauren Lowe

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LAUREN LOWE, DEC 4 2024

In 2025, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security will mark its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a climate of growing uncertainty for gender equality and women's security. The landmark resolution has provided a tool to advance women's representation in Kosovo's political and peace processes, yet despite some advancements, ongoing ethno-nationalist narratives risk derailing progress towards gender equality. Kosovo's President, Vjosa Osmani, announced the next parliamentary elections for February 2025 – the sixth since Kosovo's contested self-declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008. The previous election in 2021 saw a significant shift in Kosovo's politics, turning away from parties who gained prominence during and after the 1999 war, and towards the left-wing Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) party led by Albin Kurti. Yet despite the election result, ethno-nationalist narratives pushed by Prishtina and Belgrade continue to undermine gender equality and threaten women's peace and security in Kosovo.

The 2012 election occurred as war crimes trials were brought against some of the leading politicians in Kosovo, including former president Hashim Thaçi who then resigned from his position. Against this backdrop and the limited progress in the EU Facilitated Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, Kurti used this opportunity to push an ethno-nationalist narrative in the elections and throughout his term as Prime Minister.

Kurti and Vetëvendosje's hardline stance towards the Dialogue with Belgrade has had clear ramifications for the internal relations between Prishtina and Kosovo Serbs, particularly in the North of Kosovo. Coming into power, Kurti sought to deprioritise the Dialogue with Belgrade, demanding Kosovo's independence be recognised as a precondition for negotiations. This stance is rooted in the Vetëvendosje party's origins as an activist movement, their slogan famously painted onto the UNMIK building in 2005: "No negotiation – self-determination!" (JO NEGOCIATA – VETËVENDOSJE!). With a history as an activist in the movement himself, Kurti was banned from running as MP in the last parliamentary elections due to his involvement in a protest that saw the tear-gassing of the Kosovo parliament.

However, this did not alter public support for his campaign, winning by a landslide over Kosovo's historic political parties, such as Thaçi's PDK (the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army) and the LDK party (which led the 1990s peaceful resistance movement). As Prime Minister, he has taken a hard stance towards parallel institutions in Kosovo Serb municipalities. Moreover, Kurti continues to drag his feet in establishing the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities in Kosovo, a key condition of the 2013 Brussels Agreement.

It will come as no surprise should the upcoming election in February 2025 focus on security issues that have been dominating news and politics in Kosovo, notably: renewed tensions between Prishtina and Belgrade, the withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo's institutions, election boycotts and the installation of Albanian mayors in the North which sparked protests, the banning of the Serbian Dinar, the Banjska shooting, and explosions damaging critical water supplies. As the North grapples with its own democracy, including whether the main political party, Srpska Lista, will participate in these elections (although Serbian President Vučić has recently called for participation, particularly to counter Kurti's efforts against parallel institutions), and whether there will be active opposition against Srpska Lista where there otherwise has not been (though Srpska Demokratije has been gaining attention), it is important to note that gender, and in particular women's security, remains absent from these conversations.

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There has been little discussion by either domestic or international leaders on the gendered impacts of key events over the past few years, especially regarding women's security in the North. For instance, the decision by the Kosovo Central Bank to ban the Dinar dominated the media at the time, with commentary focusing on narratives from Prishtina on combating organised crime by reducing illegal cash flows, and from Belgrade alleging that an "ethnic cleansing" campaign is being committed against Serbs in Kosovo. Additionally, Prishtina faced criticisms from the international community for its lack of consultation with the Serb communities in making the decision.

Discourse on the Dinar-ban was at its peak when I was conducting my fieldwork in Kosovo in March 2024, where locals in the North described to me the impacts of the ban on Belgrade-funded services such as hospitals and schools, and on local businesses. Others were concerned many would need to travel into Serbia to access their income. While recognising the Euro as Kosovo's sole currency will have widespread impacts on Kosovo Serbs, women often take on higher levels of unpaid care work alongside formal employment, meaning they would be further burdened should they be unable to access income or need to travel into Serbia. Moreover, those in vulnerable situations will be especially hindered by a sudden ban on the currency, increasing the risk of women's insecurity. The Dinar-ban, though, serves as just one example of how the political tensions between Prishtina and Belgrade have gendered consequences that are frequently overlooked, leaving many to feel unrepresented by both governments and fuelling dissatisfaction in political parties.

Though the last election saw a shift away from the PDK and LDK political parties, there remained a preference for nationalist (and masculinised) leaders with elections doing little to challenge the status quo. The National Democratic Institute found misogyny was prevalent throughout the previous election, with women being targets of misinformation and sexist campaigns. There is high risk of this occurring again, particularly given the recounts I have received on smear campaigns in the media against civil society and political leaders in Kosovo. These misogynistic campaigns do not solely occur during election times but are ongoing, frequently threatening women's safety online, particularly affecting female journalists.

Election coverage and discourse will most likely be dominated by state-centred security, especially in light of the recent announcement by Vučić calling for a return to the "status quo ante" and recognising Kosovo as an "area of special social protection". However, there needs to be increased effort to include dialogue on gender insecurity that often falls aside in discourse on state-centred security. For instance, gender-based violence remains a critical issue in Kosovo, affecting mostly women across all ethnic groups (as well as other demographics) with additional barriers to reporting and support faced by women from minority groups, including Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. Moreover, unemployment is widespread across Kosovo and disproportionately impacts women, with 18.6 percent of job-seeking women in the first quarter of 2023 being unemployed (compared to 8.6 percent of men). In addition to paid work, women take on nearly double the amount of unpaid work in Kosovo, spending on average 6.2 hours per day, while men spend 3.5 hours per day on unpaid work.

Despite a feminist narrative employed by the current government, including the President Osmani's annual Women, Peace, and Security Forum, and Kurti's claims on International Women's Day that Kosovo is a feminist state, there remains a disconnect between the rhetoric of the government and its efforts to listen to and meet the needs of the public. For instance, clashes marked Kurti's speech on International Women's Day, when the march (which played an important role in the war-time and post-war context) was prevented from reaching the government building. Harmful homophobic and misogynistic language has also been an issue in Kosovo's government, seen during the recent rejection of a draft civil code which proposed civil unions in same-sex relationships. Another bill was recently proposed that would allow unmarried women to seek IVF and support more couples accessing IVF by reducing costs through public hospitals. However, this was largely defeated by members of Vetëvendosje (along with others) who were vocal critics against unmarried women accessing IVF as they would 'threaten' the family institution and (Albanian) national identity.

Although there has been some advancements towards women's political representation, Kosovo remains a patriarchal society where the national (typically male Albanian) identity is privileged over gender identities. As a result, women's in/security is often overlooked in political discourse and decision-making. The 2025 election in Kosovo will be dominated by state-centred security narratives that fuel ethnic tensions and divisions between Kosovo

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Serbs and Albanians, further undermining peace and especially women's security. Moreover, given this election will also occur at the start of Donald Trump's presidency, the outcome will reveal how the next four years of domestic and international politics in Kosovo will be shaped and what priorities will take precedence.

Kosovo's politicians need to shift the narrative from a state-centred security to instead make these elections about human security – and in particular women's security – and building a meaningful and inclusive peace in Kosovo for all gender identities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and other demographics. As civil society continues to work towards gender equality, politicians must listen to the concerns and needs of communities, and overcome ethnic divisions, to ensure peace and security is created for all those living in Kosovo.

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### About the author:

**Lauren Lowe** is a PhD candidate at Monash University's Global Peace and Security (GPS) Centre, researching gender, peace and security in the Western Balkans. Her research examines the gendered assumptions and implications of 'peace spoilers' in Kosovo's peace process, with a particular focus on women's resistance to patriarchal peacebuilding practices. She is also a research assistant at the GPS centre, working on projects addressing the marginalisation of people with caring responsibilities in peacebuilding and peacekeeping sectors.