

Kosovo Gets Leader With Russian Ties

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Pacolli, pictured Tuesday in the parliament in Pristina, owned the Swiss firm that renovated the Kremlin in 1999. **Hazir Reka**

PRISTINA, Kosovo — Kosovo's parliament has elected as president a Kosovo-Swiss businessman suspected of bribing Russian officials to win a deal to renovate the Kremlin in 1999.

Lawmakers elected Behgjet Pacolli as president on Tuesday under a power-sharing deal with Prime Minister Hashim Thaci following December elections.

The main opposition parties boycotted the session, citing Pacolli's past business ties with Russia and accusing him of pursuing politics for business goals.

The only candidate for president, Pacolli was elected in the third round with 62 votes in the 120-seat parliament, sparing Kosovo early elections.

Prime Minister Hashim Thaci's government also won parliamentary approval.

Pacolli, 59, remains unpopular among the 2 million Kosovo Albanians, largely because of his

close business ties with Moscow, which backs its ex-ruler Serbia in opposing Kosovo's independence.

His Mabetex company renovated the Kremlin.

"I shall work with all my might to get Kosovo on a level of respected countries in the world. It has the capabilities, and the Kosovars deserve this state," Pacolli said.

"I shall work with all Kosovars despite their race or ethnicity," he told the parliament in his acceptance speech, greeting ethnic Serbs in their own language.

In his book "From Challenge to Challenge," Pacolli says he has been interviewed by Swiss and Russian prosecutors on charges that he bribed former President Boris Yeltsin's administration to get lucrative construction contracts.

He denies the allegation.

"Pacolli does not care about the interest of Kosovo, but for his own interest. He served Thaci politically, and Thaci paid him back with public tenders," Visar Imeri, a lawmaker with the Self-Determination Movement, said before boycotting the vote.

Besides Pacolli's party, Thaci's PDK relies on the backing of more than 20 lawmakers from ethnic minorities, including Serbs who form the largest group, for a majority in the 120-seat parliament.

"This is scandalous. With this formula of governance, we shall be totally isolated from European countries. This president and prime minister represent the dark side of Kosovo," said Avni Zogiani, head of the Wake Up anti-corruption agency.

The images of Thaci and Kosovo were badly damaged after a Council of Europe report accused members of the former Kosovo Liberation Army loyal to Thaci of abductions, gun- and drug-running and trafficking in body parts from ethnic Serbs in the late 1990s.

Kosovo's previous president, Fatmir Sejdiu, was forced to resign after he violated the constitution because he served as party leader at the same time. His resignation after a Constitutional Court ruling precipitated early elections in mid-December.

(Reuters, AP)

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