

# The cost of politics in **Kosovo**

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# List of acronyms

<b>AAK</b>	Alliance for the Future of Kosovo
<b>CEC</b>	Central Election Commission
<b>ECAP</b>	Electoral Complaints and Appeals Panel
<b>PDK</b>	Democratic Party of Kosovo
<b>LDK</b>	Democratic League of Kosovo
<b>LVV</b>	Self-Determination Movement
<b>NISMA</b>	Social Democratic Initiative
<b>PLE</b>	Egyptian Liberal Party

# Executive summary

Understanding the financial cost of political participation is fundamental to protecting the integrity and inclusiveness of Kosovo's democracy. This study demonstrates that the financial burden associated with running for, and maintaining, public office has grown substantially in recent years, reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities in political representation. As a result, elections increasingly risk becoming contests of financial influence rather than genuine debates of ideas and public policy.

The report's findings show that running for parliament requires substantial personal financial resources. It identifies a clear correlation between campaign expenditure and electoral success. But it also finds that many candidates rely on savings, family contributions, or informal support networks, as political parties provide limited and inconsistent financial assistance. This imbalance disproportionately benefits wealthy or well-connected individuals, undermining political pluralism and merit-based competition.

Gender disparities are also pronounced. Women candidates spent, on average, more than twice as much as men often compensating for weaker party support and entrenched gender bias through personal financial sacrifice. Similarly, young candidates face structural barriers stemming from limited financial resources, weaker networks, and the unpaid nature of political involvement. Many forgo professional opportunities to remain politically active, further discouraging youth participation in formal politics.

The combination of high political costs, inadequate party support, and opaque financing mechanisms fosters a system increasingly dependent on private interests and informal clientelist networks. This trend erodes public trust, distorts political competition, and risks transforming democratic participation into a transactional process driven by wealth rather than ideas. Addressing these challenges is vital to ensuring that political competition in Kosovo remains fair, inclusive, and reflective of the diverse voices of its citizens. The report outlines recommendations that include introducing caps on individual candidate spending and stronger enforcement of such measures, initiatives designed to enhance the participation of youth and women in political parties and political life, and greater civic engagement with the topic as being key avenues for reform.

# Introduction

Understanding the cost dimensions of political participation is essential for safeguarding the future of democracy in Kosovo as its growth creates barriers for capable citizens who lack resources and raises questions about fairness, representation, and public trust and risks turning public office into the preserve of those with wealth. In Kosovo's young democracy, where institutions are still consolidating, it is vital to ensure that politics remains accessible to a broad and diverse range of voices.

This report – with a focus on the February 2025 parliamentary elections - examines how candidates financed and conducted their legislative campaigns. For some, running for parliament meant dipping deep into personal savings or relying on family and informal support networks, with many treating a mandate as an “investment” that required substantial resources. But these necessary outlays can affect the participation of underrepresented groups: young people often lack established networks to raise funds, while women face significant challenges due to unequal access to sponsorship, weaker party support, and prevailing societal attitudes linked to their gender.

Ultimately, the high cost of politics threatens to distort democratic competition. Instead of a contest of ideas, elections risk becoming battles of financial power, where interest groups overshadow policy debates. By tracing the flow of money in politics and highlighting its implications, this study aims to shed light on the actual price of political participation in Kosovo and to inform critical reforms to ensure it remains open, fair, and representative.

# Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach designed to understand the cost dynamics of political participation in Kosovo. This methodology ensured that the study captures both the quantitative cost of political engagement and the broader socio-political implications of financial barriers within Kosovo's democratic landscape. Data was gathered using a combination of:

- **Desk research:** A thorough review of existing reports, legislation, academic literature, and studies related to the financing of political campaigns and participation in Kosovo was carried out. This background research helped frame the context and informed the development of interview questions and topics for focus group discussions.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 individuals who participated in the February 2025 parliamentary elections. Of the 15 candidates interviewed, six were women and nine were men. The sample covered candidates from a broad spectrum of parties, including the Self-Determination Movement (LVV), Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), Alliance for the Future of Kosovo- Social Democratic Initiative (AAK–NISMA), and Egyptian Liberal Party (PLE). Notably, seven of the candidates were running for elected office for the first time, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by newcomers to the political process. Interviews explored personal experiences during the campaign period, financial expenditures incurred, sources of funding, and the extent of support received from political parties. The interviews aimed to capture both objective data and subjective perceptions regarding the cost of political participation in elections and beyond.
- **Focus group discussions (FGDs):** Two focus groups were organised to complement the individual interviews and enrich the findings with broader perspectives. The first focus group gathered participants from underrepresented groups, including youth, women, minority communities, and persons with disabilities. The discussion focused on the specific financial barriers these groups encounter when attempting to enter politics, including hidden costs, systemic obstacles, and unequal access to funding and networks. The second focus group brought representatives from political parties, civil society organisations, media, and electoral oversight bodies. This session served as a forum to validate preliminary findings and to support the generation of practical recommendations aimed at reducing financial barriers to political participation.

Given the sensitive nature of financial data in politics, the study acknowledges a potential limitation in the self-reported information provided by candidates and stakeholders. While responses were cross validated across interviews and FGDs where possible, the study does not claim to offer a fully exhaustive accounting of campaign expenditure. Instead, it aims to highlight key trends, obstacles, and disparities faced by individuals in Kosovo's political landscape.

# Kosovo's electoral legal framework

## Electoral system

Kosovo employs an open list proportional representation system for electing its national legislature, the Assembly of Kosovo, which comprises 120 members serving a four-year term. The entire territory of Kosovo functions as a single electoral constituency, ensuring that representation reflects the political preferences of voters across the country.

Voters cast their ballots not only for a political party or entity—such as a coalition, citizens' initiative, or independent candidate—but can also express a preference for up to ten individual candidates from the list of their chosen entity. This preferential voting allows voters to influence the order in which candidates are elected from party lists.

Out of the total 120 seats, 100 are distributed proportionally among political entities that pass the 5% threshold. This electoral threshold aims to balance inclusiveness with the need to avoid excessive fragmentation in the Assembly. The remaining 20 seats are reserved to guarantee representation of Kosovo's non-majority communities. These include ten seats specifically for the Kosovo Serb community, and ten others distributed among other minority communities: three for Bosniaks, two for Turks, and one each for the Gorani, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. An additional seat goes to whichever of the Roma, Ashkali, or Egyptian communities receives the most votes. It is a system that reflects Kosovo's commitment to inclusive and representative democracy.

## Candidate eligibility and selection

The right to stand as a candidate in elections is a fundamental democratic principle enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. It is further elaborated through Law No. 08/L-228 on General Elections, which sets out the procedural and substantive rules for candidate certification. This framework supports any citizen of Kosovo who is listed on the official voters list as being eligible to run for office, provided they do not fall under specific legal exclusions that are designed to prevent conflicts of interest and to uphold the integrity of democratic institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The certification of candidates is managed by the Central Election Commission (CEC), which oversees the submission and review of candidate lists by political parties, coalitions, or citizens' initiatives to ensure compliance with Chapters III and IV of the General Elections Law. If discrepancies or disqualifying issues are found, the political entity is notified and given the opportunity to revise its submission. Final decisions on certification are made by the CEC, with political entities able to appeal a refusal to certify before the Electoral Complaints and Appeals Panel (ECAP).



The law also includes provisions to promote gender equality in political representation. Each candidate list must include at least 30% of candidates from each gender, with alternating placement in groups of three. Moreover, as an incentive to strengthen inclusive political participation, the CEC allocates additional public funds to political entities that elect more women than the minimum required quota.

## Financing political parties

Kosovo's political party financing is regulated by a robust legal framework designed to uphold transparency, accountability, and integrity in political life. At the centre of this framework is Law No. 03/L-174 on the Financing of Political Parties,<sup>2</sup> which was originally adopted in 2010 and subsequently amended in 2012, 2013, and most recently in 2022. The law governs both public and private financing of political parties, sets clear limitations on contributions, and identifies sources of funding deemed to pose risks to the independence of the political system.

Political parties in Kosovo may be financed through membership fees, voluntary contributions from individuals and legal persons<sup>3</sup>, income from party activities, and funds allocated from the state budget. The public financing mechanism is administered through the Fund for Supporting Political Entities within the CEC. This fund, which may not exceed 0.34% of the total annual state budget, supports the regular operation of political parties and parliamentary groups and their campaign activities. In election years, an additional allocation of up to 0.05% of the state budget is available, with funds distributed based on electoral performance and representation criteria. Provisions are also made for newly registered parties.

The Financing of Political Parties law prohibits financial or material contributions from a range of sources, including foreign institutions or individuals, anonymous donors, gambling-related businesses, public institutions or enterprises, and private companies with active government contracts or those who have held a government contract in the previous three years.<sup>4</sup> These restrictions are intended to prevent undue influence and safeguard the autonomy of political actors and were strengthened following the 2022 amendments to the law which enhanced institutional oversight by giving the Office for Registration and Certification of Political Entities within the CEC greater autonomy to oversee party finances. This development followed the Assembly of Kosovo's failure to appoint external auditors to undertake this task which had led to delays in financial reporting.

Political entities are required to submit annual and quarterly financial reports, while also maintaining detailed records of payments, contributions, and in-kind donations. The law mandates the publication of these reports<sup>5</sup> and outlines procedures for selecting licensed auditors responsible for examining party finances, with those reports made publicly available on the CEC website.<sup>6</sup> These measures are designed to increase public access to political finance data, enabling civil society and the media to conduct independent scrutiny. Parties failing to meet these obligations - those not submitting reports within the prescribed timelines, failing to issue receipts, or obstructing access to financial documentation – can be subject to legal sanctions and financial penalties.<sup>7</sup>

## Spending limits

According to Article 40 of the Law on General Elections,<sup>8</sup> no certified political entity is permitted to exceed the spending limit set for the election campaign. This limit is determined by the CEC and is announced within five days of the official declaration of the election date. Ahead of the 2025 general elections, the CEC declared<sup>9</sup> that each political entity was allowed to spend up to €2,047,149: equivalent to one euro per registered voter. By tying the spending ceiling directly to the number of voters, the limits can reflect demographic changes in the electorate from one election cycle to another.

Importantly, this ceiling on expenditures covers all campaign-related goods and services, regardless of when they are purchased or provided. This means that any promotional materials, advertising, events, or services used to support a campaign - whether bought months in advance or during the official campaign period - must be included in the total declared campaign spending (for a detailed analysis of this declared expenditure for the 2025 elections, see Annex 1). Although this total includes individual expenditures, which is the primary focus of this study, candidates do not report their personal spending to their political parties or the CEC. As a result, these expenditures remain outside any formal oversight or control.

# Key findings

## Candidate recruitment

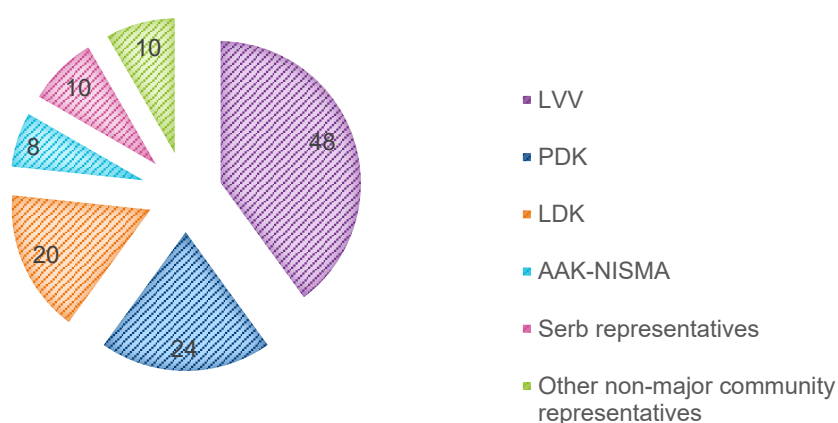
Candidate recruitment in Kosovo's main parties reflects shared systemic pressures and party-specific traditions. A cross-party comparison of the three leading parties in the 2025 legislative polls shows that while the formal criteria often mention integrity, professionalism, gender balance, and representation, in practice, recruitment is shaped less by long-term party activism and more by external prominence, financial resources, and leader endorsement. This reflects a broader trend of “ready-made” political figures entering politics on the strength of visibility or wealth, rather than through gradual political socialisation.

LVV, which won 42.3% of the vote, approached the formation of its parliamentary candidate list through a combination of strategic, political, and personal considerations. A key factor was geographical representation - ensuring that candidates reflected diverse regions and had influence within their respective local areas. This helped the party maintain a strong territorial balance and mobilise grassroots support. Another decisive criterion was candidates capacity to represent central political themes, engage in public debate, and confront political rivals effectively. Candidates who could articulate the party's ideological positions and draw sharp contrasts with opponents were particularly valued. Early activists and individuals holding executive power within the party or government structures were also given an advantage, reflecting LVV's emphasis on loyalty, institutional experience, and continuity. Finally, LVV sought to include figures from academia and the entertainment world, such as athletes and singers, to broaden its appeal and project a modern, relatable image beyond traditional political circles.

PDK, which secured 21%, applied a set of pragmatic and image-focused criteria when shaping its list of parliamentary candidates. Foremost, the party emphasised integrity and legal credibility, ensuring that none of its candidates were under indictment or facing criminal charges - a deliberate attempt to present a “clean” and trustworthy public image. PDK also prioritised public figures with professional recognition in specific fields, seeking candidates who were already visible and respected within their communities or professions. This approach aimed to strengthen the party's credibility and outreach beyond its traditional base. Age and political background were additional considerations: the leadership sought to include younger candidates and individuals without prior political engagement, as a way to renew the party's image and appeal to new voters. Another important criterion was the personal or family record of contribution to the country, particularly links to the Kosovo Liberation Army, which remains an essential part of PDK's political identity and legacy. Finally, the party gave attention to geographical balance, intentionally expanding representation beyond its traditional stronghold in the Drenica region to reflect a broader, national presence.

LDK, which placed third with 18.3% of the vote, designed its candidate list with a strong focus on preserving the party's traditional identity while adapting to new political dynamics. A central priority was to maintain the party's conservative voter base, emphasising continuity with LDK's historic values and political moderation. Candidates were expected to embody this profile and appeal to loyal supporters who identify with the party's long-standing image of stability and prudence. LDK also favoured individuals with a professional background and a pro-free-market orientation, often selecting candidates who had established ties to the business community or demonstrated an understanding of economic development and entrepreneurship. This reflected the party's aim to project competence in governance and economic reform. Finally, proximity to the party leadership was considered an advantage, highlighting the importance of loyalty and alignment with the party's internal leadership structure.

**Graph 1 – Distribution of seats in Assembly of Kosovo**



Smaller parties – in total 28 political entities, including 20 political parties, five coalitions, two citizen initiatives, and one independent candidate were certified by CEC in 2025 - tended to apply less formalised criteria, but reflected similar patterns. Educational attainment, professional experience, and regional balance were cited as advantages, and compliance with the 30% gender quota was acknowledged. But loyalty to leaders was decisive with candidates unwilling to align publicly with the party chair risking exclusion. Furthermore, all parties, regardless of ideology, had distorted recruitment pathways that were shaped by financial and reputational capital. LVV's preference for high-visibility activists, PDK's reliance on war veterans, LDK's emphasis on professional-business elites, and smaller parties' dependence on personal loyalty all pointed to the dominance of "ready-made" candidates over those emerging from party structures.

Financial capability is a key attribute of these "ready-made" candidates. Interviewees noted that the recruitment of candidates by political parties increasingly favours those with substantial financial resources, with one remarking that "the election campaign has become like an industry" where material wealth has become a prerequisite for parliamentary representation at the expense of expertise and public service. Emphasising that candidate selection is heavily shaped by

resources and networks rather than open, meritocratic competition. A dynamic that is situated in an increasingly mediated form of democracy in which parties accept funding from business actors and representatives and are expected to safeguard corporate interests in return.

## Campaign expenditures

Interviews with candidates reveal three dominant areas of campaign spending: direct engagement with citizens, digital outreach, and election-day logistics. Reflecting Kosovo's strong coffee culture, nearly all candidates reported expenses for coffee during meetings with voters. Transportation was another significant cost, as candidates frequently travelled across municipalities to build support under the single-district electoral system. In addition to these financial outlays, nearly all candidates reported substantial in-kind contributions in the form of volunteers (to support online and offline campaigns) and the provision of services (the use of vehicles, drivers and office space). Several candidates mentioned volunteer activists distributing leaflets, family members helping with canvassing, or volunteer video editors producing adverts. Based on our interviews, campaigns with lower cash budgets tended to compensate for shortfalls through volunteer support, especially in outreach and distribution, often to good effect.

Campaign spending is also increasingly committed to building influence in the digital sphere, with candidates highlighting substantial investments in video production, photography, online media, and television advertising. Payments for sponsored articles on news portals were described as a growing trend with one interviewee suggesting that it is "almost impossible for an unsponsored article to appear in the media." Media outlets were said to offer campaign coverage in packages starting at €5,000, and several candidates reported paying political analysts or talk shows to mention their names during debates, with one disclosing a payment of €200. Such practices degrade the watchdog role of the media and inflate the cost of politics. Another emerging component of the media landscape is the use of phantom news portals which conduct campaigns or counter-campaigns on behalf of specific candidates by sponsoring articles on social media to influence public opinion. Many of these entities disappear immediately after the elections with the expenditures made to these outlets not subject to verification by the relevant institutions, and their sources of funding remain anonymous and untraced.

Traditional campaign tools remain present but less dominant. Some candidates reported modest spending on printed materials such as business cards, pens, and lighters. About one-third used billboards and city lights, although these were often considered prohibitively expensive and sometimes covered by candidates' supporters. During the focus group discussions with experts and civil society representatives, it was highlighted that during election campaigns that many expenses are covered by third parties who pay on behalf of the parties or candidates, with these transactions often go unreported in official financial disclosures.

On election day itself, candidates also incurred costs to cover campaign staff and commissioners who play a role in safeguarding the vote in municipal counting centres. Given the considerable distrust which exists toward the institutions responsible for vote counting a prevailing perception

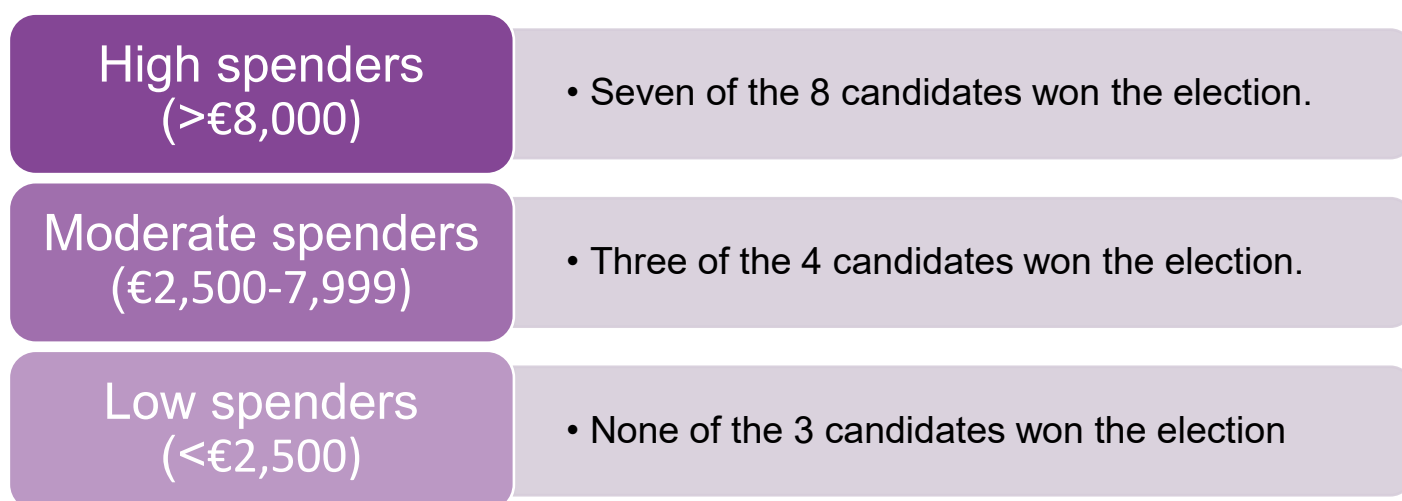
among aspirants is that, in the absence of trusted representatives within municipal vote-counting centres, their ballots may not be counted accurately. Consequently, many candidates deploy financial resources, or seek to influence the recruitment of commissioners, to ensure trusted individuals hold these positions, with the expectation that they will safeguard the candidate's votes or, in some cases, seek to increase them.

While direct evidence of vote-buying is difficult to capture, recent public opinion surveys provide indications of persistent transactional expectations. In a 2024 national poll, nearly one in five citizens reported that political parties or candidates 'often' or 'sometimes' offer jobs, money, or personal favours in exchange for electoral support.<sup>10</sup> This perception was particularly pronounced among younger respondents and those with lower incomes, highlighting how socioeconomic vulnerability reinforces clientelist dynamics. Although such practices are formally prohibited, their persistence indicates that electoral mobilisation in Kosovo remains influenced by informal exchanges that raise the cost of campaigning and reduce the focus on programmatic politics.

## The connection between spending and electoral success

When examining the relationship between how much was spent and election success, our sample suggests that higher spenders are more likely to win. The average expenditure across the 15 candidates interviewed was €9,463, with successful candidates spending on average €12,150, compared to €4,090 among those who were not elected. All candidates spending in excess of €10,000 - including two who spent more than €30,000 - were elected. The data suggests a spending threshold around €5-7,000, above which election prospects significantly improve, which places participants with fewer financial resources at a disadvantage, regardless of their political affiliation.

**Figure 1 – Spending vs electoral success**



It should be noted, however, that these figures are from a small sample and rely on data self-reported by the candidates during interviews. The possibility of underreporting or selective

disclosure cannot be excluded. Furthermore, while higher spending appears to correlate with victory, it's important to note that causation is complex. Big campaigns often attract more funding because the candidate is already strong or well-connected. In our small sample all high-spending candidates had either a strong party affiliation or other electoral advantages. Nonetheless, a clear gap exists: no low-spending candidate won, suggesting at a minimum that insufficient spending can doom a campaign.

## Spending patterns by gender

Interviews with the candidates suggest that women often feel a need to spend more money to improve their chances of victory. Several female interviewees noted that they had to compensate for limited party support and overcome gender biases by investing heavily in their own campaigns. Several female candidates described spending more on advertising, travel, and voter outreach to be taken seriously as contenders. One woman candidate said she felt she “had to work twice as hard – and spend twice as much – as some male rivals” just to achieve a comparable level of visibility. This echoes a broader sentiment that women candidates perceive higher campaign spending as necessary, where possible, to level the playing field in a male-dominated political arena. This was reflected in the data collected from the 15 candidates interviewed, which revealed that female candidates spent substantially more on average than their male counterparts, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Campaign spending by gender and election outcome**

Gender	Total spending (€)	Average spending (€)	Elected (%)
Male	53,450	5,939	44
Female	88,500	14,750	100

The ability to spend generously on a campaign often comes down to personal or network resources - an area where not all candidates are equal. Men tend to benefit more from established party structures and informal networks that provide financial and logistical support, including access to public resources used for political purposes.

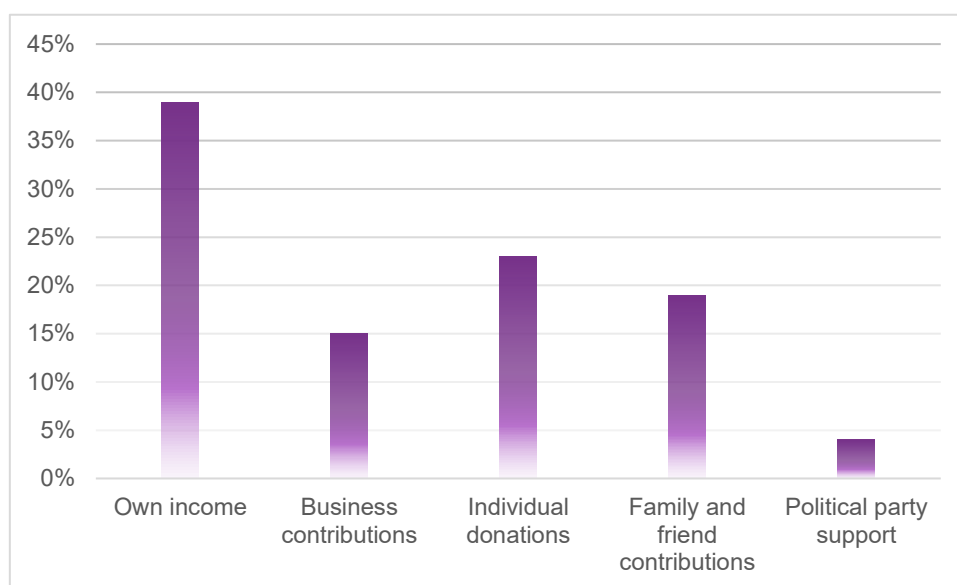
In contrast, women are less likely to be part of these entrenched networks and often receive less institutional backing from their parties. The women in our 2025 sample who won had access to greater financial resources, whether through personal wealth, family support, or strong donor networks. Indeed, some of the interviewees acknowledged that without this substantial backing or access to personal funds, it would have been very hard for them to run a competitive campaign. This highlights a socio-economic barrier: women from privileged backgrounds can marshal the funds needed to win, whereas talented women from less affluent backgrounds struggle to afford the high costs of campaigning needed to compete with male counterparts. Consequently, the need for higher spending can become a filtering mechanism that limits which women can realistically compete for office, reinforcing existing inequalities in political representation.



## Funding sources

Candidates reported mixed funding sources: personal savings (own income), business contributions, individual donors, family, and even political party support (see Graph 2). All five unelected candidates reported their own income as the primary source of funding, but none reported raising individual donations. In contrast, many successful candidates combined personal funds with external contributions, suggesting that candidates who were able to broaden their funding base – by tapping donors or family networks – fared better.

**Graph 2 – Primary funding source**



Candidates who have held positions of executive power, such as directors at municipalities or ministers at the government, can leverage state or institutional resources, public visibility, and established networks long before the official campaign period. These advantages allow them to consolidate support, shape public perception, and mobilise resources more effectively. As a result, they enter the race with a structural head start, while candidates with fewer resources or without institutional positions often remain overshadowed, even within their own parties. Political party support was largely absent with only one successful aspirant mentioning that they received funding through this channel.

## Post-election expenditure

Contrary to the common perception that campaign expenditures end on election day, candidates' financial obligations often extend well beyond the certification of results. Interviews revealed that many candidates face costs directly linked to their campaigns, such as fines imposed by ECAP for electoral rule violations or the repayment of bank loans taken to finance campaign activities. A newer trend identified is the so-called “thank-you tour,” where candidates, accompanied by their campaign teams, visit supporters to express gratitude. While framed as a gesture of appreciation,



this practice also serves a strategic function, maintaining visibility and political goodwill in anticipation of potential early elections - a scenario made more likely by Kosovo's persistent political instability.<sup>11</sup> Some candidates also reported organising community events, such as post-election iftars during Ramadan, further demonstrating how campaign-related spending evolves into practices of political maintenance rather than concluding with the vote count. Elected candidates, meanwhile, face additional costs tied to the absence of adequate office space within the Assembly, forcing them to hold meetings with constituents in external venues at their own expense.

These post-election expenses highlight how campaign-related financial pressures do not dissipate immediately but create lingering economic burdens, even for those who secure a parliamentary seat, which comes with a monthly base salary of €1,722.<sup>12</sup> While Kosovo's economy has experienced steady growth in recent years, with the nominal GDP per capita estimated at around €6,291 in 2025<sup>13</sup>, salaries remain among the lowest in the region. In 2024, the average gross monthly wage stood at €639, while public sector employees earned on average €737. Against this backdrop, the high level of campaign and post-campaign expenditures required to secure and maintain a parliamentary mandate appears misaligned with the relatively modest remuneration associated with the position, raising questions about the financial incentives that drive candidacies. Questions that are even more pertinent considering that parliamentary mandates have consistently been cut short because of political instability.

# Impacts

## On youth political participation

Young people's political engagement is largely shaped by the structure and practices of political parties, as well as access to media and financial resources. How parties organise themselves and manage access to media and training strongly shapes young people's chances of success. Several candidates identified the lack of financial support from parties and the high cost of media exposure, including advertising, public relations, and social media promotion, as key obstacles to successful youth participation. One youth aspirant explained that;

*“Competition is tough with people who have experience and business networks” although they acknowledged that “social media has mitigated this [to an extent].”*

While other participants agreed that some MPs managed to run campaigns with minimal or no spending, relying only on social media and virality to gain public attention and media exposure, gaining visibility remains key for success, and puts young people, without extensive political and business support networks, at a tangible disadvantage. Only 5% of the legislators elected in February 2025 were under 29, the legal definition of youth in Kosovo.<sup>14</sup> Political engagement also requires a significant amount of time, which can negatively impact professional careers and other personal activities. Candidates noted that parties frequently do not provide sufficient compensation, which can result in lost economic opportunities for young people.

## On women's political participation

In the 2025 parliamentary elections, 45 out of the 120 members elected to the Assembly were women<sup>15</sup> with 87% securing their mandates directly, based on the number of votes received from citizens. Only six entered parliament through the application of the gender quota. The quota provision, which guarantees that at least 30% of seats are allocated to the less represented gender, has served as an important corrective measure to ensure women's political representation. However, the fact that the overwhelming majority of elected women won their seats without relying on the quota points to a gradual normalisation of women's participation in political life. But it is one that requires them to overcome a significant number of gender specific obstacles.

Most candidates perceived financial cost as a significant barrier to women's political participation. Female aspirants often rely on personal savings or direct family support to finance their campaigns. As one candidate explained, “we do not receive donations from businesses because of the fear of informal requests that may follow once in office.” Companies frequently prefer to support male candidates who are seen as able to “return the investment. This aligns with common, though largely unverified, perceptions in Kosovo that women are viewed as less prone to corruption than men.<sup>16</sup> One party list member explained that

*“Business networks do not view women as figures who can bring benefit; large amounts go to men, as they are expected to pay back.”*

Within political parties, women also report lower levels of support, as some party structures hesitate to back women candidates on the assumption that they may be less “cooperative” in the future. A lack of property ownership and personal assets further entrenches financial inequalities. In Kosovo, many women do not own property in their name, preventing them from accessing mortgage loans for campaign financing. This means that financial backing from powerful family members or networks, is often the only option for women looking to compete on a more level financial playing field. According to one interviewee “women who have strong husbands advance”.

Beyond financial constraints, social pressures and the prevailing political culture are also barriers for women aspirants. In political meetings, women are often marginalised or “[made to feel] uncomfortable in male-dominated spaces”. It was noted that male candidates can campaign in a wide range of venues, whereas women candidates often avoid places with alcohol consumption or rowdy supporters. This limits the range of safe and acceptable public spaces available to them. Participation in campaign events is also made more difficult by societal and familial expectations that women should be primarily responsible for the household and childcare needs.

Women also face heightened scrutiny in the media and online during campaigns, with gender-oriented attacks increasingly common.<sup>17</sup> Mistakes are disproportionately amplified as one candidate noted how “small errors are misused and judged far more harshly.” Another female interviewee observed that “you often find yourself only as decoration,” highlighting the social expectations that force women to work twice as hard to gain respect. Many feel pressured to invest more in their public appearance as a result. One candidate noted

*“The cost of being a woman in public spaces is higher – a woman needs a larger wardrobe; men can wear two suits throughout the campaign.”*

## On democracy

The cost of politics represents a critical dimension that directly affects the quality of democracy. High campaign and political activity expenditures create barriers to broad citizen participation, favours candidates with substantial financial resources, and reduces political pluralism. An expensive political system increases the risk of dependence on narrow economic interests, exacerbates gender and social inequalities in representation, and undermines public trust in the democratic process and political institutions.

Respondents emphasised that high costs result in a parliament dominated by wealthy individuals. For the most part, political recruitment no longer occurs through gradual growth within parties but through the direct entry of candidates with financial means. This results in politicians with less well-established ideals or political experience being preferred.

These well-resourced candidates, or those with networks that can support their access to resources, often perceive their mandate as an investment and feel empowered to use their position for narrow benefits. This increases the likelihood of the legislature adopting “tailor-made” legislation or MPs selling their votes on key questions to the highest bidder. Business backing often comes with expectations of favours in return, typically in the form of public tenders or other benefits. As a result, politics risks remaining in the hands of elite interest groups who are not interested in strengthening the principles of transparency and democratic accountability.

High campaign expenses have also weakened the popular perception of politics as a contest of ideas and values. Candidates noted that political engagement has been reduced to financial transactions, where voters frequently demand jobs and personal favours in exchange for support. This makes political representation more dependent on clientelism and private interests, while sidelining politics as a space for ideological debate and development. And candidates viewed this as a trend that is moving only in one direction. Echoing the views of others, one respondent argued that the relentless rise in costs has created the perception that,

*“Money is deciding who becomes an MP.”*

# Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that the cost of political participation in Kosovo is high and continues to shape the democratic process in ways that reinforce inequality and limit equitable representation.

At the individual level, candidates' financial burden is substantial. To sustain their campaigns, many must rely on personal savings, family contributions, or bank loans. Those with greater resources - whether derived from personal wealth, party backing, incumbency advantages, or prior executive functions in municipalities or government - enjoy clear electoral benefits. This has particular implications for youth aspirants who encounter systemic disadvantages due to weaker networks, fewer financial resources, and limited access to media platforms. Women face even steeper barriers, with unequal access to sponsorship, and additional burdens linked to family responsibilities and social expectations, inhibiting their political competitiveness and hindering more balanced political representation.

At the systemic level, the high cost of politics risks undermining the very foundations of Kosovo's democracy. Instead of a contest of ideas and policies, electoral competition is increasingly shaped by financial power and clientelist exchanges. This distorts representation in parliament, entrenches dependence on interest groups, and erodes public trust in democratic institutions. Without reforms to reduce financial barriers, strengthen transparency, and ensure equitable access to political competition, Kosovo risks entrenching a political class defined more by wealth and connections than by ideas, integrity, and inclusiveness.

# Recommendations

To address challenges identified in the report, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Introduce clear caps on individual candidate spending during election campaigns. Parties should enforce internal rules limiting expenditures, while the Law on the Financing of Political Parties should be amended to require full disclosure of candidates' income and expenses. This would enhance transparency, curb excessive spending, and ensure fairer competition.
- Guarantee the independence and resources of auditors to review financial reports submitted by individual candidates and strengthen enforcement of spending caps by applying stricter, more consistent penalties for underreporting and illicit financing, making audits a genuine deterrent against malpractice rather than a formality.
- Any individual, organisation, or online platform that publishes, sponsors, or promotes content mentioning political parties, electoral subjects, or candidates during the campaign period—whether directly or indirectly—should be legally required to register and disclose sources of funding and expenditures related to political or campaign-related activities. These entities should be subject to the same transparency and reporting obligations as political parties and candidates. Such regulation would help prevent anonymous campaign spending, limit covert influence operations, and increase accountability in the digital information space, ensuring that voters are aware of who funds and produces political content online.
- Support young candidates through training, mentorship, and bursaries that reduce dependence on personal wealth. Require parties to dedicate part of their public financing to youth engagement and political participation, ensuring young voices are systematically included in political life.
- Go beyond quotas by expanding financial and logistical support for women candidates. Parties should be encouraged to adopt gender-sensitive budgeting and support indirect costs such as childcare and safe campaigning spaces, enabling women to compete on equal terms.
- Civil society should intensify efforts to raise public awareness on the influence of money in politics by monitoring and making public candidates' expenditures, particularly on social media. Regular reporting, fact-checking, and data-driven campaigns can inform citizens about excessive spending and clientelist practices, empowering them to demand transparency and accountability from political actors in their everyday interactions with them both during and outside electoral periods.

# References

- <sup>1</sup> Individuals are disqualified from running if they hold positions that could compromise the impartiality of the electoral process—such as public officials with special status, diplomats, election commissioners, or members of the Election Complaints and Appeals Panel (ECAP). Additionally, persons who have been convicted of criminal offences and sentenced to at least one year of imprisonment within the past three years, or who have failed to comply with ECAP or Central Election Commission decisions, are also ineligible.
- <sup>2</sup> Law No 03/L-174 on Financing Political Parties.
- <sup>3</sup> The law stipulates strict limits on private contributions: individuals may donate up to €2,000 per year, while legal persons may contribute up to €10,000. Furthermore, contributions of unverifiable origin must be reported within the legal deadline; failure to do so results in the forfeiture of such funds to the state budget.
- <sup>4</sup> Law No. 04/L-212 on the Financing of Political Entities, Article 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Annual reports must be audited in accordance with national accounting standards by licensed auditors, who are selected via an open public process led by the CEC Office.
- <sup>6</sup> Central Election Commission. 2025. 'Electoral Campaign Financial Reports'. Available at <https://kqz-ks.org/an/political-entity-services/audited-electoral-campaign-financial-reports/>
- <sup>7</sup> Political parties that misuse funds or breach financial rules can be fined between €4-40,000. Individuals responsible for violations within political parties may face fines ranging from €1-3,000, while mayoral or independent candidates may be fined up to €10,000. In cases where individuals or legal persons provide unreported or improperly documented goods or services, the law provides for fines between €1-15,000, depending on the nature of the offence.
- <sup>8</sup> Law No. 08/L-228 on General Elections in the Republic of Kosovo.
- <sup>9</sup> Central Election Commission. 2024. 'Decision on the limitation of campaign expenses for the Elections for the Assembly of Kosovo'. Available at [https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Vendimet-44-2024\\_al.pdf](https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Vendimet-44-2024_al.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Center for Insights in Survey Research. 2024. 'National Survey of Kosovo'. International Republican Institute. Available at <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-Kosovo-National-Poll.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> In the six parliamentary elections held since the declaration of independence, the Assembly has been dissolved early on five occasions, with only the most recent term being completed in full.
- <sup>12</sup> Hoti, I. 2023. "Salaries of MPs of the Kosovo Assembly according to the coefficient 105 euros". Kallxo. 1 February. Available at <https://kallxo.com/lajm/paga-e-deputeteve-te-kuvendit-te-kosoves-sipas-koeficientit-105-euro/>
- <sup>13</sup> World Bank Group. "GDP per capita - Kosovo". Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=XK>
- <sup>14</sup> Data obtained from the Central Election Commission via email correspondence.
- <sup>15</sup> Central Election Commission. 2025. 'Final National Election Results 2025'. Available at <https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2.Ndarja-e-uleseve-ne-Kuvend-dhe-kandidatet-e-zgjedhur-2.pdf>
- <sup>16</sup> Reznqi, A. 2024. 'The gender dimension of corruption'. Kosovo Law Institute. Available at <https://kli-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ENG-The-Gender-Dimension-of-Corruption-2.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> Democracy for Development. 2025. 'Gender-based disinformation and misogynous language in online media' Available at <https://d4d-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Online-Gendered-Disinformation-ALB.pdf>

# Annex 1

The Declaration of Campaign Expenditures of Political Parties submitted to the CEC provides a comprehensive look into how political entities in Kosovo financed and spent resources during the last parliamentary elections. According to the data, the total declared income for all 28 political entities was €2,249,117.37, while total expenditures amounted to €3,756,583.80. These discrepancies between reported incomes and expenditures suggests potential underreporting or reliance on undeclared sources that warrants further investigation by oversight institutions.

Whilst analysis of the figures reported point to an average cost per vote of €4, it also shows significant variation between entities, with some spending less than €1 per vote and others over €60. LVV which secured the most seats declared the highest expenditure, totalling €1.7 million, a cost per vote of €4.29. Whilst the PDK and the LDK, who came second and third respectively, had cost-per-vote figures of €4.75 and €2.09. A notable outlier in the official reporting is Opre Roma Kosova, which spent €25,196.00 to secure only 384 votes, resulting in a cost per vote of €65.61—by far the highest among all parties. In contrast, Naša Bošnjačka Koalicija achieved remarkable efficiency, spending only €150 for 1,553 votes, a cost per vote of just €0.10.

**Table 2: Cost per vote during 2025 elections (by political party)**

Political entity	Votes	Percentage	Income (€)	Expenditure (€)	Cost per vote (€)
Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE!	396,787	42.30%	1,112,143.74	1,702,036.55	4.29
PARTIA DEMOKRATIKE E KOSOVËS - PDK	196,474	20.95%	557,277.98	932,964.39	4.75
LIDHJA DEMOKRATIKE E KOSOVËS - LDK	171,357	18.27%	94,160.15	358,515.77	2.09
AAK - ALEANCA PËR ARDHMËRINË E KOSOVËS NISMA - Nisma Socialdemokrate, Konservatorët, Intelktualët	66,256	7.06%	18,157.00	337,237.35	5.09
SRPSKA LISTA	39,915	4.26%	271,480.42	147,604.66	3.70
Koalicioni për Familje	20,023	2.13%	22,000.00	72,079.74	3.60
KOSOVA DEMOKRATIK TÛRK PARTISI	4,824	0.51%	5,128.46	21,223.45	4.40
INICIATIVA E RE DEMOKRATIKE E KOSOVËS - IRDK	4,688	0.50%	17,589.59	23,437.18	5.00



NOVA DEMOKRATSKA STRANKA	4,158	0.44%	14,681.01	33,290.76	8.01
Za Slobodu Pravdu i Opstanak	4,139	0.44%	61,000.00	45,687.79	11.04
Koalicija Vakrat	3,471	0.37%	4,183.25	22,013.25	6.34
SRPSKA DEMOKRATIJA	3,271	0.35%	2,265.00	2,614.89	0.80
PARTIA LIBERALE EGJIPTIANE-PLE	3,251	0.35%	4,000.00	4,000.00	1.23
SOCIJALDEMOKRATSKA UNIJA - SDU	3,042	0.32%	-	4,897.91	1.61
PARTIA E ASHKALINJËVE PËR INTEGRIM	2,196	0.23%	900.00	900.00	0.41
PDAK-LPB	2,056	0.22%	2,497.10	2,497.10	1.21
Srpski narodni pokret	1,846	0.20%	3,095.00	4,143.58	2.24
Yenilikçi Türk Hareket Partisi	1,800	0.19%	1,210.80	1,203.00	0.67
Jedinstvena Goranska Partija	1,734	0.18%	27,379.87	8,448.59	4.87
Naša Bošnjačka Koalicija (Naša Inicijativa i Bošnjačka stranka)	1,553	0.17%	150.00	150.00	0.10
PARTIA ROME E BASHKUAR E KOSOVËS	1,350	0.14%	-	1,597.30	1.18
FJALA	899	0.10%	1,680.00	1,652.54	1.84
Kosova Adalet Türk Partisi	642	0.07%			-
Partia Balli Kombëtar Demokrat Shqiptar	621	0.07%	1,942.00	2,192.00	3.53
GRADJANSKA INICIJATIVA NARODNA PRAVDA	620	0.07%	-	-	-
Partija kosovskih Srba	462	0.05%	-	-	-
Opre Roma Kosova	384	0.04%	25,196.00	25,196.00	65.61
Fatmir Bytyqi	191	0.02%	1,000.00	1,000.00	5.24
<b>Total</b>	<b>938,010</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2,249,117.37</b>	<b>3,756,583.80</b>	<b>4.00</b>

Based on the publicly available declarations of election campaign expenditures the largest source of income for political parties is donations and contributions, which accounted for about 65% of all declared income. This heavy reliance on private contributions highlights the crucial role of individuals and entities in financing campaigns - an area often vulnerable to opaque practices and undue political influence. In-kind contributions in goods and services and public funding through the state budget were almost equally significant in terms of their financial contributions. Political party membership fees contributed just €462.

In terms of expenditure, advertising, representation, and conferences were by far the largest expense— this category alone made up over 64% of all campaign spending - showing the importance of visibility through media campaigns, events, and promotional activities.

**Table 3: Incomes and expenditures of political parties (by category)**

Incomes	Amount in Euro	Percentage
Revenues from the public funds	387,378.93	17.22%
Membership revenues	462.00	0.02%
Donations and contributions	1,469,451.53	65.33%
In-kind contributions in goods and services	357,709.48	15.90%
Receipts released from deferred revenues	28,282.18	1.26%
Other revenues	5,833.25	0.26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,249,117.37</b>	
Expenditures	Amount in Euro	Percentage
Salaries and compensation	180,989.37	4.82%
Transportation	212,369.03	5.65%
Advertising, representation and conferences	2,420,641.38	64.44%
Purchase of goods	48,667.70	1.30%
General	849,876.12	22.62%
Miscellaneous	44,040.20	1.17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,756,583.80</b>	

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