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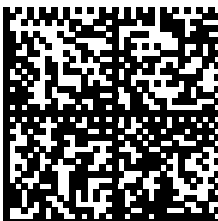
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ZINXHIRI I PROVËS

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E MËPARSHMJA	—
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The man who declared independence, under the shadow of conviction



On February 17, 2008, Hashim Thaçi stepped up to the podium in the Assembly of Kosovo and uttered the words that would secure his place in the history of Europe's youngest state.

"We, the democratically elected leaders of our people, hereby declare Kosovo an independent and democratic state," Thaçi said.

At the time, he was 40 years old, served as Kosovo's prime minister and had been the political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army.

The image of him in the Assembly became one of the defining images of February 17.

Eighteen years later, another image of Thaçi is entering Kosovo's historical record.

On September 16, 2026, he stood in a courtroom in The Hague, where he heard the trial panel of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers find him guilty of war crimes.

The judgment stated: "The trial panel sentences you to a single sentence of 25 years' imprisonment."

Neither image erases the other; on the contrary, following this judgment, they will coexist.

The question is what impact this will have not only on Thaçi's legacy, but also on how the history of the state he helped found will be interpreted.

What did the court in The Hague examine?

Mark Ellis, executive director of the International Bar Association, says the legal answer leaves little room for doubt: these are two entirely separate matters.

të fundit



Familja e Haki Imerit reagon për Specialen: Tani pritet Apeli...



Haradinaj: Diaspora, përkrah UÇK-së nga koha e luftës te...



Lutfi Haziri reagon pas identifikimit të eshtrave të veprimtarëve të LD...



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NATO përshëndet marrëveshjen për sigurinë e Groenland...



Njeriu që shpalli pavarësinë, nën hijen e dënimit në Hagë



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According to him, the mission of the Specialist Chambers was to determine the criminal responsibility of four individuals — Thaçi and his fellow fighters Kadri Veseli, Rexhep Selimi and Jakup Krasniqi — not to judge the state that was subsequently established.

Ellis told Radio Free Europe: "They found these four individuals guilty of war crimes and of their individual responsibility. That is what the law establishes. It should have no other impact on the state."

As for independence, the legal answer had been given years earlier.

In 2010, the International Court of Justice concluded that the February 17 Declaration had not violated international law.

The Specialist Chambers also drew a clear line: the goal of Kosovo's independence was not a matter of criminal responsibility. The judgment focused on crimes committed against people perceived as opponents of the KLA.

However, what is clearly separated in the courtroom can become more easily blurred in the political battle over history.

A judgment that may take on a life of its own

According to Abit Hoxha, a researcher at the University of Agder in Norway, this is precisely where the judgment may take on a life of its own.

Not by changing Kosovo's legal status, but by becoming part of the much older dispute over how its independence is interpreted.

Hoxha stresses that the decision could leave "a major stain" on this history and expects Serbia and Russia, which continue to oppose Kosovo's independence, to use Thaçi's conviction to call into question the narrative on which Kosovo has built its statehood and to take that interpretation even further.

Hoxha told Radio Free Europe's Expose program: "Countries such as Cyprus, Romania, Spain, Greece... will find it much more difficult to recognize Kosovo's independence because of this argument. Everyone who opposes Kosovo will say that the foundations of the state of Kosovo were built on war crimes. That is the greatest danger I see."

When it comes to Thaçi himself, Hoxha uses a stronger description. He calls him "the father of Kosovo's independence" — not only because he read the Declaration, but because of the role he played throughout the process that led to it.

According to Hoxha, this is a role that the judgment may complicate, but cannot erase from history.

That is because Thaçi's path ran through some of the most decisive stages in Kosovo's recent history.

From his political activity and leadership role in the KLA, he moved on to international negotiations over Kosovo and, after the war, to the leadership of its institutions.

He was prime minister when independence was declared, later president, and one of the central figures in the dialogue with Serbia and in relations with the West.

Two ways of remembering Thaçi

However, this long political history also raises the question of how far the judgment in The Hague can be separated from Thaçi's legacy.

According to Armend Bekaj, a researcher at Uppsala University in Sweden, there is no single answer to how Thaçi will be remembered.

Bekaj told Expose: "For many, Hashim Thaçi will continue to be the hero of war and peace, but at the same time, for many others, he will be a person who was found guilty of war crimes. I believe that this court has unfortunately provided ample material for today's and tomorrow's politicians, academics and journalists to write entire volumes in support of one extreme as well as the other."

For those who will view Thaçi solely through the judgment, Bekaj adds that the context must also be kept in mind: his journey from the KLA to independence was accompanied by strong support from the West, particularly from the United States.

As evidence of this relationship, he also points to the appearances in Thaçi's defense by former senior US officials such as Wesley Clark and James Rubin.

Bekaj said: "Hashim Thaçi and the other KLA leaders, and not only those of the KLA, were partners at every step — from the time of civil resistance and armed resistance to the establishment of Kosovo as a state — and worked in extraordinarily close cooperation with their Euro-Atlantic friends."

Should the West reassess that period?

This partnership takes the question beyond Thaçi himself.

If he was one of the main figures with whom the United States and its allies worked on the path toward independence, does the judgment in The Hague compel the West to reassess that period as well?

Charles Kupchan, a former official on the United States National Security Council and a professor at Georgetown University, does not think so.

Kupchan told Expose: "...because Thaçi made that transition, right? From a wartime leader, now convicted of

atrocities, he became a civilian leader who helped Kosovo move toward independence and build its relations with the United States, European powers and others. Therefore, I do not think this will change."

According to him, the verdict may cause a short-term shock, but not a blow that would alter Kosovo's international position.

He does not foresee countries withdrawing their recognition, damage to partnerships with the West or obstruction of the Euro-Atlantic path. According to him, the normalization process with Serbia is not called into question either.

Moreover, in the long term, he sees the possibility of a positive effect if the process is viewed as proof that justice is applied equally to everyone.

Kupchan said: "Kosovo was fighting to defend itself against ethnic cleansing, and for that reason the war for independence was a just war. However, a just war does not justify war crimes. One injustice cannot be justified by another. If Thaçi and other members of the KLA committed war crimes — even though the cause for which they fought was just — then I think the court did what it was supposed to do."

From the "George Washington of Kosovo" to The Hague

This contrast did not go unnoticed outside Kosovo either.

In reports on the judgment, international media described Thaçi not only as a former president and former KLA leader, but also as one of the central figures of independence.

AFP summed up this transformation in a headline: "From 'Kosovo's George Washington' to convict in The Hague." The comparison stems from a description Joe Biden used for Thaçi when he was vice president of the United States.

The Associated Press recalled that Thaçi, who returned from Switzerland to join the war in Kosovo, was later embraced by Western leaders, took part in the Rambouillet negotiations in 1999 and was regarded as one of the figures who could lead Kosovo toward independence.

The Guardian wrote that Thaçi, who once held hard-line positions, later shifted toward a more moderate political profile.

The Times also summed up the contrast in its headline: "'The Snake', Kosovo hero, convicted of war crimes."

A legacy that now has two sides

When asked which image of Thaçi will prevail decades from now — the man who helped lead Kosovo toward independence or the man convicted of war crimes — Kupchan does not choose between them.

Kupchan said: "As with other leaders who have done courageous and valuable things but have also been accused of criminal offenses, including war crimes, both sides exist in Thaçi's case as well. It is a complicated legacy. Thaçi will be remembered for the role he played in leading Kosovo toward independence. But at the same time, his legacy will now also be linked to this judgment."

These two moments are separated by just over 18 years.

Which of them will carry greater weight in how Thaçi is remembered remains a question for the years ahead.

However, September 16 did not change only his legacy.

In the same courtroom, Jakup Krasniqi was sentenced to 25 years in prison, Kadri Veseli to 18 and Rexhep Selimi to 13 — all for war crimes.

In Kosovo, the judgment was met with strong reactions and hope that the final word may not yet have been spoken.

In the end, after more than three years of court proceedings and a judgment imposing a combined total of 81 years in prison on the four former KLA leaders, attention now turns to the appeal. / RFE

Shtuar më 20.09.2026 13:59

Tags: conviction , Kosovo , man of the 17th , shadow





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