

Hashim Thaci or When the Little Red-Cap's Wolf is Tamed

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Hashim Thaci was only 31 years old when he became the indispensable partner of the NATO in Kosovo. Six years ago, former leader of the controversial Kosovo Liberation Army converted himself into a presentable politician as leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo. Now he is the main opponent of Ibrahim Rugova. The man of extraordinary times tries hard to become the man of ordinary times ...

Born to be wild



Hashim Thaci

Hashim Thaci was born on the 24th of April, 1968 in Brocna in municipality of Srbica (northwest of Drenica valley). According to his brief profile published in Kosovo Assembly web site, Thaci studied philosophy and history (in the University of Pristina), and then attended postgraduate studies in the University of Zurich, in history of Southeast Europe and international relations departments. According to other less official sources however, he was not a student model...

A certain Beqir Osmani from Drenica remembers well the youth of Thaci: "We know well who he is. We know what he did, how he was in school and what kind of education he received. Everyone on the Kosovska Mitrovica market had great problems with Thaci, who stole goods from traders. Even the customers complained. He fought in pubs of Mitrovica and Srbica. He has no education at all. He only attended two first classes of a certain secondary school. Today however he meets with international politicians. What he can actually discuss with them is far from being clear".

Serbian officials however know him from more "honourable deed" than commonplace thefts and quarrels in public areas.

During his university years, Thaci was one of the Albanian student leaders, and the first student president of the parallel university in Pristina. Kosovo Albanians, full of resentment over the 1989 annulment of the autonomy of Kosovo by Slobodan Milosevic, established in early 1990's underground administrative and educational institutions.

By 1993, in Switzerland, Thaci joined the Kosovo Albanian political emigration. He was one of the founders of the Marxist-Leninist organisation People's Movement of Kosovo, which is believed to have created the **Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK)**.

From 1993, as a member of the inner circle of the UCK, Thaci alias Snake (Gjarpni) was responsible for securing financial means, training and armament. After he completed his military training in Albania, he was engaged in a number of terrorist actions in Kosovo.

Thaci is also known as the organiser of the Drenica-Group. The group controlled between 10-15 per cent of criminal activities in Kosovo in connection with smuggling of arms, stolen cars, oil and cigarettes as well as with prostitution, the establishment and maintenance of connections with the Albanian, Czech and Macedonian mafia. Other than that, Thaci's sister is married to Sejdiija Bajrush, one of the leaders of the notorious Albanian mafia.

On the 25th of May, 1993, Thaci, along with the Drenica-Group members Rafet Rama, Jakup Nuri, Sami Ljustku and Ilijaz Kadriju, participated in the attack on the railroad crossing in Glogovac (central Kosovo) when four Serbian policemen were killed and three seriously wounded. Thereafter, according to the deposition of Rafet Rama on the 11th July, 1997 in the District Court of Pristina, Thaci and others went into hiding in wood in Drenica. Yet, they often visited Albania, Switzerland and Kosovo.

On the 17th of June, 1996, Thaci with other accomplices opened fire on a Serbian police car on the road Mitrovica-Pec in Sipolje (north of Kosovo). Same year, according to the deposition of Rama, Thaci and his gang threw hand grenades into the Serbian barracks "Milos Obilic" in Vucitrn (central Kosovo).

In July 1997, Thaci was sentenced, in absentia, by the District Court of Pristina to 10 years in prison for criminal acts of terrorism. In February 1998, a central arrest warrant was issued in his name. Thaci was condemned for having ambushed and attacked patrolling Serbian policemen.

Wrath of Thaci not only fell upon Serbian officials, but Albanian dissidents as well. Chris Hedges from *New York Times* accused Hashim Thaci and his two confidants, Azem Syla the UCK's Minister of Defence and Xhavit Haliti the Ambassador to Albania, of murdering top commanders within the UCK itself and other potentially opponent Kosovo Albanian nationalists ("Leaders of Kosovo Rebels Tied to Deadly Power Play", 25 June 1999). Hedges interviewed for his article a former member of the secessionist movement in Switzerland, Rifat Haxhijaj, who stated: "When the war [against Serb authority] started, everyone wanted to be the chief. For the leadership this was never just a war against Serbs - it was also a struggle for power". In 1997, a



**Hashim Thaci with the officers of
his the Kosovo
Liberation Army**

Kosovo Albanian reporter, Ali Uka, who was a supporter of the Kosovo independence movement though too critical for the taste of its leadership, was found dead in his apartment in Tirana. His roommate at the time of his death was no other than Thaci the Snake. According to former UCK officials, Thaci conducted assassinations in cooperation with Tirana, which often placed members of its secret police "at the disposal of the rebel commanders". According to Bujar Bukoshi, once the Prime Minister of the Rugova government in exile, "Cadavers have never been an obstacle to Thaci's career". In 1995, following the Dayton Accord, which putting an end to the Yugoslavia War did not mention at all the Kosovo problem, Kosovo Albanians began to lose their faith in Ibrahim Rugova and his passive resistance strategy. There must be some other way to fight against Serbians. That way was the UCK, which claimed for the first time in February 1996 the assault to a Serbian refugees' camp in Bosnia. In January 1997, Serbian rector of the University of Pristina was seriously wounded by a trapped car. The perpetrator was again the UCK. In 1997, on 28th of November, the symbolic day of the Independence of Albanian people, during the funeral of a teacher killed by Serbian soldiers in Ludovic (central Kosovo), the UCK made its first public appearance.

After Serbian forces killed 53 members of the Adem Jeshari family in Drenica in March 1998, because they suspected Jeshari of being a UCK leader, suddenly tens of thousands of Kosovo Albanians, who had used to support Rugova's passive resistance, transferred their loyalty and took up arms with the UCK. In February 1998, the Serbian police and the Yugoslavian Army entered Kosovo, destroyed many villages and caused 2000 of victims and the flight of 250.000 refugees. From April until September, there were serious quarrels between

Yugoslavian troops and the UCK. The second Kosovo war began.

On the 15th of May, 1998, Rugova smiled at cameras as he shook the hand of Milosevic in Belgrade. The day of the UCK was finally there ...

However during the summer offensive of the Yugoslavian Army, the UCK had to endure serious military reverses. The man, who helped its reorganisation, was Thaci.

On the 13th of October, Richard Holbrook, American negotiator and Milosevic signed an accord. Milosevic conceded the retreat of Serbian forces, the ceasefire and the arrival of 2000 "unarmed controllers" of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Three days after, the accord was categorically rejected by the UCK. Quarrels resumed. The UCK bade that fight bring more.

And it did. By the autumn of 1998, Milosevic was not the man of the Dayton Accord anymore. Serbia launched the winter offensive, which started by Christmas night and culminated with the massacre of Racak where 45 Albanians were killed as revenge for the actions that the UCK undertook against Serbian security forces. The Western world found the evil of the story: Milosevic and Serbians.

By the autumn 1998, the language of the UCK changed as well. It was not the Marxist-Leninist movement of old times anymore. The UCK also revised its plans of "Greater Albania" since it saw what a deploring political and social situation welcomed Kosovo Albanian refugees in Albania. The UCK turned its initial ideal of "Greater Albania" into "Greater Kosovo", though skilfully hid its dream from the international community. The Western world found the good of the story: the UCK and Kosovo Albanians.

The year of 1999 was to change the fate of the UCK as well as that of Hashim Thaci, now political leader of the Army, for good.



Fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army

Why decorate the bandit with sheriff badge?

What a change it was. Only two years ago, the Western world called the UCK extreme or terrorist and condemned its acts as criminal, only comparable to those of the Red Khmers, who massacred their own people in Cambodia. The CIA added the UCK on the list of world terrorist organisations.

In less than a year, the UCK was promoted from a terrorist organisation to a resistance movement. And its new political leader, 31-year old Hashim Thaci, was going to gather the fruits of that sudden change in Western attitude.

Ibrahim Rugova, who denied even the existence of the UCK or at the best denounced it as Serbian secret services' trick, did not want to be a mere witness of the unpreventable ascension of Hashim Thaci. In fact, the ultimate pacifist did what no one could have ever dreamt of him. By summer 1998, a certain Ahmet Krasniqi, a former colonel in the Yugoslavian Army, was given \$4.5 million by Rugova's administration in order to establish a rival military structure: the **Armed Forces of the Kosovo Republic (FARK)**. Tension between the UCK and the FARK did not last for long. According to the *New York Times* columnist, on the 21st of September, Krasniqi was eliminated by the UCK or by Albanian secret police or both in Tirana.

Hashim Thaci, as head of the Albanian delegation, was invited to Rambouillet pour parleys in Paris on the 6th of February, 1999. Rugova was there only to witness his own decline. Thaci stubbornly refused to accept the Western proposition for the autonomy of Kosovo. Negotiations resumed on the 19th and ended with the ratification of the accord by the UCK on the 23rd. The document was a turning point. First of all, it meant the international recognition for the UCK. It foresaw an interim government of Kosovo including the three major parties: the **Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)** of Rugova, the United Democratic League (LBD) allied with the UCK and of course the UCK itself. And the Prime Minister was going to be Hashim Thaci. The document also promised a referendum, which would however never take place.

On the 24th of March, the NATO started bombing former Yugoslavia. During the intervention, the UCK became a kind of "land troops" of General Wesley Clark, supreme commander of NATO forces. After all, that was necessary: Who else but the UCK would have known better the land and pinpointed vital military targets to NATO planes to bomb? Yet the NATO chose to co-operate with a highly suspect and unpredictable partner.

After 78-day NATO bombing, by June 1999, the **Kosovo Force (KFOR)** and the **UN Mission (UNMIK)** entered Kosovo. Hashim Thaci, self-proclaimed Prime Minister of



Ibrahim Rugova and Hashim Thaci



Madeleine Albright with Hashim Thaci

Kosovo was triumphant. “Madeleine Albright is in love with Thaci. Jamie Rubin is his best friend. It's not helpful. Thaci arrived here with the impression that he has the full weight of the American government behind him. He believes he has earned the right to rule”, stated the first head of the UNMIK, Sergio Vieira de Mello. The UCK celebrated the victory everywhere in Kosovo as if the NATO did nothing for it. Albanian houses and official buildings were decorated with UCK banners. Unlike Rugova, Thaci was everywhere in Kosovo to take care of his fellow Albanians.

However, Serbian officials denounce still today that because of Thaci's UCK, targets, which were far from being military, were bombed by the NATO and left Yugoslavian territories ravaged with several civil victims. In March 2000, the Voice of Russia accused the UCK of “built-in tension”. According to the radio, in December 1998, the UCK deliberately killed four Serbian policemen in Racak (central Kosovo) in order to provoke Serbian forces to retaliation. The radio went on that Serbian forces did not kill 45 Albanian farmers but UCK soldiers. The UCK, deceiving the international community, tried to prepare the field for the NATO aggression on Yugoslavia. Serbia insisted that its forces made some “gruesome discoveries” when they liberated the town of

Klecka (south of Pristina) in August 1998.

The NATO, proud of having prevented Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, after June 1999, found itself accused of supporting Albanian counter-cleansing against Serbians and Roma Gypsies.

Gracko was a Serbian village not far from Pristina, surrounded by Albanian villages and controlled by UCK forces. On the 23rd of July, 14 Serbian farmers while harvesting their crops were killed by UCK soldiers, according to Gracko inhabitants. Thaci condemned the assault and denied any responsibility. The incident took place six weeks after the NATO entry in Kosovo and only one month after the signature of the “Undertaking of Demilitarisation and Transformation of the UCK” between Thaci and British General Mike Jackson, head of the KFOR. Ironically many of the Gracko inhabitants were Serbian refugees from Bosnia and Krajina region of Croatia. Those, who were allegedly expelled by troops under the command of General Ante Gotovina who is currently at The Hague to answer the allegations against him. The difference, if not numerical (150 victims to 14), must be political. The NATO, which showed Serbians as the evil of the story and thus justified its intervention on international platform, could not accept that its closest partner was not that angelic after all. This would have annulled the legitimacy of its own intervention.

The fatal mistake was that the international community reduced the conflict of Kosovo to a black-and-white mentality with angelic figures on one hand and demonic figures on the other. However the Balkans as a whole is abundant of grey zones. History itself can testify.

It is still claimed that during his premiership, Thaci used former UCK soldiers in elimination of his political opponents, in creating an ethnically pure Kosovo forcing Serbians to live in

enclaves. Thaci thought differently of the newly formed **Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC)**, mainly formed by ex-UCK men. The KPC, in theory a civil guard, was to become the official Kosovo Army. Pleurat Sejdiu, former UCK representative to London, suggested that the UCK was ordering its regional commanders not to entirely decommission its ranks. Serbians denounced Thaci for organised prostitution, narcotics and arms traffic. Thaci allegedly conducted his political campaigns and fed Albanian terrorist groups by those means.

However the visible face of Thaci was totally different. On the 8th of March, 1999, the pragmatic hard-liner founded the Party for the Democratic Progress of Kosovo, later the **Democratic Party of Kosovo (DPK)**. The party program was not different from that of Rugova's LDP: Social, political and economic development, amelioration of health care and education, security and of course full independence of Kosovo. The DPK was supposed to gather those, who were disappointed with “rugovism”.

What Thaci did not count with was that there were also those, who were disappointed with “thacism”.

Some ex-UCK men found Thaci's new line too soft. January and February 2000 saw the birth of two new UCK-designed Albanian guerrillas: the National



A trooper of the special unit of Kosovo Liberation Army

Liberation Army of Macedonia in northwest of Macedonia and the Liberation Army of Presevo-Medvedja-Bujanovac in southwest of Serbia. Those former UCK-cells were to be engaged in insurgencies in Presevo Valley in Serbia (2000) and in Macedonia (2001). In March 2000, Ramush Haradinaj, ex-UCK commandant, left the DPK to

found his own **Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK)**. It is claimed that Haradinaj's entry on political scene was sponsored by Britain and the USA in order to split the UCK base. Haradinaj was also the deputy Commander of the KPC.

As to Kosovo Albanians, they were tired of insecure atmosphere, which marked the Thaci period. In four months only, the OSCE reported 348 murders, 116 kidnappings, 1070 lootings and 1106 arsons. After June 1999, the UCK and then the DPK imposed their own candidates as local authorities. Some of them however were incompetent for their posts. Kosovo Albanians showed their dissatisfaction with the DPK in the 28th of October 2000 municipal elections, which was a great blow for the Party. It must also be remembered that on the 5th of October, Milosevic was replaced by democrat Vojislav Kostunica in Serbia. Serbian threat did not exist anymore.

On the 15th of December, 1999, a **Provisional Administrative Council of Kosovo (PAVK)**, which ended Thaci's interim government, was founded. The PAVK was supposed to be a big coalition between the LDK and the DPK. Rugova and his Bukoshi government boycotted it for some time. However Thaci did always venerate Rugova as an honourable rival.

He should venerate him. After a period of disillusionment with Rugova, despite his meeting with Milosevic and his inexplicable absence in Kosovo until 2000, Kosovo Albanians faithfully turned once again to their pacifist President. In fact, Kosovo Albanians were confused: in villages, it was common to hear them chanting "UCK, UCK!" and then "Rugova, Rugova!" and "NATO, NATO!" feeling no contradiction in supporting all of their liberators. Rugova's legitimacy vis-à-vis Thaci's was irrefutable: two times he was officially elected President. Thaci was never legitimated by elections.

Kosovo Albanians wanted to have two trumps though opposite at the same time at hand: moderate Rugova and radical Thaci. On the 29th of June, 2000, the Agreement on Understanding was signed between Bernard Kouchner, head of the UNMIK and Artemije, Episcopo of Raska-Prizren (Sandzak). Serbian Episcopo, who accused Thaci of hypocrisy and of trying to create a mono-ethnic Kosovo, obtained the legalisation of Serbian enclaves and the participation of a Serbian delegation in PAVK meetings. Following PAVK meetings were boycotted by Thaci, who thereafter decided to freeze of his Party's participation in joint administrative structures: "The territorial integrity of Kosovo had been and is still being violated. KFOR and UNMIK were unwilling to resolve problems. Mitrovica [north of Kosovo], which was the originator of enclaves, is still divided while no discussion is allowed within PAVK about this or any other problem and question which requires swift action". As to Rugova, he declared that he accepted the Agreement just because he considered it as temporary. Those reactions were typical of them.

From that date on until March 2004, relations between Thaci and the UNMIK deteriorated. Key powers retained by the UNMIK (defence, justice, foreign policy), the Constitutional Framework of April 2001 defined which powers the provisional institutions of self-government (**PISG**) could wield. In the 17th of November 2001 elections, the DPK obtained 25.7 per cent of the vote and obtained 26 seats in the Assembly. Thaci's DPK entered the big coalition as the second big party after the LDK. Prime Minister was the most moderate member of the DPK, the man famous for having defused ethnic tensions in divided town of Mitrovica, Bajram Rexhepi. Thaci was relentless on full independence and asked more power for the PISG. However now that Serbian pressure attenuated, more grave and immediate problems were on agenda. Kosovo is still one of Europe's poorest regions. More than a half of its people live in poverty. The average salary of those, who work, is 200 Euros per month. According to official statistics, the unemployment rate is 57.1 per cent, while more than 70 per cent of the youth aged 16-24 are unemployed.

In April 2002, the UNMIK proclaimed "standards before status" policy to defer independence pressure. Failure to define Kosovo's status and premature donor withdrawal turned reconstruction boom into recession in 2003. In the 23rd of October 2004 elections, the DPK, with 30 seats in the Assembly, resigned to opposition. After two-day riots in March 2004, which ended with 19 dead and 900 wounded, Kosovo Albanians were looking for peace and stability.

Hashim Thaci continues to be an unpredictable figure. In October 2005, with his insistence on a resolution of independence, which would be adopted in the Assembly to clarify its position rejecting any kind of negotiations or dialogue with Belgrade, he caused a major crisis with the UNMIK, which granted no authority to the PISG to proclaim independence. By the end of November, when the final status negotiations finally started, Thaci published a noteworthy article in *International Herald Tribune* (25.11.2005): "Perhaps the best incentive for all of us is for the European Union to admit Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro as three independent countries who have implemented the same standards of democratic development, minority protections and economic safeguards, under the umbrella of NATO. In this way, the entire region can be demilitarized with open borders, a free flow of people, goods and services, strong rule of law, and a vibrant economy with a common currency that unites our various communities. Then and only then will the hatreds and conflicts of the

past be truly consigned to collective memory and not resurrected in the experience of each successive generation". However, Thaci has a red-line. He is against Belgrade's option "cantonisation": "It did not work in



Ramush Haradinaj



Albin Kurti

Bosnia and it will not work in Kosovo. I am more ambitious for my country". His ambition is decentralisation, not based on ethnic divisions - a proposition held by the UNMIK as well since March 2004 riots. One problem though: Thaci refuses to discuss decentralisation issue during the status negotiations since the reformation of local power is an issue, which concerns Kosovo institutions. Although other members of the Albanian status negotiating team unanimously stated that decentralisation couldn't be part of the talks, one may wonder if Thaci's unpredictable temper may change the course of history. Since 1995, there is a new Albanian movement called "**Vetevendosje**" (self determination) in Kosovo guided by a 30-year old former student leader and political prisoner Albin Kurti, who reminds of Thaci of old times: relentless, determined (though non violent). Famous American Balkan specialist, Tim Judah wrote then with right: "If at a crucial point in talks, one of the Albanian parties - for example, the DPK of former guerrilla leader Hashim Thaci - decides to swing his support behind Kurti then the outcome of talks, especially if a wave of anti-Serbian ethnic cleansing similar to that of March 2004 also breaks out again, cannot be predicted".

Yet this threatening possibility may be exactly what the West wants to use as a trump against the Serbian delegation. With a stick-and-carrot strategy (Rugova as carrot and Thaci as stick), the West would make Serbians accept what they thought unacceptable before for fear of the worst.