Kosovo’s President Thaçi charged with war crimes

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Hashim Thaçi, who resigned this week as president of Kosovo, will appear before a special tribunal in The Hague on charges of war crimes. Together with nine other defendants, he is accused of hundreds of murders as well as persecution and torture during the war with Serbia between 1998 and 1999.

The prosecutor’s charges, which were presented in June, were confirmed this week by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor’s Office. Thaçi, whose regime is dependent on the Western powers for financial and military support, responded by resigning his post. He rejected all accusations and denounced the prosecution, but declared his willingness to appear in court.

The remarkable thing is not that Thaçi is being taken to court, but that it is only happening now. It has been long known that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which counted Thaçi as one of its leaders, was involved in political murders, ethnic cleansing and mafia-style criminality. Thaçi’s subsequent political career was also accompanied by criminal activities. But he enjoyed the support of the United States and European powers because he supported their efforts to subordinate the Balkans to their imperialist interests.

Therefore, along with Thaçi and his KLA accomplices, the Western politicians who used and promoted him also deserve to be in the dock. First place among these are Joschka Fischer and Madeleine Albright, the German foreign minister and US secretary of state at the time of the war, respectively. They also include presumptive president elect Joseph Biden, who praised Thaçi during a 2010 visit to the White House as the “George Washington of Kosovo.”

During the 1990s, the KLA, which organised attacks from exile on Serbian military units and police stations in Kosovo, was designated by the CIA as a terrorist organisation. But this rapidly changed when the US and Germany needed a pretext to attack Serbia, which was an obstacle to their drive to fully carve up Yugoslavia and subordinate the Balkans to their interests.

Thaçi, the political spokesperson of the KLA, was invited by Fischer and Albright in February 1998 to the Rambouillet talks as Kosovo’s representative. The conference issued an unacceptable ultimatum that served as the pretext for the bombardment of Yugoslavia. The KLA emerged as NATO’s official foot soldiers in the war against Yugoslavia and it was in this function that the crimes were committed for which Thaçi is now being held responsible.

After the violent partition of Kosovo from Serbia, several political parties emerged from the KLA. Thaçi became the dominant political figure in Kosovo: he served as foreign minister, prime minister on several occasions, and president from 2016. Under the protection of the United Nations’ UNIMIK mission, Thaçi and other former KLA commanders continued the forced displacement of Serbs, Roma and other minorities, spreading fear and terror. In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia with US and German support.

All attempts to uncover the KLA’s war crimes failed. Anyone who dared to testify paid with their life. Inexplicable car accidents, alleged suicides and deadly shootings were the result.

Ramush Haradinaj, a former KLA leader, was brought before the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in 2005, when he was prime minister of Kosovo. He was charged with 37 war crimes, including crimes against humanity, murder and rape. But he was cleared of all charges in 2008 due to a lack of evidence, by which time only one of the original 10 witnesses was still alive. The final witness agreed to withdraw his

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testimony after narrowly surviving an attack.

Carla Del Ponte, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia between 1999 and 2007, wrote in her memoirs published in 2008, “Witnesses were so afraid and intimidated that they even feared to talk about the presence of the KLA in certain areas, never mind actual crimes. … Those who wanted to testify had to be brought with their entire family to other countries, and many states were not prepared to accept them.” Even members of NATO’s Kfor force and judges at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague feared for their lives.

Del Ponte also reported the suspicion that the KLA kidnapped 300 Serbians in 1999 and removed their organs for sale, which the International Red Cross first heard about in 2000. Although sufficient evidence was available, an investigation by the International Criminal Court was “snuffed out.”

In April 2009, the BBC broadcast a documentary in which several witnesses spoke about the KLA’s bestial crimes, including the removal and trading of prisoners’ organs. The author, Michael Montgomery, had been researching the whereabouts of thousands of Albanians, Serbians and Roma who had disappeared in Kosovo without a trace and stumbled across unspeakable crimes.

In response to Del Ponte’s book, the European Council commissioned European Council deputy Dick Marty to conduct a two-year investigation. Marty’s report appeared in 2010. He described Kosovo as a country with “Mafia-like structures of organised crime” and accused former KLA leaders as well as Thaçi, who was prime minister at the time, of leading a criminal network involved in contract killings, drug dealing, prostitution and the illegal trade in organs.

The American jurist John C. Williamson, who jointly authored the charge sheet against former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and was appointed as a special investigator by the European Union, came to the conclusion after a review lasting more than two years that the Marty report was based on solid evidence and would justify criminal proceedings. But nothing of the sort occurred and Thaçi was elected president in 2016.

However, one year earlier, Kosovo’s parliament decided under international pressure to establish a special tribunal financed by the EU. It is formally part of Kosovo’s judicial system but is based in the Netherlands and staffed by foreign judges and prosecutors.

The Europeans’ pursuit of Thaçi is bound up with mounting tensions between Europe and the United States. The charges were announced just a few days before a scheduled summit between Thaçi and his Serbian counterpart, Aleksander Vu?i?in Washington. The meeting was subsequently cancelled. Prior to this, Thaçi said in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that the US role was “indispensable” and criticised the EU. The Americans are showing “once again that they can act more quickly, accurately, and efficiently than the Europeans,” he added.

Even if Thaçi is convicted by the court, the EU will do everything it can to suppress the role of the NATO powers in the KLA’s war crimes. Given that the court cannot conduct its own investigations, it is dependent on witness testimony. In late September, internal court documents containing the secret names of witnesses appeared at the KLA veterans association in Pristina. They must now fear for their lives and those of their loved ones if they go ahead with their testimony.

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