

# Don't Use Our Case to Justify Crimea, Kosovo PM Tells Russia

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Russia should stop using the case of Kosovo's independence from Serbia to justify its Crimea incursion because the two cannot be compared, Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaci said Thursday.

President Vladimir Putin has criticized Western nations for what he called hypocrisy, saying they had endorsed Kosovo's right to self-determination and independence from Serbia but now deny Crimeans the right to leave Ukraine.

Thaci, who led armed ethnic Albanian units in a 1998 to 1999 guerrilla war against Belgrade troops as Yugoslavia collapsed, said the former Serbian province, which became independent in 2008, had no similarities to the events in Ukraine.

Serbia, a largely Orthodox Christian nation with historic ties to Russia, lost control of Kosovo province when NATO launched bombing raids to halt Serbian atrocities and "ethnic cleansing" under Slobodan Milosevic.

The 78-day bombing campaign, starting in March 1999, has been a source of ire for Russia and an example of what Putin says is the frequent use of deadly force by Washington under the pretext of human rights concerns.

"Under no circumstances can the Kosovo case be compared with the case of Crimea. Kosovo is a unique case. The international community intervened after the genocide by Serbia took place," Thaci told Reuters.

"We never demanded to leave one country and join another."

He said "the approach to change borders and annex territories from another country is a wrong approach that can have consequences for the whole world."

The war killed more than 12,000 people, most of them ethnic Albanians, who make up the majority in Kosovo. Another 800,000 Albanian refugees were driven from their homes.

Kosovo's independence has been recognized by 107 countries. Russia has refused to do so.

Moscow had been involved in all Kosovo-related diplomatic efforts from 1998 until 2007, when United Nations envoy Martti Ahtisaari proposed independence for Kosovo. Since then Russia has blocked all attempts by Kosovo to join international organizations.

A former guerrilla leader, Thaci is seen today as the pro-Western face of Kosovo, with support from Washington and the major EU capitals. Milosevic died in a UN detention center in 2006 while on trial on war crime charges.

Landlocked Kosovo, with 1.7 million people, remains one of the poorest countries in Europe with a high level of crime and corruption keeping foreign investors away.

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