

Prepòrt

Rugova's "help" with visas



Ukë Rugova is accused by the Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo that for a period of three years he has led a criminal group, supplying individuals with Schengen visas from the Italian Embassy in Prishtina. All these visas are presumed to have been obtained illegally through distortion of facts or through corruption.

Besa Kalaja

He grew up in an environment where many important decisions were made for the country. His house has been used for the needs of one of the most important state institutions, the Presidency of Kosovo. His father, Ibrahim Rugova, for a decade followed what is known as the peaceful resistance of Kosovo, and led the largest Albanian movement, the Democratic League of Kosovo, thus becoming one of the key figures for the international community as well.

Although his father was one of Kosovo's most important figures, he kept his children out of the public eye. They will come to the attention of the public only after his death.

Ukë Rugova, the second child of former President Rugova, studied in Kosovo and the United States. After returning from the US, Rugova approached public life in a way no one had believed. Together with several other public figures, he founded the Ibrahim Rugova List, which initially seemed to oppose the Democratic League of Kosovo, founded by his father and led by him until the last day of his life. He co-founded this list with Bujar Bukoshi - a controversial figure especially in relation to Ibrahim Rugova. Bukoshi, as prime minister in exile, managed the so-called 3 percent fund.

With this list, Ukë Rugova entered the parliamentary

elections of 2010 and won the mandate of MP. He is the owner of several businesses and the owner of millions of dollars of fortune, which the Anti-Corruption Agency has found to be joint property in most cases.

After the end of his term, Rugova faced an indictment filed for organized crime by the EU Rule of Law Mission – EULEX, a mission that for ten years dealt with major cases of corruption and organized crime in Kosovo. He was even arrested for several hours by this mission. After this mission completed its mandate, the case passed into the hands of local authorities.

Following the indictment, Rugova said in an interview with EULEX, according to Insajderi, that he did these things to make it easier for citizens to obtain a visa, and as an excuse he used the most serious case of the drowning of citizens in Tisa River in Hungary trying to cross the border to get to Western countries. To avoid such a tragedy, he said he saw the need to help citizens obtain a visa.

Witnesses who have been heard in court said that in order to obtain such a visa, they had to pay large sums of money – up to 4000 euros.



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MP Rugova

In public life, in addition to being the son of former President Rugova, he is also known as the founder of a political entity and a member of the Kosovo Assembly for one mandate.

He co-founded Ibrahim Rugova List with Bujar Bukoshi, Astrit Haraqija and Dardan Gashi. The three of them have in various cases contradicted the law and indictments have been filed against them. In one case, Bujar Bukoshi, as a former Minister of Health, along with several other officials of this ministry was accused of corruption. In the second case, he is accused of misusing the 3 percent fund.

In both cases, proceedings have been instituted against Bujar Bukoshi due to his aggravated health condition. In both cases, he was often absent from the hearings.

An indictment was also filed against former minister of culture, Astrit Haraqija. He was charged and then sentenced to one-year probation for misusing a fund that had been allocated for the production of a film. This case was returned by the Court of Appeals for retrial and the case had reached the statute of limitation.

Dardan Gashi, the other founder of the list, was also fined 1700 euros last year, albeit for a case of a different nature – for unauthorized possession of a weapon.

These cases occurred before and after the establishment of the Ibrahim Rugova List, which although failed to have a consolidated electorate went to the polls as part of the list that the Alliance for New Kosovo (AKR) created in 2010, giving a lot of power to its founders.

The two founders of this list had taken important positions in the Thaçi II Government. Only Rugova became an MP, while Bujar Bukoshi and Dardan Gashi became part of the Government. Rugova was not very active as

member of the Kosovo Assembly. He is not remembered for speaking frequently or raising any important issues in the Assembly.

Ibrahim Rugova List was short-lived. It ceased its activities after four years of establishment, and one of its founders, Astrit Haraqija, said that in the 2014 parliamentary elections they supported the Democratic League of Kosovo. The daughter of the former president, Teuta Rugova, was also running on the party's list for MPs. She won this and the following mandate but her voice in the Assembly of Kosovo was never heard. However, she has always been mentioned for her role in serving the PAN coalition in 2017 and all this is said to have been influenced by her brother along with Dardan Gashi and Astrit Haraqija. A few days before the formation of the Haradinaj Government, he was seen in a meeting with the three leaders of this coalition - Kadri Veseli, Ramush Haradinaj and Fatmir Limaj. Teuta Rugova in some cases served the PAN coalition, either by staying in the Assembly to make the quorum, or by giving her vote even though her party was against it.

The Democratic League of Kosovo did not include Teuta Rugova in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Indictment for organized crime

In 2016, an indictment was filed for organized crime against Ukë Rugova and several other persons. The indictment of the Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo (SPRK), filed on May 16, 2016 charges Ukë Rugova with managing a criminal group from May 2011 to February 2014 by supplying individuals with EU Schengen visas provided by the Italian Embassy in Pristina. All these visas are presumed to have been obtained illegally through distortion of facts or through corruption. The case concerns over 500 visas.

Rugova is also charged with the criminal offense of unauthorized possession of weapons, with a gun and two cartridges found in his residence.

The indictment, drawn up by prosecutor Allen Cansick, states that the Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo has received a copy of their visa file from the Italian Prosecutor's Office in Rome, including the name of the former Italian Ambassador to Kosovo, Michael Giffoni.

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Haraqija, former minister of culture, youth and sports, has been charged in this case. In this indictment, the initially charged were also Izet Beqiri, Florjan Petani, Qefser Baholli, Fitim Beqiri, Azad Beqiraj, Liridona Beqiri, Kujtim Avdyli, Ragip Gashi, Visar Beqiri, Hamza Beqiri, Azem Koskoviku, Edison Idrizaj, Beg Shaqiri, Hasan Shaqiri, Driton Voca, Valon Selimi, and Haxhi Islami.

As the trial dragged on in the absence of the defendants who did not attend the hearing, it was decided last year that the case be separated and the trial be conducted against Ukë Rugova, Astrit Haraqija, Izet Beqiri, Qefser Baholli and Florjan Petani.

The case is now being represented by prosecutor Florie Shamolli, while the trial panel is headed by Judge Naime Krasniqi-Jashanica.

The Prosecution alleges that this criminal group aimed to obtain material benefits so that citizens can obtain Schengen visas from the Italian Embassy in Pristina.

All persons involved in this case have pleaded not guilty. Ukë Rugova and Astrit Haraqija did not hesitate to speak to the media about the case. Rugova admitted that he helped citizens obtain visas but said that this was not done against a reward, but because the assistance provided was of a humanitarian nature.

Former minister of culture, Astrit Haraqia, who is accused of providing visas for Ukë Rugova's group, has admitted that he was involved in arranging visas for supporters and members of his party. In a conversation with KALLXO.com, Haraqia admitted that he has facilitated the visa process.

"After the arrest, I publicly said that we have arranged about 40 to 80 visas for the people of Gjakova, either for humanitarian cases, such as health or economic issues. I have supported them for visas, and I did not find anything terrible in this because we have been supporting people since 1995, it was not something new for me", says Haraqia.

Haraqia denies the allegations of the Prosecution that his activity was illegal. He even claims that all the ministers and deputy ministers of Kosovo facilitate in visa issues.

According to the indictment, Izet Beqiri is accused of organized crime and smuggling of migrants. This is because according to the indictment, he had committed several criminal activities regarding obtaining Schengen visas at the Italian embassy.

For Izet Beqiri, Rugova said that he has known him since 1992-93. He said that Beqiri's family was a great supporter of former President Rugova. Ukë Rugova him-



self started associating with Izet Beqiri in 2006. We (the Rugova family) said during the interrogation by EULEX - the material provided by Insideri - that we will not forget the help that Izet Beqiri and his family have given to President Rugova during the 90ies.

Another accused in this case, Florian Petani, was the main visa official of the Italian Embassy in Pristina. When former ambassador was absent, Petani dealt with the requests that Rugova made for visas at this embassy.

Witnesses admit that the group provided them with visas

Witnesses in the case of Ukë Rugova and others admit in court that they were provided with visas by this group facing charges of organized crime.

Since last year when the case was separated, a number of witnesses testified in the case of Rugova and others. Some of them said that in order to get a visa, they gave a lot of money - up to 4000 thousand euros. One of the witnesses said that he did not complete the application or anything else but that he was only asked to give the money, for which he says that he had given 500 in advance and the rest (3500 euros) later.

Some of the witnesses did not mention that they had given money to obtain visas but said that they had obtained them - that Rugova helped them - after they had worked for a long time in Rugova's family. Sebahate Halili, Luar Hoxha, Fidan Hasani, Skender Halili testified that they worked in Rugova's house.

One of the witnesses, Sami Baliu, said that he obtained a visa through his brother, who, according to him, had worked with Ukë Rugova.

Another witness, Hajrije Kutllovci, stated in court that she did not understand how her passport ended up in Ukë Rugova's house. She said that she had applied for a visa at the Italian embassy in Pristina, without anyone's mediation.

Some of the witnesses who were provided with visas said they did not feel injured. They said they had applied for an Italian visa through a normal procedure, where an agency had prepared the documents for them.

Several other witnesses testified that they had given large sums of money - from 3500 to 4000 euros - to obtain Italian visas, which they had not applied for themselves, but through persons they did not previously know.

Witnesses said that they provided the money for these visas in various ways. One of them, Neki Duraku, said that

he had saved the money, 4000 euros, from the work he and his family had done all summer.

Another witness, Fitim Deliu, said that he had borrowed the money in the amount of 3500 euros and that he had not seen no grace of the visa he obtained.

Several other witnesses, Kujtim Doli, Shpëtim Uka, said that the accused Astrit Haraqija had helped them obtain a visa, but denied that they had given any money for it. They even said that they had not dealt with any procedure because all of them had been carried out by the persons who had mediated and that they only submitted their passports and two photographs.

Delays in court hearings

The indictment in the case against Rugova and others was filed in 2016. Since then, the delays in the process have been very long. The hearings in most cases have failed to take place as the accused were absent.

Following the adjournment of this procedure, the trial panel at one of its hearings last year decided to separate the proceedings in this case.

Following the separation, Ukë Rugova, Astrit Haraqija, Izet Beqiri, Qefser Baholli and Florjan Petani are being tried separately from the other defendants in this case.

Following the submission of this case by EULEX to local authorities, one of the reasons it was delayed was that the court did not find it appropriate to schedule a hearing on the grounds that this case was not a priority (for the court).

After the case was transferred to local judges, in January 2018, the first attempt to hold the hearing was made after one year, respectively in January 2019, but this hearing failed in the absence of the four defendants.

That same month, another court hearing failed because some of the defendants had not appeared in court. During that hearing, it was found that the procedure in this case had to be separated.

After the procedure was separated in this case, a number of hearings were held last year in which the defendants pleaded not guilty to the charges against them.



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drug trafficking, as well as smuggling of weapons and goods.

Suspicious of involvement in other crimes

The media in Kosovo have reported that the authorities in Italy, after a hearing against the former Italian ambassador to Kosovo, Michael Giffoni, had mentioned Ukë Rugova there as well. In the minutes of this session provided by Insideri, it is stated that the Italian authorities describe Rugova as involved in drug trafficking, as well as smuggling of weapons and goods.

Giffoni was heard on May 26, 2014 by the Disciplinary Board of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was decided to dismiss him after it was found that there had been mismanagement of the visa sector during his term at the embassy.

The document states that Giffoni did all this in favor of a politician in Kosovo. That politician is Ukë Rugova.

The document disclosed the reason why information was collected about Ukë Rugova. The reason had to do with visas issued by the Italian embassy in Pristina.

Giffoni had denied being in the service of the clan led by former MP Ukë Rugova.

He had said that he only helped the Rugova family by favoring them with issuing fast-track visas. But, according to him, it was Florian Petani who deceived him by introducing him to a wide circle of people as members of the Rugova family.

But Giffon's version had not been very convincing to his superiors at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They had

decided to dismiss him from the position of Italian ambassador to Kosovo.

Preportr sent questions to the Italian Embassy in Pristina to see what happened following the case of the former ambassador, but the answer was short. This embassy through its Information Office said "Facts regarding the reason for termination of employment with Mr. Giffoni have been immediately communicated to the competent judicial authorities for the continuation of their work in line with their competencies. The Embassy is not aware of further details".

The Italian authorities also mention the fact that Rugova befriended one of the accused in the case against him in Kosovo, Izet Beqiri.

Izet Beqiri, according to documents provided by Insajderi, is mentioned by the Italian state as being wanted by Interpol because he was convicted of involvement in drug trafficking.

Ukë Rugova and Beqiri in the interviews given before the investigation have denied all the accusations that weighed on them. Beqiri stated that he did not know that he was wanted by Interpol.

Rugova's millions of fortune

WHILE HE WAS AN MP FROM 2011-2014, RUGOVA HAD PRESENTED TO THE ANTI-CORRUPTION AGENCY A FORTUNE OF MILLIONS OF EUROS THAT INCLUDED HOUSE, LAND, LOANS, BUSINESS, SALARY OF THE DEPUTY AND PENSION THAT HIS FAMILY ENJOYS FROM THE STATE.

2011 A house worth **500 thousand euros**, another worth **1.5 million euros**, apartment worth **68 thousand euros**, land worth **100 thousand euros**, car worth **25 thousand euros**, shareholder in the commercial company **Cafe ULIKSI SH.P.K.**, where he declares shares worth of 50 percent while the capital of this business is **350 thousand euros**. He also declared a loan in the amount of **250 thousand euros**.

2012 In 2012 the wealth was the same, only now he declared that he had 20 percent of the shares in the commercial company **Zero8**, while the capital of this company was **350 thousand euros**.

2013 In 2013 the assets were the same.

2014 In 2014 the assets were similar with few changes: his wife's car worth **20 thousand euros**. In the declaration of assets in 2014, Rugova states that his wife owned 30 percent of the shares in the commercial company **Zero8 Sh.P.K.**

Big delays

The first hearing in this case was scheduled for January 2017. That year the case was handled by EULEX and several hearings were held – the last one in November this year. After that, the case was transferred to local authorities and for more than a year no hearing was scheduled. An attempt was made to hold a hearing in January 2019, but it failed. Two more hearings were scheduled for June and July last year. In order not to delay the process in the July session was decided to separate the procedure. After that, in 2019 three more sessions were held – one in September and two in November. In 2020 three other hearings were held – the last one failed in the absence of a judge, a lawyer and the fact that the prosecutor was engaged in another case. The next hearing is scheduled for later this month.

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