



# The murder of Ján Kuciak and **freedom of the press** in Slovakia

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Free Press Unlimited is honoured to welcome Martin Turček, direct colleague of murdered journalist Ján Kuciak, as a speaker at Free Press Live 2018. In anticipation of the event on November 2, we reflect on the murder of Ján Kuciak and freedom of the press in Slovakia.

*By: Samuel Peperkamp*

On the morning of February 26, 2018, police arrived at the house of journalist Ján Kuciak (27) and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, in the village of Veľká Mača, southwest Slovakia. Their families had raised the alarm after they failed to contact the couple for more than four days. Upon entering the house, the police found the couple dead. Ján was shot twice in the heart and Martina once in the head, both from close range. The lack of stolen objects or signs of a struggle pointed towards a disturbing conclusion: they were assassinated.

## Making a name as investigative journalist

Ján Kuciak, who graduated with a master's degree in journalism at the public university in Nitra, had spent the last few years making a name for himself as an investigative journalist. On behalf of his latest employer, a news website named Aktuality.sk, he investigated large-scale fraud and tax evasion. A few of his cases concerned Marián Kočner, a controversial Slovak businessman, and Direction - Social Democracy, the largest political party in the National Council of Slovakia.

At the time of his murder, Ján was investigating the Slovak connections with the 'Ndrangheta, an organised crime syndicate from Calabria, Italy. According to his investigation, Italian businessmen systematically stole money from EU funds that were destined for the development of the relatively poor region of eastern Slovakia. Ján uncovered that these businessmen kept in close contact with both the 'Ndrangheta and high-ranking state officials, such as Viliam Jasaň and Mária Trošková.

## Murdered for journalistic investigations?

The news of the assassinations shocked Slovakia and echoed well beyond its borders. Candle-lit marches were held in Bratislava, Prague and Brno. Within a week, these marches changed into the largest protests Slovakia had witnessed since the country's independence in 1989. The protesters



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expressed two demands: a thorough and independent investigation into the assassinations, and a new, trustworthy government without leaders suspected of corruption and connections to organised crime.

As the public cried out, officials followed suit. Prime Minister Fico promised the equivalent of one million euros to anyone with revealing information. Tibor Gašpar, the president of the Slovak Police, suggested that Kuciak was murdered because of his journalistic investigations. Were this to be true, Prime Minister Fico added, the murders were "an unprecedented attack on freedom of the press and democracy in Slovakia".

## Solving the murders is a high priority

Those words were not enough. Politicians from the opposition accused Direction - Social Democracy of indirect involvement and demanded the resignation of Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák and Police President Gašpar. On March 14, after a rapid reformation of the Slovak government, Prime Minister Fico announced his own resignation, in order to avoid early elections and "solve the political crisis". His successor, Peter Pellegrini, declared that solving the murders was one of his highest priorities.

On September 27, more than seven months after the assassinations, Slovak police arrested nine individuals in the south of Slovakia. Four of them were accused of first-degree murder, including Tomas S., an ex-police officer that has been identified as the hitman. He received a total amount of €70,000 in both cash and forgiven debt by Alena Z., a 44-year old woman that used to work as Marián Kočner's interpreter. The prosecutors refused to answer the question if Kočner is under suspicion or in any way linked to the murders.

## The effect of Ján Kuciak's death

Even though it remains unclear where Alena Z. got the money from, the arrests give cause for slight optimism. Now that the alleged murderer and the alleged instigator are behind bars, other conspirators can be identified and the motive for the murders can be determined. If the assassins murdered Ján Kuciak to silence him, they unintentionally sorted the opposite effect: his death forced a new focus on corruption, organised crime, and the sanctity of free press.



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