



Background: Murder of Ján Kuciak

Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, were gunned down on February 21, 2018, in their home in the town of Veľká Mača, west of Bratislava, Slovakia. Kuciak, an investigative journalist with the news website Aktuality.sk, had been covering high-level corruption cases, including alleged links between organized crime and top Slovak politicians. The killing triggered an upheaval in Slovak society, forcing out former Prime Minister Robert Fico, Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák and police chief Tibor Gaspar.

After seven months, on September 27, 2018, Slovak police arrested eight people in connection with the Kuciak murder. In total, four individuals have been charged in the murder. They are alleged hitman Tomáš Sz., alleged driver Miroslav M., alleged middleman Zoltán A and the woman who allegedly ordered the killing, Alena Z. According to media reports, Alena Z. is believed to have paid Tomáš Sz. and Miroslav M. 70,000 euros for the killing, including 20,000 euros in debt forgiveness.

Prosecutors believe that Alena Z. herself only acted as a mediator. Court documents note that Kuciak never wrote about Alena Z. and she had no motive in his killing. In addition, Alena Z. has claimed that she was essentially penniless, but police raids found 23,000 euros in cash at her home and she has also been seen driving expensive cars.

The focus now is on finding the mastermind(s). Court documents have suggested that this person may already be in police custody, fuelling speculation that he may be Marian Kočner, a controversial businessman who had reportedly threatened Kuciak in 2017 for his story about tax fraud. Kuciak filed a criminal complaint over the threat but police initially did not follow up on the complaint, later saying it did not rise to the level of a minor offence. In June 2018, Kočner was detained on suspicion of falsifying promissory notes for a private television broadcaster. He remains in custody.

The murder investigation is being led by the office of the special prosecutor, a body mandated to investigate certain serious crimes. The current special prosecutor is Dušan Kováčik. During a meeting with the International Press Institute (IPI) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on February 19, 2019, the special prosecutor's office said its priority was charging and convicting the mastermind(s) and that it would be issuing the relevant indictment(s) soon. In October 2018, Slovak President Andrej Kiska told IPI that he was optimistic regarding the arrest of the mastermind(s).

A total of 79 journalists lost their lives in connection with their work in 2018, according to IPI's Death Watch. Globally, the vast majority of journalist murders go unpunished, creating a cycle of violence and impunity. The murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová came just months after the killing of Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in a car bombing. That crime also remains unsolved.

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