

Murder of Slovakian journalist Ján Kuciak reveals close ties between political establishment, corporate elite and criminal underworld

By Markus Salzmann
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One out of the four accused in the trial for the murder of Slovakian journalist Ján Kuciak has pleaded guilty. Miroslav Marsek, a 37-year-old military veteran, admitted to fatally shooting Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, in February 2018. By contrast, the alleged mastermind behind the murders, businessman Marian Kocner, has pleaded not guilty, and is currently on trial for contracting the hit.

The murder of the journalist and subsequent trial which began in December has shed light on the close ties between rich businessmen, corrupt politicians, and criminals that have emerged since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the reintroduction of capitalism three decades ago. Following the murder, mass protests broke out against Prime Minister Robert Fico and Interior Minister Robert Kalinak, which forced them to resign. This will have a major impact on the upcoming parliamentary elections in February.

Slovakia is a member of the European Union and used by the major automakers as a cheap production center. Around 80,000 of the country's 5.5 million people are directly employed in the auto industry.

Kuciak conducted research into ties between the Italian mafia and Slovakian politicians, uncovering the dubious activities of Kocner and his various business operations in the process. Kocner was suspected of ordering Kuciak's murder shortly after the journalist's death.

Kocner initially had a successful career as a pro-government journalist in the 1980s with close ties to the Stalinist bureaucracy as well as some right-wing opposition elements. With these relations, his unscrupulousness, and considerable criminal activity, he emerged as one of Slovakia's most influential men.

The close ties between all political parties and organised crime were laid bare during the investigation into Kuciak's killing. Kocner was involved in almost every national corruption scandal over recent years. He is even now on the US Treasury Department's sanctions list. He was only able to act with impunity because he enjoyed protection from high places.

"It is clear that he conducted all manner of economic crimes over years," said Daniel Lipsic, a lawyer for the Kuciak family and a former justice minister. "Tax evasion, fraud, and the like. And nothing happened, as if he had immunity from prosecution."

Vast quantities of audio recordings, videos, and card transactions acquired secretly by Kocner in order to blackmail politicians and representatives of the judiciary were secured during the investigations. Former attorney general Dobroslav Trnka was recently arrested—he allegedly protected Kocner from prosecution for years.

Furthermore, Kocner had contacts within every political party. "He referred to a female state secretary in the Justice Ministry as 'my little monkey.' He was kept up to date with police investigations against him, demanded biographical information about state prosecutors who threatened him, and urged judges to decide cases in his favour," *Der Spiegel* reported last year.

To date, only a tiny portion of the material found by the criminal investigation has been made public. "It includes hundreds of pages we are continuing to review and from which we have released only a small portion," said Matus Kostolny, editor-in-chief of the Slovak daily newspaper *Denník N*.

However, the material made public makes clear the scale of the criminal operations. Along with plans to

murder state prosecutors, the material also contains evidence of Kocner's huge influence on the current political setup. According to the documents, Kocner spoke extensively with former prime minister Robert Fico of the social democratic Smer Party in the Maldives and the leader of the right-wing liberal Most-Híd Party.

Slovakian political scientist Grigorij Meseznikov told *Der Spiegel* that Kocner wanted not only "to influence the judiciary, but all political developments in Slovakia." In this, Kocner was not alone he noted, "We should not be naive and think that these structures no longer exist. People of Kocner's type are still there, even though they've gone underground for the time being."

The criminal ties involving all political parties are no secret to the population. This was shown by the mass protests that erupted after the brutal double murder.

Fico was replaced following his resignation by Peter Pellegrini, who is seen as a front man for Fico. Despite the change in Prime Minister government in Bratislava is still made up of a coalition of Fico's Smer, Most-Híd, which is essentially a mouthpiece for the small but wealthy upper middle class, and the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS). The government is characterized by a vicious anti-refugee and anti-Roma agenda. At the same time, it has pursued a strict austerity regime and strengthened the apparatus of state repression.

Fico has committed the Smer, which remains a member of the European social democrats, to a hard-right political line. There is much to suggest that he will seek to establish a governing alliance with the neo-fascist Kotlebists—People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) after next month's parliamentary election. Current polls project the neo-Nazis, led by Marian Kotleba, in second place.

Kotleba and his party explicitly consider themselves the successors of the Hlinka Party.

The clerical leader Andrej Hlinka—and later Josef Tiso—established a fascist dictatorship modelled on Germany after Slovakia gained independence as a result of the Munich accord in 1938. They immediately banned the social democratic and communist parties. The military arm of the government, the Hlinka Guard, committed a series of crimes against Jews, Roma, and communists. In 1942, the government deported Slovakia's Jews to the Auschwitz concentration camp. The Guard was officially integrated into the German SS in 1944. Only the invasion of the Red Army in May 1945 ended the rule of terror.

A LSNS parliamentary deputy, Milan Mazurek, was fined €10,000 after making racist statements about Roma

in a 2016 interview, which prompted an intervention by Fico to defend the fascist. In a Facebook video, he stated, "Milan Mazurek simply said what virtually the entire nation thinks." In typical racist fashion, he went on, "If you execute someone for telling the truth, you transform him into a national hero. Should we not be allowed to say that parts of the Roma population abuse the social welfare system?"

A charge of inciting racial hatred was subsequently launched against Fico in December. However, the special state prosecutor has since dropped the charge without providing any explanation. During the trial, the Smer demonstratively backed Fico.

The possible entry of the fascists into the government is not based on any mass support. On the contrary, the country's political elite is widely despised.

This finds expression in the disintegration of support for all the established parties. According to the latest poll by AKO, Smer would win 17 percent of the vote, the LSNS 11 percent, and the liberal party alliance 9 percent. All other parties have much less support, and many could fail to surpass the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation, including the SNS (5 percent) and Most-Híd (4 percent). Voter turnout could also be just as low as at the European elections last May when turnout was less than 23 percent.

The rise of Kocner and criminal networks in Slovakia is a textbook case of how the reintroduction of capitalism did not bring democracy, freedom, and prosperity, but the opposite. A small privileged layer, which enriched itself shamelessly through legal and illegal means at the expense of the population, is responsible for creating precarious social conditions and paving the way for fascism.

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