



## SILENCED VOICES: Ján Kuciak

by Cathal Sheerin

Ján Kuciak and Martina

**M**artina Kušnírová was close to her mother; she used to call her on the telephone at least once a day. So, in late February 2018, when Kušnírová's mother hadn't heard anything from her daughter for almost forty-eight hours, she began to worry; when there hadn't been any contact for almost a week, she called the police.

On February 26, 2018, police officers called at the home that Kušnírová, an archaeologist, shared with her boyfriend, a talented journalist named Ján Kuciak. The two twenty-seven-year-olds lived in a quiet, little talked about town in eastern Slovakia called Veľká Mača. Within hours of the police's visit, the name Veľká Mača would be appearing in newspapers all over Europe.

When the officers entered the couple's home, they found Kuciak dead; he had been shot once in the chest. Kušnírová was also dead; she had been shot in the head. Both had been killed using the same



Ján Kuciak

Illustration by Maxine Young

handgun, and their bodies had lain undiscovered for approximately five days. Nothing had been stolen. There was little evidence that a struggle had taken place, although there were signs that Kušnírová had tried to hide from the killer, suggesting, perhaps, that Kuciak had been killed first.

The double murder sent shockwaves through Slovakia and across Europe. Press and politicians focused on Kuciak's death rather than Kušnírová's because of what it represented: he was the first journalist to be murdered since Slovakia gained its independence in 1992; he was also the second journalist to be killed in Europe in the space of five months (the other being the Maltese reporter Daphne Caruana Galizia).

Speaking to the press after the discovery of the bodies, police chief Tibor Gašpar said that the killings were most likely connected to Kuciak's investigative work. Soon afterward, Prime Minister Robert Fico declared that if that proved to be the case, it would represent "an unprecedented attack on freedom of the press and democracy in Slovakia." Fico's government put up an award of one million Euros (approximately U.S. \$1,180,000) for information leading to the arrest of the killers.

In the very early days of the investigation, it looked and sounded as if the authorities were seriously engaged. But all was not as it seemed. Within weeks, the Slovak authorities' commitment to a thorough, independent investigation into the murders was being questioned by politicians in the European Parliament and by Slovak citizens on the streets of Bratislava. There were seismic changes ahead.

Much of Kuciak's work remains unfinished. At the time he was killed, he had been investigating the role of the 'Ndrangheta mafia in Slovakia. This organized crime clan is based in Calabria, Italy, and is involved in murder, cocaine and weapons trafficking, fraud, rigging public tenders, extortion, and more. Since the collapse of communism in 1989, criminal organizations such as the 'Ndrangheta have extended their tentacles all over the former Soviet Union.

Kuciak reported primarily for the Slovak news organization *Aktuality*. For his investigations into organized crime, he worked collaboratively with organizations such as the Organized Crime and Corruption

Reporting Project and the Czech Center for Investigative Journalism. Two of the most important stories that Kuciak was working on before his death were linked, and both were particularly embarrassing to the government. One of these was an investigation into how the 'Ndrangheta was defrauding the Slovakian state of EU agricultural funds, possibly with the help of local government officials. The other was a more salacious story involving a former Miss Universe contestant, a mafia fixer, and Prime Minister Fico.

This latter investigation looked simple enough at first. How, Kuciak wanted to know, had Prime Minister Fico come to hire a former Miss Universe contestant, Maria Troskova (then twenty-seven), as his assistant? Troskova had no political experience and it wasn't clear—because the Prime Minister's press department had refused to release a job description and wouldn't say whether Troskova had security clearance or not—what exactly her job entailed. The media assumed the obvious, that Fico—like so many middle-aged male politicians—had had his head turned by a pretty face. But there was a more disturbing side to the story.

Troskova had a history of involvement with shady businessmen. She had been an assistant to a television station owner who was investigated in the 1990s for allegedly hiring an assassin to kill his business partner. In her mid-twenties, she became a business partner of Antonio Vadala, a Calabrian who owns a string of agricultural companies in eastern Slovakia. Vadala's corruption was known: he had been convicted of defrauding the EU of agricultural funds. But his back story was much darker than that. Vadala had ties to the 'Ndrangheta. In March 2017, anti-mafia investigators in Italy said that Vadala was linked to cocaine trafficking; in 2001, police wiretaps caught Vadala talking to a mafia boss about how best to hide a drug trafficker (later revealed to be a murderer) from the police. The Italian police also had recordings of Vadala being asked to accompany mafia enforcers to Rome where they were to “punish” a man who had “damaged the clan.”

Kuciak was looking into links between Fico's government, Vadala, and large scale fraud when he and Kušnírová were murdered. As soon as this information was made public, tens of thousands of people took

to the streets to protest government corruption and call for justice for the young couple. The demonstrations were the biggest since the fall of communism.

The police made early arrests. Vadala, his brother Bruno, and another man with mafia connections, Pietro Catroppa, were among seven individuals arrested at the beginning of March in connection with the murders. However, none were charged and all were released within forty-eight hours due to a lack of evidence against them.

The pressure on the government, both from the public and from its own coalition partners, increased rapidly. No one, it seemed—except Fico and a few of his colleagues—believed that a government that Kuciak had been investigating for corruption could oversee an impartial inquiry into the journalist's murder. There were daily calls from all quarters for resignations.

And the resignations came. The first members of the government to go were the assistant to the Prime Minister, Maria Troskova; State Security Council Secretary Viliam Jasan; and the Minister of Culture, Marek Madaric. They all resigned in early March. Close on their heels was Interior Minister Robert Kalinak, who resigned under pressure from the government's coalition partners. The next resignation was a big one: Prime Minister Robert Fico. On March 15, with corruption allegations swirling around him and with his longstanding antipathy toward the press being brought up again and again (he had once called them "anti-Slovak prostitutes"), he was pressured by political allies into stepping down. Another resignation came in mid-April: replacement Interior Minister, Tomas Drucker had faced public pressure to fire police chief Tibor Gašpar, who was seen as being too closely tied to the ruling party to ensure an impartial murder inquiry. The day after Drucker left office, Tibor Gašpar also resigned.

But the resignations did not satisfy the public. The protests continued. People believed that Kuciak's death was just one part of a much bigger problem, not only in Slovakia but in Central Europe more generally. Peter Bárdy, Kuciak's former editor-in-chief at *Aktuality*, summed up this sentiment in an interview he gave in April 2018:

"We are in a war on corruption, and Kuciak was a victim of that

war. I want to trust [the authorities] because I want to see the men who are responsible for Ján's murder in prison. The problem is not the investigators, but the people who are at the top... It is not enough to remove just one person. The whole system has to be changed... If someone in Hungary, Serbia, or Poland sees that Ján was killed and nothing happened, they can try the same thing there: this is not about Aktuality or about Ján Kuciak. It is about the future of free journalism in Europe."

At the time of this writing, no one has been convicted of the murders of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová. Calls for the killers—and for those who ordered the killings—to be brought to justice may be sent to the following address:

Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini  
Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky  
Námestie slobody 1  
813 70 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic  
Fax: +421 2 5249 7595

You may want to use this [sample letter](#).

Email: [info@vlada.gov.sk](mailto:info@vlada.gov.sk)

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