

Jan Kuciak murder case: Slovakian court acquits alleged masterminds

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A Slovakian special court acquitted the alleged masterminds behind the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak last Thursday.

The court in Pezinok near Bratislava based the acquittal of millionaire Marián Kožner and co-defendant Alena Zsuzsová on a lack of evidence. It could not be proven that the defendants had ordered the murder, Judge Ruzena Sabová explained when announcing the verdict, despite a key witness having testified against the two and there being a lot of other evidence against them.

“If, despite all the evidence, reasonable and understandable doubts remain, then a defendant is found innocent and that is how the court proceeded here,” Judge Sabová said, justifying the verdict.

The 27-year-old Ján Kuciak, who had researched corruption, tax evasion and the connections of high-ranking Slovak politicians to the Italian Mafia on the news portal *Aktuality.sk*, was shot in cold blood by a contract killer in February 2018. His fiancée Martina Kušnírová, who happened to be in the house with him, was also murdered.

At the end of December 2019, the court had sentenced businessman Zoltan Andrusko to 15 years in prison. Andrusko had mediated the contract killing in return for payment. To obtain a lighter sentence, he agreed with the public prosecutor’s office to appear as a key witness. His testimony massively incriminated Kožner and his accomplice Zsuzsová in the trial, telling the court he had organised the crime for them and hired two men to carry it out.

On April 6, the court then sentenced former soldier Miroslav Maršek, who fired the fatal shots, to 23 years in prison and on September 3, his cousin Tomas Szabo, a former policeman who drove the assassin to Kuciak’s house, to 25 years. Both confessed and admitted to having received €35,000 to €40,000, respectively, for the contract killing.

Kožner and Zsuzsová denied having commissioned the murder, although, in addition to the testimony of the key witness, they were severely incriminated by the record of their communications using the Threema messenger service.

Yet the trial itself was more than strange. The presiding judge, who considered the defendants’ guilt proven, was overruled by her two assistant judges, an extremely unusual occurrence according to the Slovakian press. Accordingly, presiding judge Sabová was the only one of the three who had completely studied the 25,000-page files. At the last minute on Monday, the public prosecutor’s office also tried to introduce further evidence, but the court did not allow this.

During the investigations, it had turned out that Kožner was deeply involved in the case. The murdered journalist had researched links between the Italian Mafia and Slovakian politicians and had also kept an eye on the dubious business dealings of Kožner and his numerous companies.

In the 1980s, Kožner had initially made a career as a pro-government journalist and had maintained excellent contacts not only with the Stalinist leadership of Czechoslovakia but also with right-wing dissidents. With these relationships, his unscrupulousness and enormous criminal energy, he subsequently became one of the most influential and wealthy figures in the country.

Former secret service agent Péter Tóth confessed in autumn 2018 to having shadowed Kuciak on behalf of Kožner. Kuciak himself had received a threatening phone call from Kožner six months before his assassination, threatening to “exterminate” him and his family. Although he made an official complaint about the threat, no further investigation was conducted.

During the trial, it became clear why: Kožner was closely networked with figures in politics, the police authorities and judiciary. He enjoyed close contacts with

the then Social Democratic head of government, Robert Fico. He called a state secretary in the Ministry of Justice “my monkey” in online chats. His network covered large parts of the judicial system. In March, 13 judges were arrested for bribery. Among them were the former state secretary for justice, Monika Jankovska, and the deputy chairperson of the Supreme Court of Slovakia.

The murder of the journalist and his fiancée casts a harsh light on the network of rich business figures, corrupt politicians and criminals that emerged after the introduction of capitalism and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia three decades ago. Following Kuciak’s murder, mass protests broke out across the country, forcing Prime Minister Fico and his Interior Minister Robert Kalinak to resign.

In 2019, the liberal politician Zuzana ?aputová surprisingly won the presidential election and in the spring, the newly founded party “Ordinary People” (Olano) of Igor Matovi? won the parliamentary elections. Matovi? became head of government. Both he and ?aputová had promised to fight the corruption in the country. In reality, one corrupt oligarchic clique simply replaced another.

The media tycoon Matovi? formed a coalition with the neoliberal Freedom and Solidarity Party (SaS) around the entrepreneur Richard Sulik, in which he had started his political career, and with the extreme right-wing party “We are a family” (Sme rodina), which is a member of the extreme right-wing faction Identity and Democracy at European Union (EU) level.

According to opinion polls, approval of the government is currently falling dramatically. Since this February, Olano has lost seven points and currently stands at only 18 percent approval. In the coronavirus pandemic, it is revealing its criminal indifference to the general population.

Although the number of new infections on Saturday reached the highest level since the beginning of the pandemic, with 226 cases, the government insists ruthlessly on reopening schools and starting production without any safety restrictions. In particular, the auto industry insists there should be no further lockdown, as was the case at the beginning of the pandemic when some plants were shut.

The wealth of the country’s ruling elites is due in large part to the company serving as a low-wage platform for the global car companies. No other country in Europe builds as many cars per capita as Slovakia.

President ?aputová declared herself “shocked” by the

verdict but emphasised that she naturally respected the court and pointed to the appeal process. She hoped that “justice will finally prevail before the Supreme Court.” Peter Pellegrini, who had led the government for two years after Fico’s resignation, explicitly declared his support for the ruling.

The silence from European capitals is also remarkable. While in the case of the Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny EU politicians fell into anti-Russian hysteria, although there is no evidence whatsoever that Navalny was poisoned by the Russian state, in the Kuciak case there was at most quiet, restrained criticism of the Slovak government and judiciary.

Whether the murder of Kuciak and Kušnírová will go to the Supreme Court and how it will be decided is largely an open question. Wide sections of ruling circles within the EU and NATO member Slovakia want to prevent this at all costs. The Mafia network, to which Ko?ner belongs, has far-reaching tentacles. Some journalists are currently evaluating the so-called Ko?ner library. It contains 57 terabytes of data, including the millionaire’s chat transcripts and telephone data. Last month, this led to new findings in the money-laundering case surrounding the powerful Penta financial group, which maintains close contacts with a variety of big names in business and politics.

The Kuciak case once again makes clear that with the introduction of capitalism 30 years ago, a narrow stratum of society came to the top, shamelessly enriching itself by legal and illegal means at the expense of the population. The massive protests following Kuciak’s assassination will not have been the last.



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