



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Political briefing:

The abduction of the Vietnamese businessman Trinh Xuan Thanh, an international scandal

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Summary

Claims of Slovakia's involvement in the kidnapping of a Vietnamese citizen have already been circulating through the media for a few months, but in August 2018, the allegations caused yet another serious disruption in the political scene, dividing the President, coalition and opposition even further apart only few months after the first big political crisis following the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. This international scandal rubbed salt into the wound, worsening the war between Slovak politicians, the President, and the media.

The kidnapping

Reports claim that on Thursday, 26 July 2017, a Vietnamese businessman and former politician Trinh Xuan Thanh, sentenced by the communist regime in his country to life imprisonment for corruption, was abducted via Slovakia by a government plane after seeking political asylum in Germany. According to reports of Denník N, the kidnapped businessman was sitting in a van parked in front of the government hotel Bôrik, where an official meeting of Slovak representatives, including the former Interior Minister Róbert Kaliňák and the Vietnamese delegation with the Vietnamese official To Lam was taking place. These reports claim that Thanh was later moved to a police van, which drove him from the hotel to the M. R. Štefánik Airport, while looking beaten and drunk. The head of protocol at the Interior Ministry Radovan Čulák, who accompanied the Vietnamese delegation flying to Bratislava from Prague on the government plane, stated that the former Interior Minister Kaliňák had been aware of the situation.¹

¹ --, "Denník N: This is what the Vietnamese kidnapping looked like," *Spectator*, 2 August 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20884018/dennik-n-this-is-what-the-vietnamese-kidnapping-looked-like.html>>.

German prosecutors' detailed report

According to the allegations, the van, in which Thanh was sitting after he supposedly “got drunk and fell off the stairs”, drove him all the way from Berlin to Bratislava. After he was moved to the government plane, the whole delegation and the kidnapped businessman took off for Moscow and later returned to Vietnam.

Since the whole process of Thanh's kidnapping begun in Germany, where the businessman sought asylum, the whole incident is being investigated by German prosecutors. According to their detailed report, Thanh was walking down a street in Berlin, accompanied by his girlfriend, when a van with a Czech license plate stopped near him and two men dragged him into the car. First, they drove him to the Vietnamese embassy, later to Brno and eventually to Bratislava.

2

On Tuesday, 25 July 2017, all drivers employed by Slovakia's Bureau for the Protection of Constitutional Authorities and Diplomatic Missions received calls and were asked whether they'd be available to work on the following day, because a Vietnamese delegation was to arrive unexpectedly. Several bodyguards were surprised, since similar visits were usually planned weeks ahead. The next day, the Slovak government plane returned from Prague to Bratislava with the Vietnamese delegation already on board. This was the first time Slovakia provided the delegation with a government plane. However, police officers found it suspicious, since planes were not usually lent to foreign nations – this particular case was later confirmed as an extraordinary situation. The former Interior Minister Kaliňák later explained in an interview for SME daily that the situation seemed normal to him, since the delegation changed their program at the last moment.

² M. Tódová, "How the Slovak Interior Minister parked the airplane for Vietnamese abductors," *Denník N*, 2 August 2018, <<https://dennikn.sk/1195284/how-the-slovak-interior-minister-parked-the-airplane-for-vietnamese-abductors/>>.

Radovan Čulák, identified by the German media as a key witness to the whole incident, was already on board with the Vietnamese delegation. His role was to ensure that everything proceeds smoothly. Another person on board of the plane was Quang Le Hong, an adviser to Slovakia's former Prime Minister Róbert Fico. The limousines driving from the airport with the Vietnamese delegation, including a limousine with the Vietnamese Minister of Public Security To Lam, were accompanied by five motorcycles, which is a high and unusual number given this type of visit. At the time, Kaliňák was waiting in front of the government hotel Bôrik, conducting a nervous phone call, in which he mentioned the word "passport". Three vans from a Prague rental were already parked in front of the hotel – with beaten and drugged Thanh inside one of them. None of the police officers were aware of his presence and the location of these vans was later established by Berlin police thanks to built-in GPS.

After the arrival of the limousines, a meeting between the two delegations started in the hotel Bôrik. The Vietnamese side was represented by the Minister of Public Security To Lam, Duong Minh Hung, Le Manh Cuong, and Pham Van Hieu. The Slovak side was represented by Robert Kaliňák, Radovan Čulák, Ivan Netík, and Quang Le Hong. In addition to these, 19 "B category" persons were present at the meeting whose identity is not known to German investigators, either. During this meeting, the Vietnamese representatives asked the commander of the motorcade Ján H. to add one more van to the procession, which was an unusual request, since the number of cars and people is always specified in advance. At first, the commander refused to include a foreign van, but allowed one more Slovak police van to be added. At this point, the police officers saw the beaten businessman for the first time after Čulák told them to move him from the Czech van into the police vehicle allegedly adding: "Kali knows about this; it's in state interest." Čulák explained to the bodyguards that Thanh had become intoxicated and fallen down the stairs and was to be kept out of sight of the Vietnamese Minister, so he would not embarrass him. Two men got into the van together with Thanh, propping him up to keep him from falling.

When the motorcade arrived at the airport, policemen on duty immediately noticed that an additional vehicle has been added. The cars headed directly to the plane without going through any scanners or controls at the terminal designated for state flights – the Vietnamese Minister boarded the plane first, while Thanh got inside last while being held under the shoulders to make it seem as if he was merely intoxicated and simply being supported.

One of the officers of the passport control that was waiting on the stairs of the plane was unhappy with the number of persons boarding, because some documents were missing. After a few minutes, a white Seat from Slovakia's Interior Ministry arrived at the VIP gate, and that was when the documents were all declared satisfactory.

Even though Slovakia notified Poland that Minister Kaliňák would be on board, only his personal bodyguard Ladislav O. was there to oversee the flight. When asked why the Slovak government lent the plane to the delegation for the second time, Kaliňák replied: "I'm telling you again – he'd [the Vietnamese minister] missed a flight, or something like that, and he asked me whether we could transport them all to Moscow. There was no reason to doubt them."

Kaliňák's reaction

After the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung published a report indicating that a Slovak government plane may have assisted in the kidnapping of a Vietnamese official from Berlin in April 2018, Kaliňák wrote on Facebook that he could not imagine that an official visit of a Vietnamese minister could have been used for anything other than friendly goals. He also claimed that several things did not fit into the theory of an abduction, such as the fact that the name of the prosecuted businessman was not on the list of travelers provided by the Vietnamese authorities, or that they did not transport any immobile patient or handcuffed individual.

Now, a few months later, Kaliňák still stands by his words and denies all allegations. He also considers the Denník N article containing the detailed report

to be a complete nonsense full of fabrications and lies. The former Interior Minister even took a polygraph test in order to convince his opponents and voters that he was telling the truth and was not aware of the abduction, even though Slovak legislation and criminal prosecution bodies do not recognize polygraph tests as reliable and a valid evidence. Kaliňák answered all the questions in the negative and the polygraph evaluated them as true answers. He only lied in two cases – when asked whether he was worried there could be a mistake in the test and when asked whether he had ever done anything bad to anyone. Kaliňák took the test at a private polygraph expert, the same one that opposition MP Igor Matovič visited during one of his disputes with former Prime Minister Fico, saying that he avoided the polygraph at the police and at the National Security Office in order to prevent his critics from claiming that the results might have been manipulated. Kaliňák also called on Denník N to prove their claims in a similar way he proved his.³

President Kiska's reaction

At first, President Kiska stated that he refused to believe Kaliňák would be capable of such an undertaking, but he also added that the former Prime Minister Fico and Interior Minister Kaliňák had unusually close relations with Vietnam through the former Prime Minister's adviser Quang Le Hong. Kiska said: "Last September, I was quite surprised to receive a call from PM Fico. Never before had he called me because of an ambassador. In a very unconventional, almost peremptory manner, he asked me to appoint Mr. Quang as ambassador. Even then, information was available in Slovakia that Quang was not a very reliable person. I told the PM I'd proceed as with other ambassadors. Naturally, I did not appoint him."⁴

³ M. Terenzani, "Abduction: Kaliňák took a polygraph test," *Spectator*, 7 August 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20887291/abduction-kalinak-took-a-polygraph-test.html/>>.

⁴ M. Tódová, "How the Slovak Interior Minister parked the airplane for Vietnamese abductors," *Denník N*, 2 August 2018, <<https://dennikn.sk/1195284/how-the-slovak-interior-minister-parked-the-airplane-for-vietnamese-abductors/>>.

Now, Kiska wants Slovak investigators to tell him the truth about the abduction, saying: “How can we as politicians face hundreds of thousands of people who were calling for a decent Slovakia, a Slovakia where political power will not be abused, when we don’t look into what has been said?”

Kiska also stated that the subject of the abduction had begun becoming a topic of conversation a year ago, with him repeatedly speaking about the duty of Slovakia’s law enforcement authorities to investigate these suspicions thoroughly and honestly. The President also stated: “There is also grave suspicion of gross abuse of state power, as happened when President Michal Kováč’s son was kidnapped.”⁵

On Monday, 6 August, Kiska met with Prime Minister Pellegrini. During this meeting, President stated that he had lost his confidence as the Head of State in the Interior Minister Saková. He again reminded him that he considered her nomination a missed opportunity to show people that the new government was willing to change its style of governance and added that his fear had been fulfilled, since Saková was acting as though she was the right hand of the former Interior Minister Kaliňák. According to Kiska, the current stances of the Interior Ministry under Saková’s leadership on suspicions of abuse of state power have so far appeared as an ill-concealed attempt to hide all traces and protect the former leadership. Kiska said that he was beginning to consider her as an obstacle to honestly explaining what had happened. According to him, if the government wants to convince the citizens of a real interest in resolving the case honestly and truthfully, if the government truly wants to start the process of restoring people’s trust in the state, the Interior ministry is the key.⁶

Prime Minister Pellegrini’s reaction to Kiska’s opinions was not positive. Pellegrini, according to his own words, is running out of patience. He criticized Kiska for his yet another negative stance on the political situation in Slovakia,

⁵--,“Andrej Kiska comments on the Vietnamese abduction and Night Wolves,” 31 July 2018, <<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/andrej-kiska-sa-vyjadril-k-unosu-vietnamca-a-k-nocnym-vlkom/>>.

⁶--,“President on the abduction: The Minister of the Interior has lost the trust,” 6 August 2018, <<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/prezident-medzinarodna-blamaz-je-utokom-na-slovensko/>>.

stating that he had never heard any other President utter so many negative words while addressing his own country. Pellegrini, who is a member of a political party involved in many unsolved cases including the murder of Ján Kuciak, Martina Kušnírová, and the abduction of Thanh, believes that Kiska, who might soon establish his own political party, is abusing his position as President in order to secure his political position in the upcoming parliamentary elections. President's spokesperson Roman Krpela reacted to Pellegrini's statement by telling Pellegrini to "stop sobbing".⁷

President Kiska is not the only one who is disappointed and angered by the allegations. The two strongest opposition parties SaS and OĽaNO proposed criminal prosecution of the former Interior Minister Kaliňák and the head of protocol at the Interior Ministry Radovan Čulák. They also demand resignation of the entire government under Prime Minister Pellegrini. According to these parties, Kaliňák could temper with the witnesses involved in the case of the abduction. Veronika Remišová from OĽaNO also stated that the government lost the right to rule.⁸

Protests soon to resume

Following the international scandal, the initiative For a Decent Slovakia announced that another protest would be organized in September. The reason behind the resumed protests are both the unsolved murder and the abduction of the Vietnamese citizen via Slovakia. According to Juraj Šeliga, one of the organizers of these protests, the requirement for a new, reliable government has not been fulfilled and instead, new scandals are piling up. He wants to believe that there will be an early election and that the current cabinet will fall. The

⁷ V. Kováčová, "Pellegrini kritizoval Kisku, z paláca prišiel tvrdý odkaz: Treba prestať fňukať!", *Plus 1 deň*, 14 August 2018, <<https://www1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/pellegrini-kritizoval-kisku-palaca-prisiel-tvrdy-odkaz-treba-prestat-fnukat/>>.

⁸ --, "Opozícia žiada väzbu pre Kaliňáka a demisiu vlády," *Aktuality*, 3 August 2018 <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/612135/opozicia-ziada-vazbu-pre-kalinaka-a-demisiu-vlady/>>.

initiative had already booked a square in Bratislava and is ready to continue demanding early elections.⁹

⁹ --, "For a Decent Slovakia initiative will resume protests in September," *Spectator*, 17 August 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20893557/for-a-decent-slovakia-initiative-will-resume-protests-in-september.html>>.