



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Political briefing:

The investigation of the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová, resumed protests and Captain Andrej Danko's university degree

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The investigation of the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová, resumed protests and Captain Andrej Danko's university degree

In September, after seven long months of waiting, protesting, and demanding justice, it seems that Slovakia might have gotten some answers after a breakthrough in the investigation of the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová. The police made first official arrests, but despite this progress, another protest organized by the initiative For a Decent Slovakia took place in Bratislava and two other towns in Slovakia. During this month, Denník N also decided to investigate how the Slovak Parliamentary Chairman obtained one of his university degrees, which led to another uproar caused by Andrej Danko's title.

The investigation of the murder

On 17 September, President Andrej Kiska met with the delegation of members of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), who travelled to Slovakia to be briefed on the continuing investigation of the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová.

At this meeting, President Kiska said: "More than six months have passed since Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová were murdered. Although the enormous protests and political crisis have fallen silent, what has remained, unfortunately, is a fundamental, deep mistrust of people in their government, resulting in disappointment, young people fleeing the country and an increase in both extremism and populism. It is up to all of us to restore this trust. [...] Members of the European Parliament are asking about what steps are being taken. Regretfully, I've had to say that nothing substantial has happened in our country. We have seen no major steps taken toward restoring people's

confidence in the government. We don't see the police functioning well. We aren't seeing an independent police inspectorate. Even today, in discussing about how to restore credibility to the Constitutional Court and raise the requirements for judges serving on it, I see great problems. The events surrounding the abduction of a Vietnamese individual and the abuse of official authority in this kidnapping further undermine people's trust and confidence in the state."¹

Seven months after the murder and only few days after this meeting, the police detained eight people suspected of the murder on 27 September. On 30 September, four people have been taken into custody by the Specialized Criminal Court's judge Roman Púchovský. Tomáš S., a former police investigator, Miroslav M., a former member of the Slovak Armed Forces, and Zoltán A. have been charged with premeditated murder, among other crimes, after they were arrested on 27 September, and Alena Z. was arrested on 28 September in her house in Komárno. According to yet unconfirmed information from early reports, Alena Z. could have worked for the controversial tycoon Marián Kočner as an Italian language interpreter. The National Criminal Agency (NAKA) believe it was her who ordered the murder, as reported by the Denník N, even though the prosecutor did not comment on her role in the crime yet. According to Denník N, Alena Z. might not be the mastermind, but rather just an intermediary between the hitmen and those who ordered the crime.

Alena Z., Tomáš S. and Miroslav M. have appealed against the decision and thus the Supreme Court will decide on their custody, but eventually, Judge Púchovský ruled in favor of custody in order to prevent them from fleeing, continuing criminal activities, or influencing witnesses.²

¹ --, "President meets Euro-MPs looking into the investigation of murder," 17 September 2018, <<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/prezident-sa-stretol-s-europoslancami-vo-veci-vysetrovania-vrazdy-jana-a-martiny/>>.

² --, "Court takes four suspects in the Kuciak case into custody," Spectator, 1 October 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20926198/court-takes-four-suspects-in-the-kuciak-case-into-custody.html/>>.

Reaction of the international press organizations

Pauline Adès-Mevel, RSF's head of the EU-Balkans desk, stressed that the most important thing was the arrest of the masterminds, adding that just as in the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia almost a year ago, there was a need for full justice. As stated by Adès-Mevel, journalists working to expose corruption and money laundering are vital to the anti-corruption movement and any attacks on them undermine democracy and the rule of law.

Scott Griffen of the International Press Institute (IPI) also stressed that it was important to remember that justice for Ján and Martina was not only about detaining the person or people who pulled the trigger, but also about finding those behind the murder. According to Griffen, the authorities of the world focus more on the executors of a murder, while the ordering parties often remain out of prison. Therefore, he hopes that Slovakia will not follow this example.³

Resumed protests

On 28 September, protests around the country organized by the initiative For a Decent Slovakia resumed after a short summer break. According to the media, hundreds of people attended the protests in Košice and Banská Bystrica, while an estimated 5,000 people joined the protest in Bratislava. The protesters first gathered at the SNP Square, then marched past the Presidential Palace up to the Castle Hill, where speeches took place in front of the Slovak Parliament building. After the march, Karolína Farská, one of the organizers of the protest, noted that the protest was taking place after the sunset and protesters were asked to bring light torches, candles or to turn on the lights on their mobile phones in order to show that "light prevails over darkness".

The fact that there has been little progress in the investigation of the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová was the main reason why the organizers

³ --, "RSF: The most important thing is the arrest of the masterminds," Spectator, 27 September 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20924637/rsf-the-most-important-thing-is-the-arrest-of-the-masterminds.html>>.

believe Slovaks still need to protest the current government. However, the situation changed just one day before the protests were scheduled to take place, when the police arrested eight people and charged three of them with premeditated murder. Despite the unexpected turn of events, the organizers still insisted that there were other reasons for the protest to take place, such as the lack of clarity surrounding the elections of the Constitutional Court judges and the law on the selection of the new Police Corps president.

The organizers stated: “Even though the government has been through half a year of ruling, we see no improvement, quite the contrary, the situation has deteriorated.” They also listed the appointment of Denisa Saková as the Interior Minister, the scandal surrounding the abduction of the Vietnamese citizen, and the return of former Police Corps President, Tibor Gašpar, to the interior department as an advisor to Saková among the issues they see as problematic.⁴

Andrej Danko and his JUDr. title

In September 2016, Slovak Parliamentary Chairman Andrej Danko (Slovak National Party) became a captain of the Slovak army. Danko received the rank of captain after the Defense Minister Peter Gajdoš awarded it to him “for the support of the armed forces in their modernization process and his aid in speeding up the passing of the law on voluntary military service, which is one of the priorities for the defense department”, even though by that time, Danko has been only through basic military service.⁵ Two years later, Danko is causing another uproar, as he is being accused of obtaining yet another title undeservingly.

According to Denník N, the Parliamentary Chairman is keeping how he acquired his JUDr. title a secret. As stated in the article, Danko’s official

⁴ --, “Thousands marched in Slovak towns again,” Spectator, 28 September 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20925539/thousands-marched-in-slovak-towns-again.html>>.

⁵ --, “Captain Danko causes uproar,” Spectator, 25 Január 2017, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20442500/captain-danko-causes-uproar.html>>.

curriculum vitae shows that he has the title of JUDr., while it mentions only one university - the Comenius University in Bratislava. However, there is no record in the University's list of graduates proving that the Comenius University granted him this particular title, and Danko's rigorous thesis cannot be found in its library. After this article was published, RTVS reporters found a record of a rigorous thesis written in year 2000 by a man named Andrej Danko at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica,⁶ but only several days later, the Matej Bel University adopted a measure ensuring that only authorized persons have access to Andrej Danko's thesis.

The Parliamentary Chairman keeps denying the accusations and refuses to disclose the name of the institution at which he obtained the JUDr. title. As a response to the Denník N article, Danko said: "I'm offended by the daily libel against me by Dennik N. I'm a proper alumnus of the Comenius University in Bratislava, I completed my doctoral studies as well as law exams properly. I obtained all the titles I use in a legal fashion. I won't humor Dennik N in playing its dirty games." He also suspects that the media attacks might be a response to his potential presidential bid, adding: "As soon as my potential candidacy for president began to be discussed, they started waging a dirty and wicked campaign not only against me, but also against my entire family."

According to the opposition party Freedom and solidarity, Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS), Danko's concealing his rigorous thesis is discreditable and not normal. Another opposition party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) has called on Danko to dispel the suspicions by publishing his rigorous thesis and disclosing the name of the institution at which he obtained his degree without delay.⁷ Whether or not will Danko eventually do so, remains uncertain.

⁶ M. Benedikovičová, "Šéf parlamentu Andrej Danko používa titul JUDr., ako ho získal, nie je jasné," Denník N, 25 Január 2017, <<https://dennikn.sk/1233906/danko-titul/>>.

⁷ --, "Danko: I Acquired My JUDr. Title Legally, I Demand Apology," TASR, 24 September 2018, <<http://www.tasr.sk/tasr-clanok/TASR:20180924TBB00218/>>.

Conclusion

Scandals such as the one involving Andrej Danko usually cost politicians their entire careers. However, it seems that when it comes to Slovakia and Slovak politicians, nothing really matters. Any accusation can be simply denied and later forgotten as if nothing ever happened. No politician seems to feel the moral obligation to face the consequences of their actions, no matter how serious or wrong they are, while in other countries, simply having an expensive wristwatch is enough reason to resign. While having a wristwatch that is too expensive seems like a truly ridiculous reason, not being able to or not willing to prove the validity of one's academic title while still claiming to have one is bad enough. Of course, this scandal pales compared to the investigation of the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová and the possibility of our politicians being somehow involved. Whether or not they are, will hopefully be revealed by further investigation.