

ROBERT

FICO

**THE MAN WHO STOLE
THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC.
THE POLITICAL JOURNEY
OF PRO-RUSSIAN POPULIST**

PETER BÁRDY

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**Robert Fico - The man who stole the Slovak Republic.
The political journey of pro-Russian populist**

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ISBN: 978-80-69052-07-9

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PROLOGUE

I have met Robert Fico in person only once. He didn't know me and didn't know who I was until I introduced myself to him. It was at a meeting with editors-in-chief that he called after the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová. Shortly before that, at his own press conference, he had laid out a million euros on the table and put on an absurd spectacle of which even the makers of Balkan films about the mafia would not have been ashamed.

We hadn't seen each other before and haven't since. Although a few people told me that his minions were putting his phone calls on speakerphone when they complained to me about how unfair *Aktuality.sk*, including me personally, was to Smer and its leader.

A strange way of scoring points with the party boss.

I remember very well how carefully we approached how to write, how to report on the murder of our colleague Ján. How to honour his legacy and at the same time to confront this terrible event that was connected to Fico. After all, he was the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister under whom a journalist was murdered in Slovakia. I asked my colleagues in the editorial office to refrain from anything that could harm the memory of Ján and Martina, their families, but also, the credibility and impartiality of the media. We also decided that in the weeks following the murder we would not stand on the podiums of the protest and mourning rallies to which we were invited and where speakers called for, among other things, the fall of the government and early elections. We had to stay away to prevent our editorial team and Ján Kuciak from being dragged into politics. Many people understood this attitude, others condemned us for it.

Today I know with 100% certainty that not being on the podiums was the right decision. From the horrible moment we learned of the murder, it was 16 long days before I wrote the first critical commentary about what we had witnessed, what was on our minds and what we wanted to say out loud:

“First and foremost, we need to acknowledge what is responsible for the murder of our colleague and his fiancée. If it is confirmed that his work was the motive, it is the corrupt environment. And therefore, morally, all those who have allowed Slovakia to get to where it has got to are implicated. Slovakia is drowning in a morass of corruption,

and the political elites have only watched it happen for years. Some of them have been proven to be connected to toxic people, tax cheats, speculators...

The departure of Robert Kaliňák must be just the beginning, the beginning of a big clean-up. It is a legitimate demand from the public to have people fighting corruption at the head of the country. It is a legitimate demand for the public to want to live in a country where corruption is not a standard that is excused by hand-waving.

People want to live in a country where journalists who expose corruption cases are not insulted, ridiculed and unprotected. Where investigators, prosecutors and judges have a free hand to fight evil.”¹

When we published the commentary, my phone started ringing, messages came in via Facebook and email in even greater numbers than ever... They had a common point. A kind of public satisfaction that I hadn’t written and published it sooner. They were waiting for us to comment. And we couldn’t be quiet. We had been quiet for too long. A Slovak political marketer wrote to me at the time: “Only today you’ve gone all out – I understand why and congratulations.”

It scared me a little: “Is that accurate in your opinion? I’m still trying to be restrained.”

He answered plainly, “So you weren’t anymore. I see it exactly the same way, and I’m glad you’ve now written it directly.”

Since then, I have often wondered whether I am being factual, whether I have fallen into activism that can damage not only the outcome but also journalism, or whether I am confusing feelings and desires with reality.

When I decided to write a political profile of Robert Fico in the autumn of 2022, I knew I was embarking on a difficult job. I did not want to write a summary of what is known, nor a book of Bárdy’s views on Fico. That would have been too little.

If the book was to be made, I had to talk to people who were close to him. Those who know him or have known him are the people who know what he is really like. Not the curated image that we perceive of him from press conferences, harvest festivals, celebrations of International Women’s Day or protests, where he incites people to disobedience and distrust in the state.

I wanted to understand who Robert Fico is. Whether and how his personality has changed over the long decades in politics, or whether he is still driven by the same things. How his view of politics and the state has changed. And what has happened when, after more than 30 years in politics, he is considered by many to be a security risk and a colluder with Russia, which has put us on the list of enemy states. I have had dozens of meetings and hundreds of hours of discussions with people who were or still are Fico's political contemporaries.

With people with whom he cooperated or was in open conflict. I would like to thank them all very much. They spoke very frankly, they revealed to me the thinking of Robert Fico and the backstage of Smer.

I also approached Robert Kaliňák, who was at first willing to meet, even to plead with Fico, so that he could also answer the questions in the book. I emailed the request for an interview to both the press department and the Smer secretariat, because at the time Fico said that he did not have a mobile phone so as not to be disturbed.

But that he would know within five minutes if people contacted him via the party headquarters. Even after a few weeks, Fico has not got in touch, nor has Kaliňák responded to the messages in which I asked him for the promised meeting.

Several others politely declined, saying they were afraid of what would happen if Smer formed a government after the 2023 elections, while others spoke only off the record, so that I could understand the functioning of the party and the thinking of its leader, but not to write about it. In any case, I thank them for that. It was useful.

Thanks to them, and thanks to the editor of this book, Lukáš Diko, I can say today that following in the footsteps of the political story of Robert Fico was a good decision. All the more so because Robert Fico is one of the few active politicians, if not the only one, whose story has been part of the story of modern Slovakia from the very beginning.

Why did he go into politics? Is he a political idealist trying to build a just society and a strong welfare state? Or is he a cynical political opportunist who just wanted a better life than his parents had?

Is he a politician who is out of control, or is he really only interested in power, and once he has it, can't give it up? What were and are his motivations? What kind of person is he and what political path

has he followed? It is fair to admit that I have been critical of the Fico governments for years. It was his populism, his manipulation of people's fears, his profligacy with public finances, the cases associated with his people and the style of his communication, which included arrogance, aggressiveness, vulgar insolence, condescension and lies.

The murder of Ján and Martina and what Fico did in relation to it, how he let the situation escalate, his conspiracy and inability to accept political responsibility – all this left an indelible mark on me. That is why this book about the political career of Slovakia's most successful politician begins with the events following the tragedy of 21 February 2018, which was supposed to transform Slovakia into a just state with the rule of law, fighting corruption and organised crime.

CAREER AND LIFE RUINED

MURDER

MEETING WITH
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

ORDERED AN ORBÁN?

MURDER

On Monday, February 26, 2018, at around half past six in the morning, my phone rang. My deputy Ján Petrovič was calling to say that two people with the initials of Ján Kuciak and his girlfriend Martina Kušnírová had been found murdered in the small village of Veľká Mača.

It was a huge shock for me. I didn't believe it could have happened, and all the time I was filled with a combination of tremendous fear and sadness. On top of that, nothing had been confirmed and all we knew was the four letters of the two names.

All the way to work I kept telling myself: This can't be true. At half past seven I got a call from the Minister of the Interior, Robert Kaliňák. In the broken voice of a man in a very bad mental state, he confirmed to me that our worst fears had come true and expressed his sincere condolences. The sequence of events was swift.

It was one of the worst moments of my life. And it also shook Robert Fico's life.

At that time, Smer started its regular show, the celebration of International Women's Day. On Saturday, 24 February, Fico addressed hundreds of people in Bardejov from the position of presenter. The ministers and deputy leaders of Smer Richard Raši, Peter Kažimír and Peter Žiga were his sparring partners in front of a large screen with red roses in the shape of a heart.

"The four of us have never talked about women before and you finally have a chance to say something honest. When we talk about women, we should talk about the woman as a mother, wife and finally mother-in-law. And if Kaliňák were here, we would probably also talk about mistresses, but I don't think Kaliňák would like it if I said that today,"¹ joked the jovial leader of Smer, with the female part of the audience appreciating this humour the most.

He boasted that on March 19 he and his wife Svetlana would celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary: "We lived in an apartment building on the third floor and on the eighth floor lived a neighbour who loved my wife incredibly and always came to see her.

When he took the elevator from the eighth floor, he would stop on the third floor, knock and said: 'Svetlanka, hello, how are you? What do you need?' He would talk to her and go downstairs. He was an extremely lazy man. He never did any work in his own home. And one

day he came in as my wife was just taking out the garbage. ‘Svetlana, where are you going? What are you doing?’ She said she was going to take out the garbage, and he said he would take it out. He took out her trash can, went downstairs, emptied the trash and came back. Not to the third floor, but to the eighth floor. He opened the door and walked into the house with the garbage can.

And his wife asked him what it was in his hands, and he said it was Svetlana’s trash can. “So you’re going to Svetlana’s to take out the garbage?’ Since then, he has been emptying the garbage, washing dishes and floors. He shouldn’t have come to my wife. He could have had peace of mind.”²

Fico was beaming with satisfaction. The audience was hanging on his words.

“On Sunday, 25 February, we were returning from Michalovce by car, with Robo going to the FIFA meeting at the Incheba Exhibition Centre the next morning. He had a speech there. Then we were to travel to Rimavská Sobota for a cabinet meeting,” recalls Roman Šipoš, then head of Prime Minister Fico’s office. “On the morning of Monday 26 February, around half past seven, I received a phone call from the prime minister’s spokeswoman, Beatrice Szabóová, who did not normally phone me. She asked if I knew what was wrong with the Prime Minister, that she could not reach him. We did not have a very good relationship, so I just sort of brushed her off. She told me that there was an extraordinary situation, that the journalist Ján Kuciak had been murdered. A while later, Kaliňák called,” Šipoš recalls. He, too, was looking for Fico. “It was the time of day when he would go for a run along the embankment. He gave me information about the murder of the journalist. Later, when Robert and I were moving to Incheba, I asked him if Kaliňák had called him. He replied that he had, adding that he did not know the murdered journalist either. I think it hit him. At the FIFA meeting, he just read out his speech, which was unusual for him. It was obvious that he was not himself,” recalled Šipoš about the day when the world learned about the murder of our colleague Ján Kuciak.

A source, whose credibility I was convinced of several times, later told me that Kaliňák learned about the murder from his bodyguard. When he told him, Kaliňák asked: “Who did us this?” Shortly before

lunch at 11:23 a.m., the Facebook fan page of Robert Fico and Smer published the status: “The murder of two young people is a heinous act under any circumstances and must have no place in our society. If it turns out that the death of the investigative reporter was related to his work as a journalist, it would be an unprecedented attack on the freedom of the press and democracy in Slovakia.

All Slovak governments since 1998 have respected the role of the media in Slovak society and have perceived freedom of the press as an indispensable part of the democratic system. This is evidenced by Slovakia’s consistent top ranking in the respected Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, where for example last year, they ranked us 17th. Even the Smer party, during its period of single-party government, despite its substantive reservations about the quality of journalistic work, did not take any measures that would restrict media freedom in Slovakia. The murder of two young people, like all similar cases, should be investigated as soon as possible, the perpetrators should be identified and punished. The Government of the Slovak Republic will do its utmost, within the limits of its powers, to ensure that the law enforcement authorities and other security forces can act as effectively as possible in this case. However, we reject the political abuse of this tragedy, which the Slovak opposition has almost immediately started.”

Later, another status was added: “The SMER-SD party is cancelling today’s celebration of the International Youth Day in Detva in connection with the tragic death of journalist Ján Kuciak; we will inform the public of an alternative date.”

Neither Fico nor the people in Smer responsible for communication had at all understood what had happened. That the murder of a journalist is an exceptional and very serious matter. Many people knew that there would be a storm, that people would be angry, that the opposition would demand their heads, but they believed that they would be able to withstand it.

Even the leader of Smer could not estimate what the course of events would be and how much this tragedy would change events in the state, in his party and in his life. However, we now know that the murder of two young people paradoxically touched him less than his own political and human fate.

MEETING WITH EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Tuesday, February 27 was a hectic day. Dozens of mainly foreign journalists and TV crews came to the editorial office of Aktuality.sk to cover the events related to Ján's murder. We felt very tired and sad. I remember my colleagues and I discussing whether it was worthwhile to continue our journalistic work at all.

The state, stolen by Robert Fico and his minions, had created an environment for “our people” instead of protecting its citizens like Jano and Martina.

I had been at the police station the afternoon before. The first days after the murder I went there quite often, but I took it as my duty. It was the least I could do to investigate it.

During the course of the day, I received a message that Fico wanted to meet with the representatives of the editorial offices. The day before, probably all the editors-in-chief of the national media had signed a statement in which they warned that “the murder of a journalist is a serious sign that crime is turning against one of the most important pillars of freedom: freedom of speech and the right of citizens to control those in power and those who transgress the law.” The initiative also included a call for “the state to take all necessary steps not only to track down the criminals but also to create the conditions for journalists to work safely”.

We have not found out who came up with the idea for Fico to meet with media representatives. In the editorial office we just shook our heads. I must admit, in the frame of mind I was in, I did not want to go to the meeting at first. But in the end, I did not refuse the invitation. After all, the heads of all the major newsrooms were going, so our ignoring it wouldn't have solved anything. It would have been a mistake.

When I arrived at the Office of Government, I met Denník N reporter Monika Tódová at the door. “Peter, did you see that?” she asked me. I didn't know what she was talking about, because every moment there were new and new reports, different speculations, reactions...

“I don't know what you mean,” I admitted.

“That million on the table! It's crazy.”

Before the meeting with the editors-in-chief, Fico, Robert Kaliňák and the police president Tibor Gašpar had convened a briefing entitled “Update on the murder of Ján Kuciak and his girlfriend”.

In the yellow lounge of the Office of Government, a million euros in cash lay on a shiny wooden table beside them. They had promised it as a reward for relevant information that would help in the search for the people responsible for the murder of Ján and Martina.

It is still said that Erik Tomáš was behind the idea of a million on the table. According to Béla Bugár, Kaliňák tried to persuade Fico to do the press conference without money. “Fico finally decided that they would do it to show that they were willing to give money to reveal who had murdered Kuciak.”

Ridiculous.

After the “cash” cases connected with alleged tax cheats Marian Kočner and Ladislav Bašternák, which were also exposed by the murdered Jano Kuciak, Fico, Kaliňák and Gašpar stood in front of journalists next to a million euros in “cash”. With an armed policeman in a balaclava in the room, they staged a cynical performance, thereby proving that they were completely unaware of what had happened. They were so staggeringly out of touch with reality that Fico thought the scene was a good idea, as if it had been cut from a mafia film.

I’ve seen that press conference on tape several times since then.

While Fico began to speak, Kaliňák and Gašpar stared blankly at the ground. And when their boss promised a million for information and pointed a finger at the wad of cash, you could sense him trembling.

The last big topic Jano worked on was the activities of the Italian mafia in eastern Slovakia and its connection to Fico’s advisor Maria Trošková and Viliam Jasaň, the head of crisis management and state security at the Office of Government. Information about the text, which indicated that the mafia had de facto shaken hands with the Office of Government, had already leaked to the public. At the press conference, journalists confronted Fico with this topic as well.

“You are linking innocent people to a double murder, that’s over the line,” Fico defended his own people. Asked whether or not he felt responsible, he responded irritably: “I didn’t quite understand your question... Yesterday the first suspect was identified, today the second,

tomorrow you may identify the third. Don't link people without evidence to premeditated murder. That's over the line."

The meeting with the editors-in-chief took place in the next room – in a green lounge with a long table. Here, too, the relationship of the head of the Italian businessmen from eastern Slovakia, Antonino Vadala, with the connection to the criminal organisation 'Ndrangheta, was discussed with Fico's adviser. After all, this was serious business.

And a journalist who had been covering the issue had been murdered. They sat me down somewhere in the middle of the table. On my left hand sat the editor-in-chief of *Nový Čas* Júlia Kováčová, on my right the editor-in-chief of the daily SME Beata Balogová, and next to her the editor-in-chief of *Denník N* Matúš Kostolný. On the opposite side sat Erik Tomáš (main Fico's press speaker and advisor), Robert Kaliňák, Robert Fico and Tibor Gašpar. I had Kaliňák opposite me. There was a mixture of nervousness and the smell of alcohol in the air. At that time, Fico was quite openly said to have been drinking too much, and his glassy gaze also suggested that. I had never met Fico or Kaliňák before. Only once with Gašpar, the day before, before the first questioning at the police headquarters.

The Prime Minister took the floor. He tried to be circumspect and said something about how they cared about the murder investigation. Actually, I didn't care. I felt anger mixed with sadness, but at the same time I knew I had to check myself and remain as neutral as possible. I looked at Fico and watched his pathetic sad tone of voice change to a lighter one as he and Kaliňák joked about the subject of Vadala and Trošková's relationship.

"So how was it? Was she with Vadala or not? However, Vadala went to Italy and got married there. So, what kind of relationship did he and Trošková have?" the jovial Kaliňák waved his hands, as if telling a funny story about a partner's infidelity. Fico nodded with a bitter smile. He was no longer the jovial host from the Women's Day rally.

When Fico and Kaliňák started to talk down the importance of the investigative journalistic work of Ján Kuciak, I had to speak up.

I introduced myself. Fico froze, and when our eyes met, he looked away and began to look for support in Erik Tomáš, who had become one of his closest people after he lost the 2014 presidential election. But Tomáš turned the other way. That's when I realised that Fico was

not as strong and bulletproof as he appeared on the outside, and that he needed to have people around him to give him support.

I warned him to stop talking down Ján's work. During this very strange meeting, Fico's spokeswoman Beatrice Szabóová walked around the table and took pictures. I didn't want to be in the photo, so I hid behind one editor-in-chief.

After the meeting, Fico immediately disappeared. Out of courtesy, Kaliňák came over, shook my hand and disappeared into the darkness of the corridors of the Office of Government.

I then hurried to the editorial office as they were finishing preparations for the release of Ján's last article.

At 7:35 p.m. I posted a short status on Facebook: "Tonight at midnight – Ján's message... Thank you all for your support."

I had no idea what impact it would have. On the one hand, I had people writing to me expressing support, but the 'other side' knew that what happened at midnight could be a major problem for them. They were trying to find out what was going to happen, what we were going to release...

The people from Smer and the Office of Government tried to soften me up so that I would reveal what the content of the article would be.

Ján's last text *The Italian Mafia in Slovakia*. Its tentacles reach into politics was published after midnight on 28 February. We provided it to all Slovak media that expressed an interest in it. We translated it into German and English and sent it to editorial offices all over Europe.

Millions of people learned about the Italians' activities in Eastern Slovakia, about their suspicious business, about their toxic links to one of the most powerful mafias in Europe – the Italian 'Ndrangheta, about Mr Jasaň, Miss Trošková and Fico. About the terrible condition of our state.

ORDERED AN ORBÁN?

"George Soros and his network take every opportunity to overthrow governments that oppose immigration," commented Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the situation in Slovakia just 12 days after the public learned of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Attempts to link the murder to conspiracy theories appeared almost immediately.