

Slovakia: Fico sues editor for use of photo

Slovakia's Prime Minister launches SLAPP case against leading investigative journalist

Media freedom groups today condemned the legal action taken by the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, against the editor in chief of Aktuality.sk, Peter Bárdy, as well Ringier Slovak Media, the publisher of the book, for the use of a photo of Fico on the cover of the book 'Fico-Obsessed with Power,' We call on the court to dismiss the case.

Fico is claiming 100.000 euros from Bárdy, and another 100.000 euros from the publisher as compensation for non-material damage caused by the choice of cover photo. Fico's lawyers claim that Fico has the right to decide how his photograph is used.

The action has all the hallmarks of a SLAPP, or Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation, that is used by the powerful to intimidate journalists and end their investigative reporting.

The book, which charts Fico's long political career, includes statements by Fico's colleagues and political opponents.

Aktuality.sk is one of Slovakia's leading news media with a reputation for hard hitting investigative journalism. It was also the home of [Jan Kuciak](#) before he was murdered in February 2018 following his exposures into corruption in the heart of the Slovak state during Fico's last tenure as Prime Minister. The killing of Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, sparked huge public protests, leading to Fico's eventual resignation. Fico has regularly blamed the media for his departure. He wasted little time in [acting](#) against those he described as 'enemy media' after returning to power with the 2023 elections.

"We are convinced that we have not violated the law, which we will defend and explain in court. And we believe in a fair trial," said editor-in-chief Peter Bárdy. "If someone wanted to intimidate me with this lawsuit, if it was meant to trigger self-censorship in me, it didn't work. I will continue to do what I have been doing for almost three decades in journalism and together with the editors of Aktuality.sk, but also with many great journalists from other Slovak media, we will point out problems in the state, criticize politicians, heads of institutions and publish verified information in the public interest. Because that is our job,"

According to our analysis, the lawsuit fulfills key indicators for a SLAPP. There is an imbalance of power between Fico as the claimant and Bárdy as the defendant, considering Fico's political influence and the lawsuit targets not only the publisher but also Bárdy in his individual capacity. The lawsuit does not object to the content or the veracity of the information in the book, and the damages requested, namely EUR 100,000 from each defendant, are highly excessive.

The Council of Europe and the European Union have introduced new instruments to counter SLAPPs, including the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive which member states should implement and transpose. Instead of intimidating journalists with SLAPP legal actions, Fico and his government should focus on implementing these standards at the national level.

The Media Freedom Rapid Response consortium and its partners will continue to closely monitor the SLAPP case as well as document it on Mapping Media Freedom and the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists.

Undersigned Organisations

International Press Institute (IPI)

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

OBC Transeuropa (OBCT)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO)