

ARTAN CUKU

ON THE EVENING OF 8 APRIL 2017, Albanian police were alerted to an incident in Albania's capital, Tirana. There had been a murder. The victim, it turned out, was the ex-Albanian police chief, Commissar Artan Cuku. He was found dead by his wife, Marjola, just after 8 p.m. at the entrance to their apartment block.

'I had just arrived home with the two kids when I heard some voices, then two shots were fired,' she said. 'I tried to phone Artan to tell him something was going on, but he did not answer. I then went straight to the entrance, where I saw him stretched out on the ground. When I tried to lift his head, I saw that there was no sign of life. I do not know how long I stayed there weeping.'

Commissar Cuku was a prominent public figure in the fight against organized crime in Albania. During his 20-year career in the police service, he had arrested about 1000 people connected to known criminal groups. Tonin Vocj, Director of the Criminal Police Department at the General Directorate of State Police, told the author: 'Artan Cuku showed tremendous determination to fight criminality in general and organized crime in particular. He directly investigated more than 45 criminal organizations. He was the protagonist behind investigations into many serious criminal incidents across the country. In Vlora alone, where Cuku had served as director of police, 21 organized-crime groups were bust and brought to justice, and 47 police operations were successfully completed.'

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Enrik Mehmeti, a television journalist based in Vlora who reported on many of the Cuku's criminal investigations, said: 'During his operations, Artan Cuku was emotionally and physically charged, leading by example and encouraging other police officers in the fight against the known criminal underworld, for whom the fear of being apprehended by law-enforcement agents was great. The faith he created and courage he showed turned him into a hero of the city of Vlora. He enjoyed good relations with everyone but was aggressive when it came to dealing with criminals.'

The prosecution services and the police, under pressure from the media and the general public, acted quickly. Their investigations found that the shooter was one Mikel Shalari, a 24-year-old resident of Tirana with a criminal past. Two months after the incident, police arrested Shalari, who confessed to prosecutors of how he had been offered a fee of €25 000 by Bledar Jambelli for the killing, €3 000 of which had been paid up front, with the balance to follow after the job had been completed.



Mikel Shalari, Artan Cuku's hired assassin

Jambelli – aka Rikardo Muho – from Fier, Albania, was a prominent criminal who was well known to the Albanian police because of his involvement in illicit activities in Spain and other European countries. According to the police, Jambelli masterminded Cuku's murder, and, following Shalari's testimony, he was arrested by INTERPOL in Greece on 31 December 2018, and charged for Cuku's assassination. The court found him guilty and he was imprisoned.

**'I'M NOT AFRAID OF DEATH
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Cuku's killing can most likely be linked to when he was director of Vlora city police department and was in charge of the investigation leading to Jambelli's arrest in 2012 for a murder committed in 2006. A few months later, however, senior police officers took Cuku off the case and the courts released Jambelli due to lack of evidence.

Ironically, when he was murdered, Cuku was no longer serving in the police – he had been replaced in June 2014 following a shift in Albanian politics. Former General Police Director Ahmet Prençi said: 'Imagine a police officer who had been working on the front line of the fight against crime and suddenly is out of work and thrown onto the street. It was a shameful, absurd and unjustified departure.' In all probability, assassinating Cuku was therefore designed to send out a threatening message to those who might have wanted to reopen investigations into Jambelli's criminal activities in the future. According to Prençi, 'opening an old file in Albania would have been very damaging to him'.

In a conversation with his wife, Cuku had once said, 'I'm not afraid of death as long as I am in God's law. I am more afraid to live as a coward than to die as a man.' It seems that Artan Cuku's words were prophetic; not long after expressing this sentiment, he was found dead.

On 2 April 2019, Artan Cuku was awarded the title of Martyr of the Nation by the Albanian government for having sacrificed his life because of his duty.



Artan Cuku, in his office