

Press freedom is under attack

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Opinion

The murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia along with 1000 other journalists since 2006 highlights the growing intimidation and dangers reporters face.



Daphne Caruana Galizia | *Photo credit: Press Association*

The European Parliament's press conference room in Strasbourg recently saw a short but moving ceremony on 14 November. The gathering was held to honour investigative blogger and journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was recently assassinated in her native Malta.

Present was Parliament President Antonio Tajani, himself a former journalist. Galizia, who blogged about graft across Malta's political divides, died when a bomb ripped through her car. Her brutal murder has re-focused attention on the growing risk facing journalists.

German Greens MEP Sven Giegold said her "horrible" death shows that "the fight of journalists and

whistleblowers to make business more transparent is essential, but also terribly dangerous, even within the EU. The EU cannot defend freedom of the press internationally when journalists are intimidated or, worse, murdered.”

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The Greens have advanced the idea of a Galizia ‘European prize for investigative journalism’, modelled on the Sakharov Prize.

Galizia’s son Matthew supports the idea, saying, “My mother was assassinated because, like many strong journalists, she stood between the rule of law and those who sought to violate it.”

Eight of the world’s leading news organisations have urged the European Commission to probe the murder; otherwise, it would achieve its “clear objective of silencing her investigation into corruption at the highest levels in Malta”.

Signatories include James Harding, BBC news and current affairs director, Jerome Fenoglio, director of Le Monde, Katharine Viner, editor-in-chief of the Guardian and Dean Baquet, New York Times executive editor.

A Commission spokesperson said, “The right of a journalist to investigate, ask uncomfortable questions and report effectively is at the heart of our values and needs to be guaranteed at all times.”

However, concerns remain over the plight facing journalists and the wider future of the entire ‘Fourth Estate’. Attacks seem to happen with impunity, with Unesco reporting that 90 percent rate of such crimes remain unsolved.

Brussels-based Italian journalist, Maria-Laura Franciosi, said, “Remember, for each journalist killed, attacked, threatened or detained, countless others are intimidated to self-censor, eroding press freedoms and depriving entire societies of important information.”

Italian NGO “Ossigeno per l’informazione” (Oxygen for Information) is dedicated to defending journalists’ right to free expression. It has also been threatened because of its work.

It proposes creating ‘hotspots’ in all European countries, where press integrity experts ascertain the validity of their claims and alert national authorities to threats to press freedom, allowing them to find ways to improve the situation for journalists.

Given the number of serious attacks against Italian journalists and bloggers - 321 so far in 2017 and 3,406 from 2006 to date - and the almost impossible task of identifying and punishing the attackers, Franciosi says it is urgent to create an Italian ‘hotspot’.

Alberto Spampinato, director of “Ossigeno per l’Informazione” said, “These actions are spreading a kind of violent censorship; we have to call it by its real name. We need to demand that deliberate

violations of the right to information are punished as a crime”.

Tom Gibson, EU representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on the EU to do more. “The murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia should be provoking EU institutions to think of how they can work together to better protect journalists.”

Gibson added, “It is an increasingly vulnerable profession. Around Europe, journalists find themselves at risk of legal threats, online harassment, smear campaigns, physical and psychological attacks and death threats. Female journalists are increasingly targeted online.”

Outside Europe, the murder of female journalist Gauri Lankesh shocked India.

Meanwhile in the UK, the BBC’s political correspondent Laura Kuenssberg was assigned bodyguards at the Labour party conference following online threats.

Although Gibson welcomed statements from European leaders for full investigations into Galizia’s murder, he said, “This demonstrates how journalists in EU member states can work in isolation, receive threats yet have little to no support from EU institutions.

“In such cases, journalists are forced to keep their heads down and force themselves to bear the pressure. Fortunately, not all threats lead to such a terrible tragedy, it signals that they must be taken seriously.”

Gibson believed it was now time for the EU institutions to ask themselves: how can we read the warning signs in advance and how do we offer viable protection and support?

William Horsley, media freedom representative of the association of European journalists, quoted UN Secretary General António Guterres saying “‘When journalists are targeted, the kind of news that gets silenced - corruption, conflicts of interest, illegal trafficking - it is exactly the kind of information the public needs to know.’” He pointed out that since 2006 as many as 1000 journalists had been killed worldwide.

He believed it is not enough for EU member states and their politicians to mourn this death; “They must tackle the root causes of violence and threats against journalists - the misuse of laws, the lack of judicial independence and safeguards against abuse of power, and effective political controls over the media.”

He added, “These fatal flaws exist not only in Mexico, Russia or Turkey. They are fostered by powerful forces within the body politic of European countries. The European Parliament should intensify its scrutiny to expose the rot. Member states must be pressed to live up to their legally binding obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.”

UK journalist Paul Marston told The Parliament Magazine, “I have worked for newspapers - full time then as a freelance - for over 60 years, and written many news stories for most of the English national papers, and it saddens me to see the decline in the printed press.

“Circulations have slumped so revenue from advertising has also fallen, and even The Guardian regularly pleads for financial help from its readers. Inevitably the number of journalists employed in the provinces and the London-based papers has been severely cut back, and it must be much more difficult for young people to get a foothold in the print world.”

“With fewer people reading newspapers, the fact that children start acquiring skills on computers even in primary schools means they are growing up with the know-how to go online and read the

daily news on the numerous websites rather than buy newspapers as they grow up.”

He adds, “Newspapers have been closing down or being merged, so if this trend continues where will people in the provinces go to have their complaints or other stories aired in future. They will have no voice against authority, or an ally to help right wrongs in their communities. It’s very sad, but inevitable, especially if you check the scores of free channels on our TV screens these days and see so many of them packed with adverts.”

Marston asks, “Where will the journalists of the future learn the trade? On social media? Perish the thought. It’s rather like the massive supermarkets and on-line shopping giants killing off the corner shops and high street shops. Read all about it. But where?”

Dennis Abbott, a former UK newspaper journalist, said, “Newspaper owners say the likes of Google, Facebook and news aggregation sites should pay a license fee to publishers for the right to use their content. They believe this is crucial to safeguard the future of journalism and journalist jobs.”

He added, “Thousands of journalists are losing their jobs each year because the big tech firms use their news stories for free but there are signs that the tide is turning against the big tech companies and their fake ‘freedom’ narrative.”

As veteran US broadcaster Walter Cronkite reminds us, “journalism is what we need to make democracy work.”

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