

# THEIR OWN BACKYARD: HOW SAFE ARE JOURNALISTS IN THE EU?

Freedom of the press is a core pillar of the EU. But one can observe cracks in this fundamental. Warsaw and Budapest are accused of infringing upon it, but those deep rifts are also reaching neighboring countries. Has the overall situation for European journalists changed, and how can we protect them – and democracy?

**T**he picturesque Mediterranean island of Malta was left in shock. In autumn 2017, a car bomb took the life of Daphne Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist. Two years later, the Maltese businessman Yorgen Fenech, whose company 17 Black was scrutinized by Caruana Galizia, was arrested. At the end of November, Chief of Staff Keith Schembri was being targeted by the investigators, several Maltese ministers resigned, and another resignation announcement by Malta's Prime Minister Joseph Muscat followed.

**ONLY HALF A** year after the attack on Caruana Galizia, the Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak suffered the same fate: alongside his fiancée, he was shot dead in his home close to Trnava. His attacker's trial began in mid-December. One of the defendants is the businessman Marian Kocner, who is said to have ordered the murder. Various people from politics and the judiciary, who were in contact with Kocner, have resigned.

**BOTH VICTIMS WERE** investigative journalists. They tackled scandals regarding corruption and tax fraud and were living in constant jeopardy. Their

tragic murders lead us to the following questions: have external threats towards journalists increased in general? Above all, can we provide better protection for journalistic work in the EU? Hungary and Poland are notorious for restricting media. The issue, however, is more widespread.

**THE ANNUAL REPORT** 2019 by the Partner Organisations to the Council of Europe gives an overview of the current safety of journalists in Europe. According to its authors, including the Association of European Journalists and Reporters without Borders, press freedom is at its most fragile since the fall of the Iron Curtain. The report depicts a disquieting image of the current situation of journalists across the continent – violent crimes and impunity have increased, and legal protections have often been denied. In comparison to 2018, the number of recorded threats, including death threats, has doubled. Moreover, verbal abuse and public stigmatisation of the media is rising.

**IN THIS CONTEXT**, such cases were not observed only in Turkey or Russia, but also in member states of the EU – aside from Poland and Hungary. Out of all examined countries, Italy had the highest increase



Memorial for Daphne Caruana Galizia in Valletta. Source: Wikimedia Commons

of media freedom alerts in 2018. According to the report, organised crime remains one of the biggest threats to journalists, followed by neo-fascist groups. Additionally, ex-Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has expressed hostility towards the media. Earlier this year he threatened the anti-mafia author Roberto Saviano with the withdrawal of his police protection due to his criticism of the government.

**THE INTERNATIONAL NON-PROFIT** organization Reporters without Borders has been sharply critical of the threats made by the then-Interior Minister. Still Juliane Matthey, press officer of the organisation, underlines this: “What will become of this threat remains to be seen, as Salvini is no longer in office and his Lega party is no longer involved in the government.”

**REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS** laments the overall anti-media discourse by populist forces. Not only in Italy, but also in Central and Western Europe, verbal violence and accusations have intensified. A recent example is the German TV-journalist Georg Restle. After criticizing the party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), he received a death threat by letter. According to the TV-channel WDR, the

letter is to be assigned to the “right-wing extremist spectrum”. This is not an individual case.

**THE SPOKESPERSON OF** the German Journalists Association (DJV), Hendrik Zörner, stresses that animosity towards the media from citizens is increasing: “Look at the marches and demonstrations, such as from Pegida supporters, where one can observe violence against journalists”. The Berlin-based freelance journalist Osia Katsidou doubts that the “media-bashing” by the populist right – despite the rising threats – will change any time soon: “Their political success is directly linked to their rhetoric – regardless of whether they are against journalists, refugees or climate activists.”

**THIS PHENOMENON CAN** also be observed on a local level. According to Anders Nilsson, editor-in-chief at Örebro's largest local newspaper *Nerikes Allehanda*, two journalists have experienced physical assault. “We had some incidents where we encouraged our reporters not to be in the middle of the crowd. The same goes for demonstrations, to always keep an eye out.

This is part of our preparation - if we know that the situation is going to be like this, we contact the police beforehand for information on how to minimise the risks", explains Nilsson.

**NEVERTHELESS, THIS WORRYING** development is not left unanswered: the new EU Commissioner Vera Jourová expressed concern about verbal attacks on journalists by politicians. At her October hearing, she announced that she plans to provide more protection, as well as financial and legal support.

**"THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION** has been silent for far too long. After the killings of Daphne Caruana Galizia and Jan Kuciak, but also much earlier, when Hungary massively restricted the freedom of the press", spokesperson Hendrik Zörner says. However, he considers the EU guideline for the protection of whistleblowers positive. "This is an important foundation for strengthening informant protection".

**BEYOND THE INSTITUTIONAL** work of the EU, the non-profit organisation European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, ECPMF, which is co-founded by the European Commission, is working on the implementation of the European Charter on Freedom of the Press in the European Union. Its main target is responding to attacks on press freedom on both a national and international level. Addi-

tionally, it provides support for harassed journalists, national media associations and individuals that defend freedom of speech. For instance, journalists under threat have the possibility to apply for legal support from the ECPMF.

**FINALLY, IT MUST** be stressed that, especially among the Scandinavian countries, Finland as well as the Netherlands have been the front runners in the Reporters without Borders ranking - both on a European and an international level. "They are characterised by good working conditions for journalists, exemplary freedom of information laws and the widespread absence of threats and attacks against media workers," explains Matthey from Reporters without Borders.

**PERHAPS "THE USUAL** suspects" - Poland and Hungary - are not the only bogeymen that the EU should consider. Quite the opposite: a look behind the fallen Iron Curtain reveals an increasingly unstable picture of the current situation of journalists. Populist discourses and widespread mistrust are weakening the supporting columns of European democracy. However, a collapse is likely not imminent. Despite worrying developments, the EU remains one of the most secure environments worldwide. Both EU-institutional and non-profit organisational work provide essential means to fill and fix the cracks in the soil.



Demonstration in Bratislava in memory of Ján Kuciak. Source: Flickr.

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