

CPJ remarks to the Helsinki Commission

Remarks by CPJ Deputy Executive Director Robert Mahoney to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, during its May 9, 2018 briefing, “A Deadly Calling: The Murder of Investigative Journalists.”

Mahoney’s remarks as prepared for delivery:

Being a reporter in much of the world is dangerous work. Being an investigative reporter can be deadly.

The assassinations of Daphne Caruana Galizia, in Malta, in October, and of Ján Kuciak, in Slovakia, in February, underscore the dangers facing reporters who dig painstakingly through thousands of documents and track down reluctant sources to expose wrongdoing and hold the powerful to account.

Of the 1,303 journalists killed since the Committee to Protect Journalists began keeping statistics in 1992, more than half--838--were murdered. Covering politics, crime and corruption is a more dangerous assignment for most reporters than covering wars. Some 256 journalists murdered over that period were covering corruption, 189 were covering crime, according to our research.

The killers and those ordering the murder of journalists are rarely brought to justice. In fact, in 86 percent of murder cases the killers and those who hire them get away scot free. We at the Committee to Protect Journalists, along with our colleagues around the world, are working hard to ensure that this is not the case for Daphne Caruana Galizia and Jan Kuciack. We want their killers and the masterminds who employed them unmasked, prosecuted, and put behind bars.

These murders were particularly shocking because they took place in the European Union where we expect the rule of law to prevail. Over the years relatively few reporters have paid the ultimate price for their work in Western Europe.

Which makes these two brutal slayings of investigative reporters only four months apart unprecedented.

The intimidation of reporters following the tentacles of organized crime is a great concern. Unchecked, threats and assaults will lead to that cancer that eats away at independent journalism in many violence-plagued societies, self-censorship.

Smuggling, money-laundering, human-trafficking, embezzlement of EU funds and subsidies are all topics that European journalists, whether individually or in collectives, have taken on.

This leaves them exposed. Failure to achieve full justice in the cases of Daphne and Jan could leave journalists in Malta and Slovakia in even greater danger. It would also send a message throughout the rest of the continent that reporters' lives don't matter.

That would be catastrophic for press freedom across Europe especially given the growing authoritarianism we are witnessing in Russia and several of its former Soviet-era allies.

Poland and Hungary are deeply troubling examples of the decline of press freedom in the European Union, but Brussels seems to look on fecklessly as media diversity and freedom of expression fray on its eastern edges.

In Poland, the government has taken control of public media, cut off official access to critical reporters and threatened others with legal action. Lucrative state advertising is used to wield influence over news outlets. Critical outlets are deprived of that ad revenue.

Hungary has gone even further down that road. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán now starting his third term, has most broadcast and print media in his camp. For example, the news website *Átlátszó* estimates that more than 500 titles are now in the hands of oligarchs and businessmen linked to the government, all of them heavily benefiting from state advertising. Of these, only 31 titles were government-allied in 2015.

In Bulgaria, another EU member state, three investigative journalists have been attacked in the past six years. One, a prominent television reporter Genka Shikerova, has had her car set on fire twice since 2013. She is famous for asking politicians tough questions on air. Someone did not appreciate her frankness. No one, of course, has been prosecuted for any of the assaults or arson.

And so it's hardly surprising that in the countries lining up to join the European Union, press freedom violations go unpunished. Take Montenegro. Just last night veteran investigative journalist Olivera Lakić was shot and wounded outside her home in the capital Podgorica. She covers crime and corruption for the newspaper *Vijesti*. It is the second time she has been assaulted for her work. This latest shooting is worrying because it comes just five weeks after a car bomb exploded outside the home of Lakić's colleague at *Vijesti*, investigative reporter Saed Sadikovic in the northern town of Bijelo Polje. No one was injured. Sadikovic, who also reports on corruption and organized crime had been threatened in February over a report he aired in December. He reported the threat to police but they took no action.

Outside of the EU, Ukraine has seen the murder of two journalists in the past four years including Pavel Sheremet, who like Daphne was blown up in his car.

And finally to Russia, which is the murder capital of Europe for the press. Some 38 journalists have been killed there since 1992. Some have been high profile assassinations such those of *Forbes* editor Paul Klebnikov or *Novaya Gazeta's* Anna Politkovskaya.

Some deaths barely make a ripple in the international media, maybe because it is hard to prove the link to journalism. One such is the death last month of investigative reporter Maksim Borodin who mysteriously fell from the balcony of his fifth-floor apartment in Yekaterinburg. Borodin had gained national attention for his reporting on the deaths in Syria of Russian private military contractors fighting on the side of President Bashar Assad.

This is a dark time for European journalism and the killings of Daphne and Jan are an outrage. But that is not the end of the story. It can't be.

Journalists are fighting back with the best weapon they have. Journalism.

Last month an international collective of journalists, representing 18 media outlets from 15 countries was launched. "The Daphne Project", whose mission is to continue working on Daphne Caruana Galizia's unfinished stories as well as to investigate the truth about her murder.

The project yielded almost immediate, tangible results. On April 23, Member of the European Parliament Pieter Omtzigt was appointed special rapporteur of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe. He will monitor the ongoing murder investigation in Malta, examine the broader circumstances surrounding the journalist's death, and make calls for impunity to be addressed.

In Slovakia, protests brought the resignations of the prime minister and the interior minister.

International journalists and Jan's colleagues at the news website where he worked, *Aktuality.sk*, have vowed to pursue the stories Jan was working on at the time of this death, and to monitor the investigation into the killing.

It is essential that we journalists continue reporting on the investigations that our murdered colleagues began, and that we finish them and publish them. That will send a message to politicians and criminals that you cannot censor reporters and shut down their work through murder.

This we are doing. We are not staying silent.

Briefings like this one play an important part in keeping these murders and the plight of the investigative press more generally, in the public eye.

It is also essential that we keep up international publicity and pressure so that law enforcement and the judiciary bring to justice all those involved in the assassinations. Failure to do so will send the message to those with means and motive that murder is an effective way of silencing criticism.

Thank you for your interest in press freedom and our fight for justice.