@priscilla-du-preez

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Democracy is dead if we don’t have a free press

World Press Freedom Day

A gloomy prospect indeed. But it is hard to be optimistic when, in the year that has passed since the last World Press Freedom Day, two journalists have been brutally murdered. In the EU.

The way in which both murders were carried out – a car bomb in broad daylight, a young couple shot at home – leads to the conclusion that these brutal killings were also a loud and lethal message to journalists and citizens all over the world: it’s better to stay silent.

But people did not shut up. Indifference has not reigned, and journalists across the globe stood up and vowed to continue the investigations that had been brutally cut short. Members of the European Parliament organised official ad hoc delegations to visit the people on the ground in Malta and in Slovakia. Debates were held, resolutions were passed, recommendations were made. Vigils were planned, press conferences were organised, protests erupted.

So now what?

We can not afford to forget these murders. We are pushing the European Parliament to set up a prize for investigative journalism that would bear the name of Daphne Caruana Galizia and are also supporting proposals to set up an internship programme for young journalists to honour Jan Kuziak. But we also need to make sure that their deaths are investigated by an independent body and that the perpetrators are brought to justice.

We also need to fight the long term fight. A fight which is regulatory, economic and cultural.

Journalists – and journalism – was already under threat in Europe and beyond, even before these attacks. The pressure comes from many different angles: regulations that strangle freedom of expression, funding models that limit plurality, exploit journalists, or undermine their independence, State interventions that are tantamount to censorship, commercial pressures to produce fast and meaningless content, mass surveillance and now, the latest trend in the art of silence is the calculated ‘ hype’ around ‘fake news’ pushed by demagogues and despots.

What can be done to defend independent ‘watchdog’ journalism in Europe?

- **Regulatory changes:** the Trade Secrets Directive, criminal defamation laws, restrictions on the right to access and share information; are all examples of legislation that need to be reformed if we want to avoid creating a legal system that is better prepared for limiting freedom of expression than defending it.
    - We need laws to prevent concentration in the media sector, to ensure transparency of media ownership and also of sources of funding.
    - We need to defend our freedoms and civil liberties by curtailing government surveillance and intrusions on the right to privacy.

- **Economic changes:** Funding for journalism needs to be increased, particularly for investigative journalism which takes a long time to produce. The Greens/EFA Group already managed to get the European Commission to set up a fund worth half a million Euros for investigative journalism projects (the deadline to apply was today).
    - We are now campaigning for the European Union to set up permanent funding for cross-border investigative projects, to be disbursed by an independent body.
    - We also commissioned a report on the different funding models for investigative journalism which analyses them according to criteria such as independence, quality and sustainability.
    - We need to defend the rights of journalists, including by defending their working conditions, salaries and job security.

- **Cultural changes:** Journalism is often underrated but it should be valued as a public interest good, and interference by the State in editorial independence should not be tolerated in any democratic society.
    - We should campaign against the jailing of journalists and stand up for our right to freedom of expression and to media freedom.

What can you do, specifically?

- Support investigative journalism projects!!
- Spread the word about the importance of press freedom!
- For more on what you can do, read our blog from last year

Recommended

Press release

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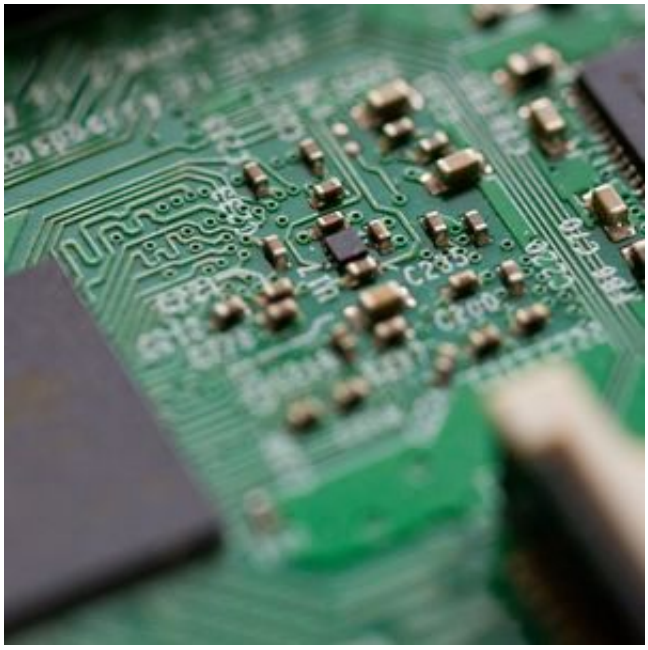

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Contact person



Pam Bartlett Quintanilla

Team leader - Outreach and campaigns

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