Resolution on the rule of law in Malta: six years after the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, and the need to protect journalists

2023/2901(RSP) - 19/10/2023 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 437 votes to 14, with 66 abstentions, a resolution on the rule of law in Malta: six years after the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, and the need to protect journalists.

The text adopted in plenary was tabled by the EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and the Left groups.

As a reminder, the Maltese anti-corruption investigative journalist and blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia was assassinated in a car bomb attack on 16 October 2017. An independent public inquiry into the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia was initiated in late 2019 following a demand by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and eventually concluded its work on 29 July 2021. The board of the public inquiry published its final report with a set of conclusions and recommendations on strengthening the rule of law, the respect of press freedom, freedom of expression and the protection of journalists, on legal reform at constitutional level and on legislative proposals regarding media freedom. The resolution stated that efforts to protect journalism cannot succeed without an equal effort to fight corruption and money laundering, and the fight against corruption and money laundering will fail without a strong and pluralist press.

Parliament paid tribute to Daphne Caruana Galizia six years after her assassination and to her essential work in exposing corruption, organised crime, tax fraud and money laundering and in holding those involved in such illegal activities accountable. It strongly condemned the criminalisation of, attacks on and killings of journalists for doing their job and stressed the crucial role they play in unveiling the truth, protecting democracy and ending the culture of impunity.

Members are deeply concerned that limited progress has been made in the ongoing judicial proceedings on the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia since Parliament’s resolution of 20 October 2022 on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the assassination, that to date there have only been three low-level convictions and that the mastermind behind the assassination has not been convicted yet. The Maltese authorities are called on to expedite the judicial proceedings to ensure that justice is served.

Parliament called for an end to the culture of impunity and in this regard called for thorough, swift and independent investigations and prosecutions of all public officials allegedly embroiled in corruption, extortion and trading in influence as exposed by investigative journalists in Malta, including in the vote-buying scheme and driving licence racket.

It stressed that it is critical for high-profile financial and economic crimes, especially corruption and money laundering, to be prosecuted rigorously. Members are also alarmed by the institutional failure of law enforcement and justice in Malta including the slow progress in proceedings against Pilatus Bank officials and the efforts by authorities to suspend them.

The resolution deplored the fact that journalists, as well as family members of Daphne Caruana Galizia, are currently still the target of SLAPPs. In this regard, the EU is called on to reach a swift agreement on an ambitious anti-SLAPP directive.

The Maltese Government is called on to:

- further address existing concerns related to media freedom and the independence of the public media from political interference, including a framework to ensure transparency in state advertising, and the increasing use of hate speech on social media;

- address the challenges related to the length of investigations into high-level corruption cases, including by establishing a robust track record of final judgments. Protracted investigations continue to hamper progress on the rule of law;

- make progress on investigations into cases of possible attempts by then public officials to conceal evidence and obstruct investigations and judicial proceedings;

- adopt additional measures and other safeguards to improve the environment for critical and independent journalism in Malta and the accountability of politicians and officials.

Lastly, concerning the Maltese Citizenship by Investment programme, Parliament recalled its position that EU citizenship is not for sale and called for an **immediate ban** of the programme in Malta and throughout the EU.