

Council of Europe sides with Julian Assange

By Sara Chessa

5 February 2020

The attitude of European institutions is changing after years of silence. In this case, it was [Andrej Hunko](#) and [Gianni Marilotti](#) that convinced the European Assembly to speak up.

The moment that press freedom advocates have been waiting for so long has finally arrived. The European institutions are starting to officially state that they don't want [Julian Assange](#) to be extradited to the U.S.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ([PACE](#)) has become the first one to step in and call for Assange's immediate release, joining the call of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, [Nils Melzer](#), who some months ago clearly stated that Assange should walk free.

The call was made on the 28th of January, 2020, when the PACE was debating on a resolution for the Member States included in a report on [Threats to Media Freedom and Journalists' Security](#) in Europe.

Julian Assange's detention "sets a dangerous precedent for journalists", according to politicians from the Council of Europe's parliamentary arm, who voted on Tuesday to oppose the WikiLeaks founder's extradition to the US <https://t.co/dlQMYnEuHh>

— WikiLeaks (@wikileaks) [January 28, 2020](#)

Drafted by the Labour member of the British House of Lords, [George Foulkes](#), the document opens stating that the Council of Europe and its Assembly are firmly committed to strengthening media freedom in all its aspects, including the right to access to information, the safeguard of editorial independence and of *'the ability to investigate, criticise and contribute to public debate without fear of pressure or interference'*.

Several amendments to the report were proposed inside the PACE Committee on [Culture, Science, Education and Media](#), and Lord Foulkes, who is part of it, was happy to accept the one on Assange.

[Lord Foulkes](#) said:

"UK colleagues supported it because we don't want to see him extradited by the UK Government to the United States and facing centuries in prison."

The [Council of Europe](#) is the continent's leading institution on human rights and includes 47 member states, 28 of which are also part of the European Union. What this Parliamentary Assembly, made up of members of national legislatures says about freedom of the press is something civil society should take notice of.

In this light, you would hope that the work of [Wikileaks](#) and his founder can hardly be forgotten. Or maybe it could — it seemed to be surprisingly off the agenda until some

weeks ago, but January 2020 seems to have marked a change of course.

Great News for Julian Assange

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) is demanding the immediate release of Julian Assange!

PACE speaks on behalf of 820 million Europeans and is responsible for the election of the judges of the European Court of Human Rights.

— Kim Dotcom (@KimDotcom)
[January 30, 2020](#)

At the beginning of the new year, an [urgent alert](#) on the Assange case was submitted by the International Federation of Journalists ([IFJ](#)) and by the European Federation of Journalists ([EFJ](#)) to the new online platform that the Council of Europe implemented in order to ensure the protection of reporters by drawing attention to particularly pressing current issues.

The urgent alert on the Assange case quoted the statements made by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer after visiting Assange in Belmarsh prison in May 2019.

He said:

"In addition to physical ailments, Mr Assange showed all symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture."

Following that urgent alert, on the 27th of January, an event sponsored by German Member of Parliament [Andrej Hunko](#), was held at the Council of Europe on the risks represented by possible extradition of Assange for the freedom of the press.

After an intervention by Nils Melzer via videolink, the audience had the chance to listen to the General Secretary of the IFJ [Anthony Bellanger](#).

This is shocking! UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer reports on very severe wrongdoings in the case of Julian Assange.
<https://t.co/VOPYWLpOMj>

— Sönke Matthewes (@reflecmecc) [February 3, 2020](#)

According to Mr Bellanger:

"The detention regime currently imposed on Assange appears to be unnecessary, disproportionate and discriminatory, and to perpetuate his exposure to psychological torture."

Following [Regis Brillat](#) of the CPT (Executive Secretary of the [European Committee for the Prevention of Torture](#)), the discussion proceeded with Senator [Gianni Marilotti](#), coordinator of the Italian Parliamentary Intergroup

for the Monitoring of Julian Assange case.

Given the unprecedented tough talk pronounced by some speakers against the guilty silence of some states on the persecution of an individual who can “*only be accused of having disclosed real facts*”, it is likely that this conference on Assange’s extradition risks has deeply influenced the development of the debate in the Assembly.

And, actually, there are some steps that happened behind the scenes.

SYDNEY joins
Global Day of
Protests

FEBRUARY 24
12PM: Martin Place
Sydney
Marking the 1st day
of Julian Assange's
Extradition Hearing.

Save the Date! Let's
get a huge crowd
together to show our
government we
care!

[#IStandWithJulianAssange](#)
[#DontExtraditeAssange](#)
[#SaveJulian2020](#)
pic.twitter.com/XUQX7E6fHb

— People For
Assange
(@people4assange)
[February 1, 2020](#)

One of these is the drafting by Hunko of an amendment (different from the one finally approved, which was written later) signed also by his Italian colleague Marilotti and aiming to modify the Assembly’s Media Report in order for it to mention Wikileaks publisher.

It suggested to add the following words:

“...and defend the freedom media and security of journalists, namely in the case of Julian Assange as his possible extradition to the U.S. would set a precedent and threaten journalists in all member states”.

Moreover, Hunko spoke with his British colleague author of the [PACE Media Freedom Report](#), Lord Faulkes, highlighting the importance to add a clear reference to the case. The reply was positive and the discussion grew

inside the
Committee.

Then Hunko handed the ball to the Italian Senator Gianni Marilotti, whose words as a speaker of the conference on Assange's extradition seemed to wake up many parliamentarians by highlighting the clash between the extradition and European democratic values.

He stated:

We believe it is important to highlight the fact that the unfair treatment and human rights violations that he is apparently facing are not compatible with the foundations of the European democracies, which gave themselves laws and principles related to the respect of the human being that are not negotiable.

John Shipton
in Brussels
for
[#AssangeDa](#)

[y \[?\]\[?\]](#) which honours his son. UK, USA turn a blind eye to Assange's ill-treatment, but the rest of the world is waking up. Artist [@davide_dormino](#) displays Assange-inspired work there, as Council Of Europe [@coe](#) stands up for Assange's rights <https://t.co/HX4GeJXQgR>

— Media Bubble (@Factsmatter2) [January 29, 2020](#)

He went on by expressing a tough condemnation of the complicity shown by many states:

We should be surprised and in a certain

way outraged in front of the cautious silence kept by some states not only on Julian Assange's situation but also on the facts revealed by him through Wikileaks work. These silence seemed to authorise or support the US and the United Kingdom's behaviour in relation to an individual who is apparently deprived of the right to prepare his defence and deprived as well of his right to dignified psychophysical conditions.

Enhanced by Hunko's event speakers, the debate continued in the Media Committee of the PACE, where a new amendment on Assange emerged, tabled by Mr Stefan Schennach and other members.

It stated:

In this respect, consider that the detention and criminal prosecution of Mr Julian Assange sets a dangerous precedent for journalist

s, and join the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment who declared, on 1 November 2019, that Mr Assange's extradition to the United States must be barred and that he must be promptly released.

Noticing that the second amendment was even stronger, Mr Hunko withdrew the one he had proposed.

Another member of the Italian Intergroup, [Alvise Maniero](#), during the final vote expressed satisfaction for this choice. "I hope my colleagues will show their courage by approving these amendments and its spirit, in that moment I will be able to joyfully approve the whole report on media freedom", he stated.

Amendment to report on Threats to Media Freedom and Journalists' Security in Europe prepared by Labour peer Lord Foulkes adopted unanimously earlier this evening [#Assange](#) Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) [pic.twitter](#)

[.com/xkYu1nRliA](#)

— Amelia Wittbeck (@Hannise)
[January 29, 2020](#)

And, since the Assembly finally approved a unanimous call for the release of Wikileaks publisher, the patient work of Hunko and Marilotti has been

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