

Speech of Julian Assange at the Council of Europe, October 1st, 2024

Mr. Chairman, esteemed members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, ladies and gentlemen:

The transition from years of confinement in a maximum-security prison to standing here before the representatives of 46 nations and 700 million people is a profound and surreal shift.

The experience of isolation for years in a small cell is difficult to convey; it strips away one's sense of self, leaving only the raw essence of existence.

I am not yet fully equipped to speak about what I have endured—the relentless struggle to stay alive, both physically nor mentally, and the deaths by hanging, murder, and medical neglect of my fellow prisoners.

I apologize in advance if my words falter or if my presentation lacks the polish you might expect in such a distinguished forum.

Isolation has taken its toll, which I am trying to unwind, and expressing myself in this setting is a challenge.

However, the gravity of this occasion and the weight of the issues at hand compel me to set aside my reservations and speak to you directly.

I have traveled a long way, literally and figuratively, to stand before you today.

Before our discussion or answering any questions you might have, I wish to thank PACE for its 2020 resolution (2317), [<https://pace.coe.int/en/files/28508/html>], which stated that my imprisonment set a dangerous precedent for journalists and noted that the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture called for my release.

I'm also grateful for PACE's 2021 statement [<https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8446/pace-general-rapporteur-expresses-se...>] expressing concern over credible reports that US officials discussed my assassination, again calling for my prompt release.

And I commend the Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee for commissioning a renowned rapporteur to investigate the circumstances surrounding my detention and conviction and the consequent implications for human rights.

However, like so many of the efforts made in my case—whether they were from parliamentarians, presidents, prime ministers, the Pope, UN officials and diplomats, unions, legal and medical professionals, academics, activists, or citizens—none of them should have been necessary.

None of the statements, resolutions, reports, films, articles, events, fundraisers, protests, and letters over the last 14 years should have been necessary.

But all of them were necessary because without them I would never have seen the light of day.

This unprecedented global effort was needed because of the legal protections that did exist, many existed only on paper or were not effective in any remotely reasonable time frame.

I eventually chose freedom over unrealisable justice after being detained for years and facing a 175 year sentence with no effective remedy. Justice for me is now precluded as the US government insisted in writing into its plea agreement that I cannot file a case at the ECHR or even a freedom of information act request over what it did to me as a result of its extradition request.

I want to be totally clear. I am not free today because the system worked. I am free today because after years of incarceration I pleaded guilty to journalism. I pleaded guilty to seeking information from a source. I pleaded guilty to obtaining information from a source. I pleaded guilty to informing the public what that information was. I did not plead guilty to anything else. I hope my testimony today can serve to highlight the weaknesses of the existing safeguards and to help those whose cases are less visible but who are equally vulnerable.

As I emerge from the dungeon of Belmarsh, the truth seems less discernible, and I regret how much ground has been lost during this period when expressing the truth has been undermined, attacked, weakened, and diminished.

I see more impunity, more secrecy, more retaliation for telling the truth and more self censorship. It is hard not to draw a line from the US government crossing the rubicon by internationally criminalizing journalism to the chilled climate for freedom of expression now.

When I founded WikiLeaks, it was driven by a simple dream: to educate people about how the world works so that, through understanding, we might bring about something better.

Having a map of where we are lets us understand where we might go.

Knowledge empowers us to hold power to account and to demand justice where there is none.

We obtained and published truths about tens of thousands of hidden casualties and unseen horrors of war, about programs of assassination, rendition, torture, and mass surveillance.

We revealed not just when and where these things happened but frequently the policies, the agreements, and structures behind them.

When we published *Collateral Murder*, the infamous gun camera footage of a US Apache helicopter crew eagerly blowing to pieces Iraqi journalists and their rescuers, the visual reality of modern warfare shocked the world.

But we also used interest in this video to direct people to the classified policies for when the US military could deploy lethal force in Iraq and how many civilians could be killed before gaining higher approval.

In fact, 40 years of my potential 175-year sentence was for obtaining and releasing these policies.

The practical political vision I was left with after being immersed in the world's dirty wars and secret operations is simple: Let us stop gagging, torturing, and killing each other for a change. Get these fundamentals right and other political, economic, and scientific processes will have space to take care of the rest.

Wikileaks' work was deeply rooted in the principles that this Assembly stands for.

Journalism that elevated freedom of information and the public's right to know found its natural operational home in Europe.

I lived in Paris and we had formal corporate registrations in France and in Iceland. Our journalistic and technical staff were spread throughout Europe.

We published to the world from servers in based in France, Germany, and Norway.

14 years ago the United States military arrested one of our alleged whistleblowers, PFC Manning, a US intelligence analyst based in Iraq.

The US government concurrently launched an investigation against me and my colleagues.

It illicitly sent planes of agents to Iceland, paid bribes to an informer to steal our legal and journalistic work product, and without formal process pressured banks and financial services to block our subscriptions and freeze our accounts.

The UK government admitted at the European Court of Human Rights that it had unlawfully spied on my UK lawyers during this time.

Ultimately this harassment was legally groundless. President Obama's Justice Department chose not to indict me, recognizing that no crime had been committed.

The United States had never before prosecuted a publisher for obtaining or publishing government information.

To do so would require a radical and ominous reinterpretation of the US Constitution.

In January 2017, Obama also commuted the sentence of Manning, who had been convicted of being one of my sources.

However, in February 2017, the landscape had changed dramatically.

President Trump had been elected. He appointed two wolves in MAGA hats: Mike Pompeo, a Kansas congressman and former arms industry executive, as CIA Director, and William Barr, a former CIA officer, as Attorney General.

By March 2017, WikiLeaks had exposed the CIA's infiltration of French political parties, its spying on French and German leaders, the European Central Bank, European economics ministries, and its standing orders to spy on French industry.

We revealed the CIA's vast production of malware and viruses, its subversion of supply chains, antivirus software, cars, smart TVs, and iPhones.

CIA Director Pompeo launched a campaign of retribution.

It is now a matter of public record that under Pompeo's explicit direction, the CIA drew up plans to kidnap and assassinate me within the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and authorized going after my European colleagues, subjecting us to theft, hacking attacks, and the planting of false information.

My wife and infant son were also targeted. A CIA asset was permanently assigned to track my wife and instructions were given to obtain DNA from my six month old son's nappy.

This is the testimony of more than 30 current and former intelligence officials speaking to the US press, which has been additionally corroborated by records seized in a prosecution brought against some of its agents.

The CIA's targeting of myself, my family and my associates through aggressive extrajudicial and extraterritorial means provide a rare insight into how powerful intelligence organisations engage in transnational repression. Such repressions are not unique. What is unique is that we know so much about it due to numerous whistleblowers and judicial investigations in Spain.

This Assembly is no stranger to extraterritorial abuses by the CIA.

PACE's groundbreaking Dick Marty report on CIA renditions in Europe exposed how the CIA operated secret detention centers and conducted unlawful renditions on European soil, violating human rights and international law.

In February this year, the alleged source of some of our CIA revelations, former CIA officer Joshua Schulte, was sentenced to forty years in prison under conditions of extreme isolation.

His windows are blacked out, and a white noise machine plays 24 hours a day over his door so he cannot even shout through it.

These conditions are more severe than those found in Guantanamo Bay.

Transnational repression is also conducted by abusing legal processes.

The lack of effective safeguards against this means that Europe is vulnerable to having its mutual legal assistance and extradition treaties hijacked by foreign powers to go after dissenting voices in Europe.

In his memoirs, which I read in my prison cell, former CIA Director Mike Pompeo bragged about how he pressured the US Attorney General to bring an extradition case against me in response to our publications about the CIA.

Indeed, acceding to Pompeo's efforts, the US Attorney General reopened the investigation against me that Obama had closed and re-arrested Manning, this time as a witness.

She was held in prison for over a year and fined a thousand dollars a day in a formal attempt to coerce her into providing secret testimony against me.

She ended up attempting to take her own life.

We usually think of attempts to force journalists to testify against their sources.

But Manning was now a source being forced to testify against their journalist.

By December 2017, CIA Director Pompeo had got his way, and the US government issued a warrant to the UK for my extradition.

The UK government kept the warrant secret from the public for two more years, while it, the US government, and the new president of Ecuador moved to shape the political, legal, and diplomatic ground for my arrest.

When powerful nations feel entitled to target individuals beyond their borders, those individuals do not stand a chance unless there are strong safeguards in place and a state willing to enforce them. Without them no individual has a hope of defending themselves against the vast resources a state aggressor can deploy.

If the situation were not already bad enough in my case the US government asserted a dangerous new global legal position. Only US citizens have free speech rights. Europeans and other nationalities do not have free speech rights. But the US Espionage Act still applies them regardless of where they are. So Europeans in Europe must obey US secrecy law with no defences at all as far as the US government is concerned. An American in Paris can talk about what the US government is up to. But for a Frenchman in Paris to do so is a crime without any defence and he may be extradited just like me.

Now that one foreign government has formally asserted that Europeans have no free speech rights to talk about them, a dangerous precedent has been set.

Other powerful states will inevitably follow suit.

The war in Ukraine has already seen the criminalization of journalists in Russia, but based on the precedent set in my extradition, there is nothing to stop Russia, or indeed any other state, from targeting European journalists, publishers, or social media users by claiming that their secrecy laws have been violated.

The rights of journalists and publishers within the European space are seriously threatened.

Transnational repression cannot become the norm here.

As one of the world's two great norm-setting institutions, PACE must act.

The criminalization of newsgathering activities is a threat to investigative journalism everywhere.

I was formally convicted, by a foreign power, for asking for, receiving, and publishing truthful information about that power while I was in Europe.

The fundamental issue is simple: Journalists should not be prosecuted for doing their jobs.

Journalism is not a crime; it is a pillar of a free and informed society.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates, if Europe is to have a future where the freedom to speak and the freedom to publish the truth are not privileges enjoyed by a few but rights guaranteed to all then it must act so that what has happened in my case never happens to anyone else.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to this assembly, to the conservatives, social democrats, liberals, leftists, greens, and independents—who have supported me throughout this arduous ordeal and to the countless individuals who have advocated tirelessly for my release.

It is heartening to know that in a world often divided by ideology and interests, there remains a shared commitment to the protection of essential human liberties.

Freedom of expression and all that flows from it is at a dark crossroad. I fear that unless norm setting institutions like PACE wake up to the gravity of the situation it will be too late.

Let us all commit to doing our part to ensure that the light of freedom never dims, that the pursuit of truth will live on, and that the voices of the many are not silenced by the interests of the few.

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