

Slovenian journalist Blaž Zgaga: If Assange is extradited “the same can happen to any of us”

By Oscar Grenfell
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Last week, the WSWs contacted well-known Slovenian journalist Blaž Zgaga after the public release of a statement signed by more than 1,400 journalists and media workers around the world demanding freedom for WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

Zgaga is a co-organiser of the initiative, which unambiguously condemns the attempt to extradite Assange from Britain to the US as an attack on press freedom. It was publicly launched days before court hearings for the beginning of court hearings for Assange’s dispatch to the US, where he faces Espionage Act charges and the prospect of a 175-year prison sentence.

The statement points to the historic significance of the publications for which Assange has been charged by the US administration of President Donald Trump. It declares: “Mr Assange’s reporting of abuses and crimes is of historic importance.” It calls on journalists and media professionals to take up a fight against Assange’s threatened extradition and prosecution and the broader assault on freedom of the press.

Zgaga has had a decades-long career in investigative journalism. He also authored an e-learning course in investigative journalism for the prestigious College of Europe in 2019 and held workshops there for journalists. He is the incoming Journalist in Residence 2020 at the Booth School of Business in Chicago.

The WSWs began by asking Zgaga to outline his own professional background.

Blaž Zgaga: I am a freelance investigative journalist based in Slovenia, who writes for the Croatian weekly magazine *Nacional*. I started my career in 1993 for then major Slovene daily newspaper *Delo* and spent 15 years working for major printed media outlets in Slovenia.

I mostly covered military and intelligence and

revealed many scandals. One of the biggest was illicit spy collaboration between the US DIA [Defence Intelligence Agency] and the Slovene defence intelligence service OVS, against then Yugoslavia. After publication in June 2000, my office and apartment were searched by the police and I was prosecuted for an alleged crime of revealing military secrets, with a threatened maximum sentence of five years in prison. I was cleared of charges by a higher court in 2003 in a pre-trial phase.

When the right-wing government of Janez Janša started with censorship and political pressures on the Slovene media during the period of 2004–2008, I initiated a journalists’ petition against censorship in 2007. It was signed by 571 journalists, who represented one quarter of all professional journalists in this small alpine country.

Then in 2008, I resigned from the second major daily newspaper *Večer* because of censorship and pressures and started a freelance career. With a Finnish colleague, we revealed a multi-million bribery scheme during a Slovene Army purchase of Finnish Patria armored vehicles in September 2008. After this scandal, Janša lost an election and was later sentenced to two years in prison for bribery in the Patria case. However, in 2015, the constitutional court repealed the judgement. A statute of limitations in this bribery case has since passed.

As a freelance journalist I have collaborated in many breaking ICIJ [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists] and EIC [European Investigative Collaboration] investigations, where I am focusing my work in later years.

My latest investigations were about US extreme-right religious group multi-million funding of European anti-abortion NGO’s and massive cocaine trafficking

in Europe, with a focus on the Balkan Cartel. I am a co-plaintiff in a constitutional complaint against the German federal intelligence agency, the BND, which is allowed to spy on foreign journalists without any limitations. The German Constitutional Court had a two-day public hearing in January and we hope that the court will limit massive electronic surveillance, which was revealed by Edward Snowden, in the next few months.

WSWS: How did the statement come to be authored and released?

BZ: It all started on October 23, 2019, when Serena Tinari sent a worrying letter to the Global-L list, where investigative journalists from around the world exchange tips and information. After she read reports about Assange's dire situation in Belmarsh Prison, she suggested that we write a public letter for Assange like we did in 2010.

But after six days of total silence, as nobody responded to her proposal, I wrote a little bit of an angry response to all, saying that it appears that journalists' solidarity is dying on this list. This started a week-long debate, where some US journalists actively smeared Assange. But with Nicky Hager, we started writing our carefully crafted international statement. More than 1,300 signatories from 99 countries confirm that journalistic solidarity is very much alive and I hope that many other journalists will join this initiative soon.

Why is this case so important? If the UK extradites Assange to the US and if he is sentenced there to prison for publishing information in the public interest, for revealing war crimes, then the same can happen to any of us.

It also opens an important question: what is the difference between "the West" and China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and other authoritarian regimes? If journalists cannot write about war crimes allegedly committed by Western armed forces, what is the legitimacy of these democratic countries?

This case and our initiative are not only about Assange, but also about press freedom and freedom of expression in democratic countries. If these rights are denied in the Assange case, then it will be difficult to say that these countries are still democratic. Without free press and freedom of expression, no democracy is possible.

WSWS: How does the response to the petition contrast with the generally despicable role played by the corporate press in the Assange case?

BZ: United Nations Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer wrote in his report last year: "It finally dawned on me that I had been blinded by propaganda, and that Assange had been systematically slandered to divert attention from the crimes he exposed. Once he had been dehumanized through isolation, ridicule and shame, just like the witches we used to burn at the stake, it was easy to deprive him of his most fundamental rights without provoking public outrage worldwide."

When so well informed and excellent a lawyer as Melzer was blinded by propaganda, I am afraid that many journalists around the globe have also simply believed what was published in the smearing campaign against Assange and that they haven't yet checked the real facts behind this case. I hope they will do it soon and reassess their knowledge and opinion on this case, as the Assange case will also define their professional freedoms in the future.

Many stories with truthful information were published in recent weeks in some major European media. This shows that truth is slowly coming out. But I really appreciate that 1,300 journalists from 99 countries, who signed the statement, demonstrate that journalistic solidarity and journalism itself is not dying yet. Just the opposite, it shows that we are stronger together and that we must speak out and fight for press freedom and freedom of expression on a global scale. Who will fight for our freedom if not us?

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