



## BIG DATA, BIG DANGERS, SMALL BUDGETS

### JOURNALISM AND TRANSPARENCY IN TODAY'S EUROPE

On October 16, 2017, a car bomb killed journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia as she drove past her home a few kilometres from the Maltese capital of Valletta, where European Young Leaders held their second meeting of 2018.

Four months after the murder, another investigative reporter Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were gunned down at their home in rural Slovakia.

The killing of journalists in peaceful European democracies sent shock waves across the continent, showing the danger facing media professionals probing high-level corruption and the murky interface between politics and organised crime.

“How can we ensure that journalists can operate with adequate safety and security and reveal what needs to be revealed?” asked **Claudia Olsson**, Founder and CEO of Exponential AB and 2018 European Young Leader, as debate focused on role of the media and the struggle for transparency and accountability to safeguard European democracy.

Two journalists among the 2018 Young Leaders had worked with Kuciak and Caruana Galizia. Police offered them protection after their colleagues’ slaying.

During the three-day meeting, **Pavla Holcova**, Founder of the Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism, and **Bastian Obermayer**, Pulitzer Prize-winning Investigative Journalist with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, stressed the need for reporting that holds those in authority to account, especially at a time of deteriorating public confidence in politicians and institutions.

“It’s not only the governments, but the courts and the police are all losing the trust of the people,” Holcova said.

Obermayer told how he came to play a central role in the Panama Papers revelations of offshore misdeeds after receiving a package of documents leaked from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca.

Eventually the investigation involved over 400 journalists from round the world – including Caruana Galizia and Kuciak – probing suspicions of fraud, corruption and tax evasion involving over 200,000 offshore entities and several prominent political figures.

“This is only the tip of the iceberg,” Obermayer said. “It’s hard not to become cynical. We all know that people are corrupt, but the scale is even bigger than we thought.”

Aside from the threat of violence and political pressure even within an established democracy, media operations in the digital age are increasingly cramped by financial constraints.

Investigative reporting is particularly vulnerable to budget cuts, Obermayer explained. “The business model of investigative journalism is a disaster: you go away for several months and you come back with one story.”

Nevertheless, with commitment, it’s still possible to mount successful investigations. “If you have a really dedicated group of people you can make it. You have to have a common goal. You have to be really convinced.”

Despite a vast amount of data out there, there is a fundamental lack of openness in our societies. Much information is controlled by a small group of corporate or government agencies and shadowy entities dictate what gets targeted at consumers.

“There is a huge lack of transparency. Ads are not part of the public sphere anymore, where you can have discussions around topics,” cautioned **Julia Kloiber**, Senior Fellow at the Mozilla Foundation and founder of Code for Germany, which seeks to promote transparency, open data and civic technology. “Transparency has to be increased. We have to know what messages are out there. It’s rather a black box and we don’t know what’s going on.”

Politicians need to take the lead by allowing greater public scrutiny, said **Nasima Razmyar**, Deputy Mayor of Helsinki and 2018 European Young Leader. “Transparency is extremely important, and you have to be an example for citizens,” she said.

Several participants pointed to the constructive impact of big data and argued for more positive news to counter pessimistic worldviews that are leading voters to seek radical fixes.

“We focus too much on the negative, rather than the positive stories,” said **Katarzyna Nawrot**, Assistant Professor at Poznan University of Economics and 2017 European Young Leader. “The power of the negative seems to be much more powerful than the positive,” added **Markus Freiburg**, Founder and Managing Director of the Financing Agency for Social Entrepreneurship in Germany and 2017 European Young Leader. “We need to channel positive narratives about how the world is developing.”

Within the embattled newspaper business, however, Obermayer had his doubts about the power of positive stories. “Good news isn’t headline news,” he concluded.

*Led by Friends of Europe, each year the European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme brings together talented, established leaders, aged 40 and under, who have made their mark in a wide range of fields such as politics, science, business, media, NGOs, the arts and civil society. You can find more information about the programme in the EYL40 overview. The programme was originally conceived with EuropaNova. The 2018 autumn seminar was hosted in Valletta, Malta.*



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