

Investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia murdered in Malta

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Investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was murdered by a car bomb as she drove from her home in Bidnija on the Mediterranean island of Malta on Monday.

The explosion was so violent that it blew her vehicle off the road and into a nearby field. On Thursday, Maltese government officials said that initial investigations pointed to her having been killed by a Semtex bomb planted under her automobile that was triggered remotely.

Galizia was well known for her exposures of corruption and criminality at the top of Maltese politics and business. Her brutal slaying is a signal to all those who attempt to lift the lid on the sordid nexus of political power and financial swindling money at the heart of capitalist society: think again if you value your life.

The day after Galizia's killing, in a Facebook post that has been "liked" 18,000 times and shared more than 7,000, her son, Matthew Caruana Galizia, said his mother "was assassinated because she stood between the rule of law and those who sought to violate it."

He describes the shocking scene when he arrived at the bombed-out car, "I am never going to forget, running around the inferno in the field, trying to figure out a way to open the door, the horn of the car still blaring," and realising his mother was dead when he saw her body parts strewn on the ground.

Pointing to those in power, he depicts Maltese society as "a people at war against the state and organised crime, which have become indistinguishable."

On Thursday, journalists held a rally in the Maltese capital, Valletta, to protest the killing. The protesters held up placards with slogans including "Not Afraid" and "Justice," while others held up front pages and placards splattered in blood-red paint.

According to Europol, the European Policing Authority, large-scale money laundering is carried out by organised crime through the many online betting outfits based in Malta, and accounts for ten percent of the island's GDP.

The country is also a convenient base for massive tax avoidance, with major corporations evading billions in payments.

Jonathan Benton, head of the UK Metropolitan Police's Proceeds of (international) Corruption Unit told the BBC, "Malta has a serious problem of money laundering. You cannot have this scale of money laundering without corruption in politics. There cannot be confidence in the judicial process, the independence of judges and the rule of law. It is surprising this is an EU [European Union] member state. Billions in illicit money were laundered in Malta during the Arab spring. The passport scheme of Malta is part and parcel of the big corruption structure of Malta."

This sort of corruption was something Galizia, described by *Politico* website as a "one-woman WikiLeaks," regularly exposed in her weekly column for the *Malta Independent* and in her blog, *Running Commentary*, which were followed by up to 400,000 readers, outstripping the circulation of all Malta's newspapers combined.

The list of those who might have wanted her dead is a long one, as she regularly shed light on the murky financial dealings of Malta's leading politicians and criminal syndicates both at home and abroad.

In 2016, she played a key role investigating the Maltese connections to the "Panama Papers" tax avoidance scandal. This trove of more than 11 million leaked documents details the financial and attorney-client information of more than 214,000 offshore companies listed by the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca. It provides a glimpse into the shady world of tax avoidance carried out by the world's super-rich elite and corporations.

Documents uncovered by Galizia pointed to a shell company registered in Panama in 2013, but ultimately controlled by Malta's Labour Party energy minister

Konrad Mizzi and Prime Minister Joseph Muscat’s chief-of-staff, Keith Schembri. The company had been set up four months after the Labour Party came to power that year.

In April 2017, a whistle-blower from the Malta-based private bank Pilatus claimed to have seen documents linking Mizzi and Schembri—as well as Muscat’s wife Michelle—to secret accounts held at the bank.

In May, Galizia exposed how “a series of payments, in the form of loans,” had been “routed” from Azerbaijan to Panama-registered shell company Egrant—also set up in 2013 and controlled by Michelle Muscat. A payment of just over \$1 million was allegedly made in March of last year, Galizia discovered, that had come from an account at Pilatus bank, where Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev’s daughter, Leyla, also held an account.

The link to Azerbaijan is significant, since the country’s state oil company is a major shareholder in Malta’s new power station. In 2014, Prime Minister Muscat and his wife hosted President Aliyev and his daughter during their visit to Malta.

The material exposed by Galizia proved to be politically explosive for Muscat and the Labour Party government he headed, as Malta took over the rotating presidency of the European Council in January just as the negotiations with Britain over Brexit were due to begin.

British Green Member of the European Parliament, Molly Scott Cato, who also sits on the parliament’s Panama Papers inquiry, said of the growing corruption scandal, “the latest developments and allegations place at stake the credibility of the EU.”

With other MEPs calling for Muscat to go, he sought to deflect the mounting criticism at home and abroad by calling a snap election on May 1, which he went on to win.

But this did not halt Galizia’s stream of articles and blog posts uncovering Malta’s dirty secrets. As far as her enemies were concerned, something had to be done to try and silence the journalist and stop her making further revelations. Speaking to the *Guardian*, her son Matthew said death threats were “almost a daily occurrence.” His brother Andrew said there had been a “concerted attempt to ruin her financially” through an almost non-stop series of costly libel trials including at the hands of Muscat and opposition Nationalist Party leader Adrian Delia, whom she had accused of money laundering.

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Two weeks ago, she filed a complaint with the police

that she was receiving renewed threats. The final post on her blog was a comment on a libel trial by former National Party leader Simon Busuttil and Schembri.

“Mr. Schembri is claiming that he is not corrupt, despite moving to set up a secret company in Panama along with favourite minister Konrad Mizzi and Mr. Egrant just days after Labour won the general election in 2013, sheltering it in a top-secret trust in New Zealand, then hunting round the world for a shady bank that would take them as clients.

“(In the end they solved the problem by setting up a shady bank in Malta, hiding in plain sight.)”

Just minutes before she was blown up, she ended her comment with the words, “There are crooks everywhere you look now. The situation is desperate.”

Matthew and his other brothers, Andrew and Paul, have refused to endorse a €1 million [\$US 1.2 million] reward for evidence leading to a conviction of their mother’s murderer. In a Facebook post Wednesday, they said they had been under “unrelenting pressure” to back the reward campaign from the president and prime minister.

The post continued, “We are not interested in justice without change. We are not interested in a criminal conviction only for the people in government who stood to gain from our mother’s murder to turn around and say that justice has been served. Justice, beyond criminal liability, will only be served when everything that our mother fought for—political accountability, integrity in public life and an open and free society—replaces the desperate situation we are in.”

The statement concluded with a call for Muscat to resign for “watching over the birth of a society dominated by fear, mistrust, crime and corruption. Resign for working to cripple our mother financially and dehumanise her so brutally and effectively that she no longer felt safe walking down the street.”



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