

Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly calls for Assange's release, condemns threatened extradition

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The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a resolution last Tuesday which demands the “prompt release” of imprisoned WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and warns that his threatened extradition from Britain to the US, for lawful publishing activities, “sets a dangerous precedent” for all journalists.

PACE is the parliamentary wing of the Council of Europe, an international assembly with 47 nation-members that was established in 1949. The organisation, which oversees the work of the European Court of Human Rights, states that its role is to serve as “Europe’s guardian of human rights and democracy.”

The references to the Assange case are contained in a resolution titled “Threats to media freedom and journalists’ security in Europe.” It documents a rise in the number of journalists jailed, assaulted and murdered in Europe and internationally, including the killing of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia after she exposed official corruption in 2017.

The resolution bluntly declares that “Threats on media freedom and the safety of journalists have become so numerous, repeated and serious that they are jeopardising not only citizens’ right to be properly informed but also the stability and smooth functioning of our democratic societies.”

Significantly, the draft report, prepared by British Labour peer Lord Foulkes, did not contain any mention of the WikiLeaks founder. This was in line with the support of all of the official political parties in Britain, including Labour, for the jailing of Assange and the attempt to silence him for exposing war crimes.

Less than a month out from British court hearings aimed at rubber-stamping Assange’s dispatch to the

US, however, other members of PACE recognised that the resolution would not have any credibility if it failed to mention Europe’s most famous imprisoned journalist and publisher.

Members of the European United Left–Nordic Green Left, comprised of a number of self-styled “left” parties throughout the continent, moved two amendments, both of which were adopted. Their intervention followed lobbying by Assange’s father, John Shipton, and other prominent supporters of the WikiLeaks founder.

The first amendment called on all European governments to “defend the freedom of media and security of journalists, namely in the case of Julian Assange as his possible extradition to the USA would set a precedent and threaten journalists’ freedoms in all member states.”

The second stated that they should “consider that the detention and criminal prosecution of Mr Julian Assange sets a dangerous precedent for journalists, 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.”

The amendments were passed under conditions where Assange’s status as a political prisoner is undeniable. He is being held in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, a facility designed to hold murderers and terrorists, despite not having been convicted of any crime. All of Assange’s legal and democratic rights, including to access documents crucial to preparing his defence and to confer freely with his lawyers, have been trampled on by a British judiciary determined to

dispatch him to his American persecutors.

The lawlessness of the operation against Assange has been underscored by revelations, contained in official court filings, that the US does not consider him entitled to the First Amendment protections of the American constitution, which uphold free speech and freedom of the press. It has also been reported that if he is extradited, Assange will be held in the US under Special Administrative Measures—draconian regulations, usually applied in terrorism cases, that prevent a prisoner from communicating with virtually anyone.

The nakedly anti-democratic character of Assange's persecution has placed erstwhile supporters of the campaign against him on the back foot. Foulkes stated that he and his colleagues “don't want to see Julian Assange extradited to the United States to spend centuries in prison.”

The Labour peer, however, exposed himself as a supporter of past efforts to frame Assange on bogus sexual misconduct allegations in Sweden. He told the *Guardian*: “I was in favour of him being sent back to Sweden when there were allegations against him to face, but as far as the US is concerned I think there would be deep concerns if he were to be sent there.”

This position—taken by the majority of Labour MPs—amounted to backdoor support for the US attempt to destroy Assange. The Swedish allegations were used by Britain, acting in collaboration with the US and Swedish governments, to deprive Assange of his liberty, embroil him in legal proceedings and to blacken his name.

The attempt to smear Assange as a “sex criminal,” however, is increasingly untenable in the wake of the collapse of the Swedish investigation late last year. In the course of almost a decade, the investigation was dropped three times and never progressed beyond the “preliminary stage.” Prosecutors did not come close to issuing any criminal charges. UN Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer has documented fifty aspects of the Swedish government which appeared to violate Assange's rights to due process and the presumption of innocence.

That PACE has felt compelled to explicitly condemn the persecution of Assange reflects a growing groundswell of support for the WikiLeaks founder in the lead-up to the first British extradition hearings on

February 24.

The body, however, does not have any binding powers over its member-states. Its recommendations and statements can, and have been, ignored at will, with no consequences.

PACE oversees the European Court of Human Rights, which may be the final court of appeal for Assange, if all levels of the British judiciary rubber-stamp his extradition, as they have signalled they will do. Even that body, however, has no powers of coercion over any European state. The US and its allies, including Britain, have made clear that they are willing to flout international and domestic laws in their pursuit of Assange, as they did when launching the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, which was formally condemned by United Nations bodies.

Defenders of democratic rights will not condemn PACE's resolution. The record, however, demonstrates that Assange's freedom will not be secured through the deliberations of courts, parliaments or European assemblies. What is required is the development of a mass political movement, fighting to block his extradition, as part of the struggle against the growing trend to authoritarianism and in defence of all democratic rights.



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