Europe to Whistleblowers: We're on Your Side

BY MARK WORTH
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For decades, activists painstakingly have fought country-by-country for stronger legal rights for whistleblowers. Imagine our joy when the equivalent of 28 whistleblower protection laws were passed on April 16.

The European Parliament overwhelmingly approved an EU Directive to protect employees who report crime, corruption and public health dangers from retaliation. Leading the charge in Brussels was Parliament Member Virginie Rozière (France, S&D), who said EU officials "heard the concerns of its citizens" and "pushed for robust rules guaranteeing their safety."

Thanks go out to everyone involved with this historic campaign, including the European Green Party, Government Accountability Project and Transparency International. Now, we have to get to work for the people! The European Center for Whistleblower Rights is working to ensure employees and citizens will benefit from these new legal protections.

Citizens demand stronger rights for whistleblowers in Europe – “lanceurs d’alerte” (Getty Images)
Campaigners win reinstatement of Macedonian wiretapping whistleblowers

BY SLAGJANA TASEVA
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Three years after they were fired, criminally charged, and jailed for helping to bring down North Macedonia’s corrupt prime minister, Gjorgji Lazarevski and Zvonko Kostovski finally have been reinstated.

This marks the successful conclusion of a year-long campaign on behalf of two whistleblowers known as “Macedonia’s Forgotten Heroes.”

“There will always be a place here for professionals,” Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski told Lazarevski and Kostovski as he welcomed them back to work.

In 2015 Lazarevski and Kostovski exposed the illegal wiretapping of some 20,000 public officials, judges, activists, and journalists by then-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. Gruevski’s government retaliated by leveling false criminal charges and imprisoning Lazarevski and Kostovski for a year.

The successful campaign to win their reinstatement was launched by Transparency International Macedonia and the Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection.

The campaign began with Lazarevski and Kostovski receiving the Coalition’s Free Speech Award during a televised ceremony in Prishtina in March 2018. This brought the case back into the public consciousness and led to renewed media coverage throughout the region.

The next step was international and Europe-wide action alerts to citizens and activists who wrote to the current Prime Minister.

Articles and updates were continually distributed to officials and media. Activists spoke numerous times with the Prime Minister’s office, EU officials, US Embassy officials, and others in Skopje and Brussels.

Finally, Lazarevski and Kostovski were reinstated in December 2018. This is a great victory for North Macedonia and all of Europe!

Boeing employees blow lid off 787 Dreamliner factory

On the heels of two 737 crashes that killed 346 people, Boeing is now facing allegations of poor workmanship on its 737 Dreamliner.

John Barnett is among the former employees at Boeing’s 787 factory in Charleston, South Carolina, who revealed the problems to The New York Times in April 2019.

Barnett, who is receiving assistance from the European Center for Whistleblower Rights, said managers told him to finalize paperwork on defective parts without first learning whether the parts had been installed into 787s. A senior manager told Barnett, “Don’t worry about it,” the Times reported.

Barnett also said jagged metal shavings left inside planes could pierce flight-control wiring, which he said could be “catastrophic.”

“I haven’t seen a plane out of Charleston yet that I’d put my name on saying it’s safe and airworthy,” Barnett told the Times.

Forsaken citizen: Germany abandons Brigitte Fuzellier

For nine years, Brigitte Fuzellier has been fighting for justice in Paraguay. For these nine years, she has been ignored by officials and most media in her home country of Germany.

In 2010 Fuzellier exposed financial irregularities at the Paraguayan operations of Kolping International, a large Catholic charity based in Cologne. Kolping, which is closely tied to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s CDU party, responded by filing dubious criminal complaints against her. Judges in Paraguay have banned her from leaving the country.

Fuzellier, a German citizen being assisted by the European Center for Whistleblower Rights, says the German Foreign Ministry has refused to help her.

Among the German media outlets that have refused to report Kolping’s alleged misconduct are TV station Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), the newsmagazine Stern, and newspapers Bild, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Taz.
U.S. whistleblower rights are surging

BY TOM DEVINE
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With its just-approved Directive on whistleblower protection, the European Union has replaced the United States as the pace setter for freedom of speech against abuses of power. But free speech activists across the pond have not been dormant. The bi-partisan, trans-ideological Make it Safe Coalition of 75 organizations committed to whistleblower currently has won or is in the midst of campaigns for 21 laws better protecting whistleblowers.

Already this year, the Taxpayer First Act extended best practice whistleblower rights to those challenging Internal Revenue Service fraud. In the fragmented U.S. system of piecemeal laws, that is the 23rd whistleblower statute enforced through the Department of Labor. The House of Representatives also approved a Whistleblower Ombudsman to conduct training and maximize effective working relationships with congressional offices.

The main challenge is the final battle of the Whistleblower Protection Act for federal employees, already in its fourth generation. Despite repeated unanimous approvals, the law still is missing key teeth.

Federal workers in the U.S. are the nation’s only significant group of whistleblowers who cannot defend themselves against retaliatory investigations. They do not have access to court and jury trials to enforce their rights. They do not have a realistic chance for temporary relief to freeze retaliation in cases that drag out for years. Make it Safe Coalition activists are working closely with congressional committees on legislation to plug these loopholes, and are optimistic.

The other 18 campaigns span the spectrum, such as:
- extending whistleblower rights to congressional and judicial employees;
- strengthening due process rights to challenge illegal gag orders;
- overhauling whistleblower offices at the Department of Veterans Affairs;
- creating best practice rights for disclosures to the Chemical Facilities Safety Board;
- obtaining court access and jury trials for Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Department of Energy workers; and
- consolidating the 23 corporate whistleblower laws enforced by the Labor Department.

Once whistleblowers were public pariahs. Today, however, nearly all these legislative campaigns are favored to succeed. The reason is simple. Beyond funding the military industrial complex, whistleblower protection may be the only significant issue that both parties in Congress agree on. The times they are a-changing.

Retaliation no more: Spanish NGO fights for new rights

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy resigned last year following a string of corruption scandals including the “Gürtel” case exposed by whistleblower Ana Garrido. With no legal protections, the former Madrid-area city employee suffered serial retaliation, leaving her near-pennyless.

To prevent such reprisals in the future, the NGO Xnet in June submitted a comprehensive whistleblower protection law to the Spanish Parliament. If passed, the law would be among the strongest in Europe. Congratulations to Xnet!

Fishyleaks' to expose illegal fishing in Europe

Nearly one-fourth of all fish caught in Europe – 1.7 million tons – are thrown overboard every year. Ninety percent of Mediterranean fish stocks are depleted, as are 40 percent of those in Europe’s Atlantic waters.

Our Fish wants to put a stop to this. In July the NGO launched Fishyleaks.eu, a secure online platform where people can report illegal fishing practices confidentially or anonymously. The system uses GlobaLeaks, developed by the Hermes Center for Transparency and Digital Human Rights.
International Whistleblower Day: Albanian journalist Klodiana Lala wins Free Speech Award

BY ARJAN DYRMISHI
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Following her articles linking organized crime groups with political figures, Klodiana Lala's family home in Tirana was fired upon by thugs with automatic weapons. The August 2018 attack was described as a “clear mafia-style message.”

For her courage, and in recognition of her 15-year career exposing crime and corruption in Albania, Lala received the Free Speech Award. The News24 investigative journalist was presented the award by the Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection in Tirana on March 21, 2019.

"The situation is this: if a journalist publishes a scandal, the first thing that will happened to him or her is that someone will try to buy her or him. If they do not manage to buy her or him, then they will try to intimidate with different forms," Lala said in her televised acceptance speech.

“This happens not only with me,” she said, “but with colleagues who, through many years, have invested all their efforts to make a better society.”

Lebanon, Tunisia pass MENA's first whistleblower laws

Eight years after Arab Spring, the Middle East is witnessing the first steps toward protecting whistleblowers. Lebanon and Tunisia have passed the region’s first whistleblower laws. Both laws contain many international standards. Tunisia has criminalized retaliation, intimidation and threats. In Lebanon, whistleblowers may qualify for financial rewards.

Southeast Europe leads world on whistleblower rights

Now that Croatia has passed a comprehensive whistleblower law, we are very pleased to report that every country in Southeast Europe has legal protections in place. All of these laws were passed with support from the Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection. The region now leads the world in terms of whistleblower rights.