



## SILENCED VOICES: Daphne Caruana Galizia

by Cathal Sheerin

“I don’t know why we should be surprised that organized crime has insinuated its tentacles into the highest echelons of government in Malta,” wrote Daphne Caruana Galizia in May 2017. “If it happened in Italy and Eastern Europe, it can happen here, where the institutions of state are so much weaker.”

Caruana Galizia, fifty-three, was murdered in a car bomb attack five months after she published the above statement; one of Malta’s fiercest critics of corruption, she was loved by her readers, feared by politicians, and loathed by the corrupt.

Malta’s problem with corruption has frequently been highlighted by the international community. There are three key elements that facilitate (and even encourage) widespread financial and political double-dealing on the island: an economy that is heavily dependent on financial services, tax avoidance, and online gambling; extremely



*Daphne Caruana Galizia*

Illustration by Maxine Young

close ties between the island's richest families and the two main political parties (the Nationalists and Labor); and the often blurred lines between politics, business, the judiciary, and law enforcement. As Caruana Galizia wrote just hours before she was killed: "There are crooks everywhere you look now. The situation is desperate."

At the time of her death, Caruana Galizia had been a journalist for over thirty years. She had written for numerous newspapers and magazines, but was best known for her blog, *Running Commentary*, which combined investigative reporting with caustic comment. It was the most popular online news source in Malta, regularly attracting over 400,000 views a day (more than the combined circulation of all the island's newspapers). Part of its appeal was that it gave the reader access to Daphne Caruana Galizia *uncut*—frightened of nobody, completely non-partisan, pulling no punches. If she believed that someone was corrupt, she denounced them harshly on her blog; many of Malta's most powerful figures sweated under her scrutiny. Leading politicians of both main political parties were targeted, as was the current Labor Party Prime Minister.

During the final two years of her life, most of her work was based on the infamous Panama Papers—11.5 million documents leaked in 2015, which detailed the dubious tax-avoiding activities of some of the world's richest and most influential people. Trawling through these documents, Caruana Galizia revealed that the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, Keith Schembri, and the government's Energy Minister, Konrad Mizzi, had set up secret, offshore entities that—Caruana Galizia wrote—were used to receive kickbacks from wealthy Russians in return for fast-tracking their applications for Maltese passports. (A secret investigation by a Maltese intelligence agency would later report that there was "reasonable suspicion" that Schembri was also involved in money laundering.)

Even more embarrassing for the government was Caruana Galizia's revelation that the Prime Minister's wife had received \$1 million U.S., paid into a secret offshore company, from the daughter of the deeply corrupt President of Azerbaijan. This scandal provoked such outrage that the Prime Minister was forced to call a snap general election in

June 2017. And although he held on to power, a poll showed that the Maltese public's confidence in its politicians had sunk to a new low: 63% now said that corruption (not crime, cost of living, or anything else) was their biggest concern.

Unsurprisingly, Caruana Galizia's work made her a lot of enemies. She received regular death threats throughout her life, including in the weeks leading up to her murder. She was also a regular defendant in defamation lawsuits. Although most European countries have removed the offense of criminal defamation from their legislation, a few still retain it; and where it is retained, as in Malta, it is often weaponized by the wealthy as a means of silencing critics. At the time of her death, Caruana Galizia was facing an incredible forty-two defamation and libel cases. Many of these had been filed by high profile politicians, including Keith Schembri. This abuse of the law was one of Caruana Galizia's pet hates. In February 2017, she spoke extensively about it to the International Press Institute:

The politician or other public person who feels him/herself to have been libelled will file a formal request for the police to prosecute the journalist, and the police are obliged to comply as they cannot ignore a formal request. The complainant pays nothing, as this is a police prosecution and not a civil suit. Meanwhile, the journalist must pay lawyers to defend him/herself and be present at every single court hearing as required under Maltese law. The stress is great... Being a free operator who is not subject to editors (at least not in terms of my website) makes it more stressful because I face the charges alone, and more expensive because I must pay my own fees and court costs... The criminal defamation laws have to be repealed. You simply cannot have politicians using the police to prosecute the journalists who write about them. The law, which was meant to protect the innocent from slander, is ripe for abuse by the powerful against those who oppose them... if the person filing for libel is found to have been clearly in the wrong, then there should be a penalty paid, or compensation for the journalist who has been put through all that unnecessarily.

Caruana Galizia was murdered on the afternoon of October 16, 2017. She had been driving a rental car near her home in Bidnija when an explosive device that had been placed under the vehicle was detonated remotely. Pieces of her car were found strewn across nearby fields; Caruana Galizia's remains were found by her son, Matthew, eighty meters from the scene of the blast. "I looked down," he later wrote on Facebook, "and there were my mother's body parts all around me." She was the fourth person in Malta to be killed by a car bomb since the start of 2016.

Caruana Galizia's murder provoked national and international outrage: the European Commission, human rights organizations, and media outlets made public statements calling for a thorough, independent investigation; the Pope sent a rare letter of condolence to Malta; thousands of people took to the streets of the island's capital, Valletta, carrying placards that read, "Journalists will not be reduced to silence," and calling for justice for the dead reporter.

Most saw a direct link between Caruana Galizia's work and her killing. These included her son, Matthew, who wrote the day after her death:

My mother was assassinated because she stood between the rule of law and those who sought to violate it, like many strong journalists. But she was also targeted because she was the only person doing so. This is what happens when the institutions of the state are incapacitated: the last person left standing is often a journalist. Which makes her the first person left dead... A culture of impunity has been allowed to flourish by the government in Malta. It is of little comfort for the Prime Minister of this country to say that he will "not rest" until the perpetrators are found, when he heads a government that encouraged that same impunity. First he filled his office with crooks, then he filled the police with crooks and imbeciles, then he filled the courts with crooks and incompetents. If the institutions were already working, there would be no assassination to investigate—and my brothers and I would still have a mother.

Members of the European Parliament who visited Malta on a fact-

finding mission a month later raised similar concerns. They noted “a high degree of unwillingness to investigate,” a “failure to prosecute corruption and money laundering,” and a general air of “incompetence” at every level of the police.

However, on December 4, 2017, the Prime Minister announced an unexpected breakthrough in the investigation into Caruana Galizia’s death: ten men had been arrested in connection with the crime. A day later, three of these men appeared in court where they were charged with murder, criminal use of explosives, involvement in organized crime, and criminal conspiracy. All three pleaded not guilty.

At the time of this writing, no motive has been presented for the killing of Caruana Galizia; those who ordered it are still at large.

Calls for a thorough, impartial investigation into Daphne Caruana Galizia’s murder, and for those who masterminded it to be brought to justice, may be sent to the following address:

Prime Minister Joseph Muscat  
Office of the Prime Minister Auberge de Castille  
Valletta VLT 1061  
Malta

You may want to use this [sample letter](#).

Email: [Office of the Prime Minister](#)

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