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'He shouldn't be extradited'

Whistleblowers must be protected and Julian Assange freed, argues German Social Democratic MP Frank Schwabe

Read this interview in German.

Last week, the extradition hearing against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange from the UK to the US began. What could happen to Assange if he's extradited?

> He faces up to 175 years in prison on 18 different charges. This alone shows that it's about setting a warning example.

Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, believes that Julian Assange will be subjected to targeted psychological torture. Is this accusation justified?

> Assange is obviously in very bad shape, both mentally and physically. That's also because of his long stay at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. But even now he is being held in a high-security prison under even stricter conditions. There's no reason at all for this. On the contrary, he must receive comprehensive medical care.

The SPD faction wants to invite Nils Melzer to the German Parliament. What do you hope to achieve this way?

> We want to do this across parties if possible. Of course we want to create publicity; we want to discuss the Assange case but also the issue of whistleblowers in general. But quite apart from the assessment of Assange's role: torture mustn't be allowed anywhere. Melzer has given people a wake-up call. We want to give him the opportunity to report first-hand to the Bundestag. It's good that the position of UN Special Rapporteur on Torture exists.

For the first time in the Assange case, the anti-espionage paragraph in the US is being used against a journalist. Is a precedent being set here intentionally?

Of course. A law from 1917 is to be applied here. It all seems like trying hard to set a precedent to deter others. But the opposite should be the case. People must be encouraged to reveal to companies, but also to authorities or whole states, criminal behaviour or even behaviour contrary to international law. This is the opposite of treason.

Is the Assange case a declaration of bankruptcy for the rule of law in the United States?

At least it raises many questions. All signs point to the fact that he cannot expect a fair trial. Therefore, he shouldn't be extradited. He must be set free to choose where he wants to live.

What is at stake for European democracies in the Assange case?

The rule of law has a long European tradition. And we are rightly proud of its standards. We must vigorously counter any impression that this could be overridden in special cases. A breach of the rule of law in the Assange case would have far-reaching negative effects beyond this specific case. Britain has committed itself to the rule of law not only within the EU but also within the Council of Europe. No matter the specific case.

Journalists and whistleblowers are coming under increasing pressure not only in authoritarian states, but also in the West. What must be done to protect them from political persecution?

We need a comprehensive understanding that whistleblowing is good and necessary. People who uncover the worst offences are not fouling their own nest, but they are rather doing a service to democracy and human rights. Whistleblowers must be protected by international conventions and agreements as well as by national laws.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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Frank Schwabe is an SPD politician, member of the German Bundestag and since 2014 spokesman for human rights and humanitarian aid of the SPD parliamentary group. Schwabe is also Chairman of the SOC Group in PACE.