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## PRESS RELEASE

### **“A free and unhindered press is the only way we can have a functioning democracy...but there is still work to be done” – IGM on World Press Freedom Day 2020**

Today is World Press Freedom Day and the Institute of Maltese Journalists (IGM) is joining international press associations and civil society groups in reminding the public of how essential the free press is to the maintaining the freedoms we all take for granted.

Last year, IGM stated that “a free and unhindered press is the only way we can have a functioning democracy,” – a principle that we abide it as it is the only way we can make informed decisions about the society we would like to live in. However, there is still work to be done.

During the current pandemic, many applauded the frontliners, amongst which journalists, from their balconies. A noble gesture. However, **Maltese journalists are being harassed on a daily basis**. While skimming through comments posted on social media as a reaction to the daily medical bulletin by the health authorities, or beneath news articles or opinion pieces related to the latest migration saga, one may easily notice vile threats and bullying! This is not and will never be tolerable. We can never accept any type of blatant hatred towards people who work tirelessly to provide the public with factually correct information, having to compete with a wave of misinformation that litters most social media platforms. **We call on the authorities, including politicians, to understand and most importantly pronounce themselves against any type of anti-media rhetoric**. Citizens can only form informed opinions if they have clear answers to pertinent questions, and information based on factual truth.

We refer to Friday’s remarks by Prime Minister Robert Abela during a press conference, where he stated that he would “appreciate” if journalists would only ask on the subject of the press conference and not delve into issues related to the migration crisis that Malta is currently facing. Prime Minister, this is not on. While you might have uttered all information that could be communicated at the time on such a subject, journalists’ questions can never be restricted to a particular subject that the authority deems fit. This, on the contrary, simply fuels more hatred towards what constitutes the fourth pillar in a democracy.

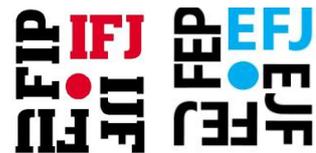
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IGM notes the Opposition leader's initiative to start having televised weekly interviews with questions being fielded by journalists from the independent media. This is a step in the right direction towards more transparency. **IGM not only invites the Prime Minister to follow suit, but proposes that a weekly Press Conference is organised for the sole purpose to let journalists representing all media houses to field questions.** This can contribute much better towards press freedom in Malta, rather than being cushioned while transmitting messages as done by the two political leaders during the past months.

COVID-19 has brought a lot of restrictions, not only on the general public, but also on journalistic practice. Thankfully, technological advancements made it possible to virtually report and also ask questions. Yet, journalists are eager to get back to the traditional formats of press conferences, having the chance to ask follow up questions and interview the relevant persons.

IGM regrets that Malta kept stooping lower in the World Press Freedom Index issued by Reporters Without Borders. Malta is now 31 places lower than it was in 2016. We reiterate that "no society can be truly, free and democratic, if it is not well-informed, and in this respect, this latest drop is worrying as much as it is disappointing." IGM agrees that weaknesses in the rule of law ultimately hinders journalism and that much more needs to be done to allow journalists access to important information. The Council of Europe's platform for media freedom and safety of journalists' annual report issued this week, labelling Malta as a "country of exceptional concern," is even more worrying.

As we have seen from the public inquiry into Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder, the failure of authorities to act on reports of corruption - in addition to allowing bad actors to act with impunity – leaves journalists alone and at risk.

On this day, IGM remembers Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was killed over a two years and a half ago, by someone who wanted to deprive the public of information. While during the past months we have witnessed significant developments, we are still waiting for justice to be served.

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