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WikiLeaks founder says he pleaded 'guilty to journalism' in deal for his release and calls for protection of press freedom



Julian Assange says he chose freedom over 'unrealisable justice' – video

Jennifer Rankin in Brussels

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Julian Assange has said he chose freedom “over unrealisable justice” as he described his plea deal with US authorities and urged European lawmakers to act to protect freedom of expression in a climate with “more impunity, more secrecy [and] more retaliation for telling the truth”.

In his first public statement since the plea deal in June ended his nearly 14 years of prison, embassy confinement and house arrest in the UK, the [WikiLeaks](#) founder argued that legal protections for whistleblowers and journalists “only existed on paper” or “were not effective in any remotely reasonable time”.

“I eventually chose freedom over unrealisable justice, after being detained for years and facing a 175-year sentence with no effective remedy,” he told lawmakers in Strasbourg at the parliamentary assembly of the [Council of Europe](#) (Pace), the human rights body with members ranging from Iceland to Azerbaijan.

“I am not free today because the system worked. I am free today after years of incarceration because I pled guilty to journalism,” he continued.

“The rights of journalists and publishers within the European space are seriously threatened,” he told Pace’s committee on legal affairs and human rights, urging the assembly to act. “The criminalisation of news-gathering activities is a threat to investigative journalism everywhere. I was formally convicted by a foreign power for asking for, receiving and publishing truthful information about that power while I was in [Europe](#).”

Assange rose to prominence in 2010 after publishing a series of leaks from the former soldier Chelsea Manning showing that the US army in Iraq [killed a dozen unarmed civilians](#), including two Reuters employees. No one has ever faced justice for the killings.

He further angered the US government when a few months later he published a trove of 250,000 US diplomatic cables, some of which were [published in the Guardian](#), causing a [diplomatic crisis](#).

He **walked free** from a US district court on the Pacific island of Saipan in June after agreeing to a plea deal. He pleaded guilty to a single criminal charge of conspiring to obtain and disclose classified US national defence documents and received a 62-month sentence, in effect time served at Belmarsh prison in south London.

Assange spent five years in Belmarsh, after seven hiding away in the Ecuadorian embassy in central London and more than a year under house arrest.

Assange was arrested by British authorities on behalf of the US in 2019 after Ecuador withdrew his asylum. He had originally entered the Knightsbridge-based embassy in 2012. At the time it was reported that he feared he might be extradited on to the US if he was extradited to Sweden, where a warrant for his arrest had been issued on two separate allegations of sexual assault.

Swedish authorities **dropped an initial investigation** into an alleged rape in 2017 after concluding that all avenues to conduct an inquiry had been exhausted. Assange, who denied all charges, remained in the embassy for a further two years, fearing extradition to the US by British authorities.



Stella Assange attended the session with her husband. Photograph: Stéphane Mahé/Reuters

Assange told the committee on Tuesday that the landscape changed dramatically in February 2017 when Donald Trump appointed “two wolves in Maga hats” - Mike Pompeo as the CIA director and William Barr as the US attorney general.

While Barack Obama had **commuted the sentence of Chelsea Manning**, the Trump White House pursued a much more aggressive approach to WikiLeaks. In 2020 it was reported that senior CIA officials had **considered abducting and assassinating Assange** when he was in his fifth year in Ecuadorian embassy.

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Assange said his wife, Stella Assange, and then baby son had been victims of US spying and attempted evidence-gathering, including what he said was an attempt to take DNA from his six-month-old child's nappy.

Over nearly 90 minutes, Assange addressed the committee seated next to his wife. He answered questions slowly but firmly, but declined a final question,

citing tiredness.

He said it had been a “profound and surreal shift” to go from a Belmarsh cell to Strasbourg. Speaking of his time at Belmarsh, he said: “The experience of isolation for years in a small cell is difficult to convey. It strips away one’s sense of self, leaving only the raw essence of existence. I am yet not fully equipped to speak about what I have endured.”

On Wednesday, assembly members will debate a draft resolution that condemns the “disproportionately severe charges” brought against Assange by the US government.

Drafted by Thórhildur Sunna Evarsdóttir, an Icelandic MP with the left-leaning Pirate party, the resolution states that “misuse” of the US 1917 Espionage Act has had a “dangerous chilling effect, dissuading publishers, journalists and whistleblowers from reporting on governmental misconduct”. The text also criticises the UK, a founding member of the Council of Europe, for failing to protect Assange’s freedom of expression and right to liberty.

In a dissenting opinion, the British conservative peer Richard Keen said the text was “overly polemic and imprecise on key legal points”. He argued it was “regrettable” to describe Assange as a political prisoner in Belmarsh because, he wrote, the WikiLeaks founder had been detained lawfully having violated earlier bail conditions and was considered a flight risk.

“These proceedings did indeed take unusually long, but Mr Assange and his legal team contributed to prolonging them himself. His detention was therefore in no way politically motivated,” Keen wrote, arguing that the designation “belittled the fate of true political prisoners”.

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