

His Case BROKE The Internet, Exposed EU

Europe's commitment to free speech is crumbling before our eyes. How can a public protest against a top EU official lead to arrest, fines, and even a "record" that could impact one's future, all while the official claims the protester is lucky to live in a free country in a show of absolute irony? Is "damage to an official" the new way to silence dissent, and what does the media's silence on this high-profile case reveal about the state of journalism in Europe? Today I'm talking to Armando Mema, the Former European Parliament candidate who hackled Ursula von der Leyen a few months ago during a speech and who was then arrested on camera while von der Leyen ironically was saying that he's lucky living in a free country where his act is not a crime. We talk about the details of Armando's arrest, the perplexing legal charges, and the unprecedented court order restricting his future right to protest. Whether the freedom to speak out against power is truly protected in Finland and across the European Union, or if we are witnessing a concerning slide towards authoritarianism. Links: Video being discussed: <https://x.com/eurodale/status/1953386444505874932?s=61> Armando's X (Twitter): <https://x.com/ArmandoMema> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Intro & The Viral Arrest Video 00:00:58 The Protest, Arrest, and Initial Charges 00:08:16 The Fine, Legal Aftermath & Ambiguous Charges 00:11:54 Broader Implications for Freedom of Speech 00:20:52 Media Coverage, Public Reaction & Finnish Political Climate 00:26:09 Conclusion & The Future of Protest in Europe

#M2

Hello everybody, this is Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking to Armando Mema, the former European Parliament candidate who heckled Ursula von der Leyen a few months ago during a speech, and who was then arrested on camera while von der Leyen, ironically, was saying that he's lucky to be living in a free country where his act is not a crime. Please have a look at that scene.

#F1

They can be happy that they are in a free country like Finland, where free speech is a right, where they have no restrictions. If they were in Moscow, they would be in jail in two minutes.

#M2

Armando, welcome to the channel.

#M3

Thank you. Thank you for having me here.

#M2

Well, thank you very much for saying yes, because you went through something quite extraordinary, especially considering the timing of this whole thing. We just saw it. Can you tell us what you were protesting against and what happened to you when you were arrested and afterwards?

#M3

Yes, so five days before the election day for the European Parliament, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen came to Helsinki to give a speech with the Prime Minister of Finland, Petteri Orpo. It happened that I was walking, as usual, to go back home and pick up my daughter from daycare. I was a candidate for the European Parliament, and I didn't know that the President was coming that day. So, I took the chance, since I was also running for the EU Parliament, to take part in the event and ask a few questions to the European President and, of course, protest a bit against her policies, which, of course, I oppose in many areas, many fields. There were other people protesting that day, including students from the University of Helsinki.

They were protesting against the genocide in Gaza and Finland's and Europe's role in this genocide. So technically, I was not part of the protest, but I felt it was the right thing to do to peacefully join the protest. There were, I think, more than 50 people there with slogans and things, plus there was a big crowd of people. So I thought I was not doing anything different from what the other people were doing there. I asked the EU President, "What is she going to do about the genocide in Gaza? What's Europe's role going to be in that?" And then I started to protest, as other people were doing. And in not even, let's say, two minutes, the police came without explanation.

They grabbed me with force, and then I just had one moment to react and say, "Look, this is what they are doing to European candidates in Finland." After that, I just followed the police to the police car. It was a big surprise for me because it happened so fast that I couldn't realize what was happening. Basically, they took me inside the police car for maybe 20 minutes so the EU President and Prime Minister could continue their speech. It felt as if it was intimidation and silencing. The questions were too uncomfortable for the EU President, and they decided, in my opinion, to take me and silence me. But it was very surprising because they could have just said to me, "You are disturbing the event," or something like that, and asked me to leave the area so they could continue their speech.

But there were also, surprisingly, other people shouting and disturbing, even with megaphones. So I don't know how my voice was louder than someone shouting with a megaphone. I think the questions made Ursula and Petteri Orpo very uncomfortable. So they decided to move me away so people could not listen to those questions and maybe think about the whole situation. Because she came there basically to favor one party over the others, Kokoomus—something she's not supposed

to do as the EU President, because she represents all EU citizens. But she came there and told people, like, "Hey, you have to vote for Kokoomus at the next European elections." And so this was basically what happened that day. If you have questions, I can...

#M2

So, because the gathering of protesters wasn't too large, does that mean you believe that the questions you shouted at her could be heard by her?

#M3

Yes, yes, definitely. She could hear. And usually, I've noticed in past protests, the EU President will just laugh at the protesters and be indifferent. But the questions this time were so uncomfortable that she had to reply with the microphone. And she said at that exact moment that you should be thankful to be in a democratic country like Finland, because if you were in Russia, you would be arrested.

#M2

Yeah, while you were being arrested, I wonder whether she realized that that was actually happening. But then you were brought to the police car. What are they charging you with? So first, what did the police tell you—why are you now in a police car? And then, what are they charging you with legally now?

#M3

The police, surprisingly, said that I was being aggressive and they initially charged me with a fine for public disobedience—basically, that I didn't listen to the police order to leave the area. Which is not true, because during the court case on the 11th of August this year, the police were asked, "In what language did you give the orders to Mema to leave the area?" And she said, "I don't remember which language I was using to tell him to leave, but I used my hands to communicate with him."

I mean, the whole situation is so hilarious. And then after she said that, the judge changed the charges. So they canceled the previous fine and changed it from public disobedience to damage to an official. So they actually said that I was damaging the police by being aggressive or doing something with my hands and feet. So the whole story is very, you know, once you write a report that this is what happened, you can't just say, "OK, we cancel that fine and give him another fine based on what we think the matter is."

#M2

So the point is, they want to fine you. And now, at this point in time, you are currently fined. How much did they fine you?

#M3

So they charged about 110 euros for this fine. But what's most important about the whole situation is that the judge made an order that from now on, if I want to protest again in Finland, I will have to ask the police. So I will have to inform the police that I will take part in any protest. It looks to me like clear intimidation from the authorities to silence people who are dissidents. If you try to protest again, they'll put you in trouble. They will give you more charges. They will have a history of you. They claimed that I was being aggressive, but that's not the case. There is a comment from Helsingin Sanomat, which just recently published an article about the incident. The media did not report who the person was; they just wrote, "Hey, there was a person heckling at Ursula von der Leyen, and this happened, and he got fined."

There is a comment from one person—people can voluntarily comment on the articles—and he said, "According to me, he was not being aggressive at all." I mean, if we cannot protest peacefully, what is going to happen to human rights and democracy in this country? So I think... Now the court case continues. I'm trying to appeal the ruling because I'm not happy with the decision. This may also affect me in the future. So it's going to be there, and for something I didn't do—like, I was not being aggressive. I saw the video where there were other people protesting, just 20 centimeters from the police. But for some reason, they decided to take me to the police car, and the other people, they just let protest.

#M2

You might have just been unlucky that they grabbed you instead of anybody else. It might be something else. Do you think that if the police had realized you were actually a candidate for the EU Parliament at that point in time, things would have been different?

#M3

The funny thing is that before they put me inside the police car, there was a moment where they had to take all my belongings. And I was telling them, "Look, I'm a candidate for the European election. I don't know why you're doing this." And the moment I said that, they took me and put me inside the police car. So I had informed them. They could have said to me, "Wait here. We will give you the fine and then you can leave the area." But they took me, put me inside the police car, and made me wait for 20 minutes. About the time the EU president and Orpo were there having their speech, once they left, they removed me from the police car and gave me the fine. I told them that I was a candidate. They didn't listen to that; they just continued with what they were doing. And so this was the case.

#M2

Yeah. So just for me to get this straight: we are now living in a situation in which, if an EU Commission president or an EU official gives a speech in front of a crowd—this was not an invited crowd, right? This was not you trespassing. It was not you getting access to a private gathering where she was speaking at a private event. This was a public event. She knew that whoever she was speaking to, people could just walk up to it, right? And if that happens, you're now, in the EU, not allowed to shout disapproval at these people. That's just where we're living now, right?

#M3

Yes, correct, correct. It's very important that you mention the fact that I was in a public square. There were other people there handing out flyers for the EU elections, candidates just like me from other parties. There were people voluntarily gathering there. And it's not that I trespassed into some area. There were also other people protesting. It seems that we are not allowed to be against the policies of our leaders. We are not allowed to peacefully protest. Amnesty International here in Finland is studying my case currently because, also for them, it seems very unprecedented that someone is just getting arrested for peacefully protesting in the way it happened.

#M2

Arrested and fined. Can you tell me, does the fine come along with an actual record, a police record entry?

#M3

So this is considered a minor crime. But in the future, let's say, it might affect me when applying for jobs.

#M2

That's what I mean. Does it remain on your record? I mean, is it part of your...

#M3

One lawyer told me it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be on my record, but it might be used against me in the future. If there are other protests, they're going to say, "Oh, look, you were being aggressive on that day in the previous protest. So we have a clear record of you being aggressive," when that's not the case. So what I'm trying to get from the court now is to remove this fine because I didn't do it, and also to remove the restriction of having to ask permission from the police to protest again. Why should this happen? I should be allowed to join any protest peacefully without giving any information to the police.

#M2

And just to be clear, the police are not charging you with the crime of heckling or the crime of shouting. They are charging you with the crime of being aggressive toward the police. So the fact that they had to grab you and pull you away is enough to justify that you were aggressive toward them, not toward von der Leyen. But that's the charge, right?

#M3

Yes, but during the court case, they said that, hey, there was the European president and you're not allowed to disturb the speech. So the judge was saying that when a public authority comes and gives a speech, you're not allowed to interrupt their speech or protest. First, they said public disobedience—not listening to a police order. And then they said damage to an official, which is a bit of an escalation from the previous charge.

#M2

Sorry, sorry, sorry. I misunderstood. So that was the previous charge. And now it's damage to an official, and the official is, of course, von der Leyen. Right? That's the damage—or is it damage to the police?

#M3

They didn't clarify this. They said "damage to an official." So they didn't clarify who I was being aggressive toward, because I also asked the judge—I was allowed to ask questions—I asked, "I was being aggressive to whom, exactly?" They didn't clarify that. So it's about the interpretation of the law here; they could say it was the police, they could say it was Ursula von der Leyen. But in my own language, in Italian, it was "damage to an official," without specifying who the official was.

#M2

It's just—what kind of feeling does this leave you with, knowing that, in principle, the Finnish police have now set a precedent that anyone who protests against public officials from the EU, and potentially also public officials from Finland, can be taken away and given a fine? Is that still part of your concept of freedom of speech?

#M3

Yes, of course. It really shocked me because I thought Finland had one of the best rankings in terms of free press, democracy, and human rights. It feels like I have to think twice in the future if I want to take part in any protest. They can use anything against me. At this point, they can say you were being aggressive, even when I was not being aggressive. So you're not allowed—it's like a form of

intimidation, that whoever is dissident, we're going to make sure that he will think twice in the future if he wants to protest again against any official in Finland or the European Union. Of course, I don't want to get in trouble with the law. I live with my family. I have a daughter. I live my life.

I feel intimidated that I cannot protest in the future, as I thought other people were also doing. They target specific people. And then, yes, also during the court case, it seemed like the judge came there with a clear intention of fining me, whatever the circumstances were. So they were not being impartial; they were being partial, like, "Okay, we have to defend the police. We have to say that we're doing the right thing." So it feels like, you know, the media in Finland didn't report the incident. And the funny part is that the video which went viral on the Internet was made by Helsingin Sanomat. So they were there making the video, but they didn't write any comment.

In another newspaper, they wrote that the protests went peacefully, nothing happened, the EU president is so democratic, and at the same time they published only a tiny fraction of the video where this was happening. They also took pictures of me. There was one journalist, a woman, who was taking pictures with a professional camera, but she was not allowed to publish them. So it feels like the press does not comment on cases like this. Then the court is being partial. So you have the press against you, the authorities, the judge, and the politicians. And you ask yourself, is this supposed to happen in a free and democratic country? This feels more like being in other countries where there is totalitarianism and tyranny.

#M2

The thing is, of course, the reason this case became so famous is because she said exactly what happened to you, right? "We live in a democracy, therefore you can say this, but you cannot say that," and then being taken away. It just exposes how the system they're building is the opposite of what they're selling it as. In general, since that happened, did you get more reactions from abroad? Did this case stir up anything, since it then went viral on social media?

#M3

Yes, there were many reactions from other journalists and public figures across France and America. Germany as well. I saw a video they published on local television. But again, it feels that the press in Europe in general might have the same problem as we have here in Finland. So this is a very big scandal. And also, the big main newspapers around the world are not publishing the case. So they know that this is a very hot topic. And when the EU president tells you the exact opposite, and it happens straight away that, look, it is not like that—I'm not allowed to protest freely, I'm not allowed to be a dissident—then of course it makes you question the state of things, not only in Finland, but also in Europe.

#M2

Let me just ask you, toward the end of this interview: In general, in Finland, did the public atmosphere for protests and so on become tighter? What is it like in Finland at the moment to not be part of the pro-interventionist, pro-NATO group? Did you notice any changes?

#M3

Yes, absolutely. Since there was discussion of NATO membership and after we joined NATO, the public debate has become so paranoid and schizophrenic. They think that whatever is against the mainstream narrative is either pro-Russia or aligned with the BRICS countries. They label you as pro-Russian. I have no connections at all with Russia, but one member of the European Parliament from Kokoomus commented on Twitter that, according to him, this was some sort of Russian agent doing this stuff. It felt so ridiculous because I am the victim here, but I'm being targeted and used for a political agenda. Like, okay, whatever is against us or criticizes us, we will just label it as pro-Russian and that's it. So this is not free debate. In a free debate, you should be able to question the history.

You should be able to analyze the facts. You should be able to talk freely without fear of being labeled as something you're not. So, of course, the public debate in Finland feels very toxic, and we should be able to criticize NATO when it's doing wrong. We should be able to criticize the European Union when it's doing wrong things—let's say in Ukraine, or in Gaza, or even during the pandemic. So, you're not allowing people to talk freely; you use authority against them. It seems like freedom of speech is actually ending in Europe. It feels sad because you go to school to study and you have a certain idea of human rights and democracy, and then you realize that suddenly the real world is more like a jungle than a democracy, and that we have to fight again for basic freedoms like freedom of speech.

#M2

Yes, because, ladies and gentlemen, this seems to be the world that we are currently building in Europe, where freedom of speech is the freedom of the leaders to speak in a public square into a loudspeaker. And if anyone responds with something disapproving, then that is considered disturbing and will be fined. So we, the lovely citizens, have the freedom to remain silent if we are unhappy. Armando, I'm very sorry to hear that this is how it went down for you. I do hope that you get this back in the next instance and that this verdict will be overturned. It's a very unsettling case for what it indicates about where the journey is headed for all of us. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us before we close?

#M3

Yeah, so I think it's very important for people who are listening to think. I think what happened in my case is very important because it affects all of us in the future. If this can happen to me, it can happen to any EU citizen around Europe or the world who wants to take part peacefully in any protest. Actually, we are also seeing in the UK and Germany what they are doing to peaceful

protesters. So it's very important that we think about it and see what the solution could be to this. Otherwise, if we just leave it as if it's not important, then we're heading toward a sort of totalitarianism. And you may not be allowed in the future, like me, to protest or be against the policies of the leaders. It's a very sensitive matter. I hope the discussion we had today was helpful for people to better understand the reality we live in in Europe.

#M2

It certainly does. Armando, thank you very much for giving us the details. For people who want to follow you, I will put your Twitter/X link in the description of this video below. Armando Mema, thank you very much for your time today.

#M3

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Bye.