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IPI Opening Ceremony Speech

David Dadge, Director of the International Press Institute

Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would very much like to welcome you to the opening ceremony of the 57th World Congress and General Assembly of the International Press Institute.

I am particularly pleased that the opening ceremony takes place in this stunning parliament with its wonderful atmosphere and architecture.

Mr. President, the history of this IPI World Congress in Belgrade has followed, to a lesser degree, the twists and turns of recent developments in your own country.

Indeed, there were times when I wondered whether I would give this speech at all and I worried also that, due to your extremely busy schedule, you would not be present.

Happily, I am here and I welcome the fact that you now sit in front of me. It has often been said that a long journey offers the most fulfilment and I hope that we can draw on a shared sense of satisfaction at being present today.

When I look back on IPI's journey to this parliament building, I realise the importance of those first steps in Budapest in 2005 when the IPI Executive Board agreed to come to Belgrade.

I think few of us realised at the time that this decision would take us along a path so familiar to many of my IPI colleagues. IPI has a long tradition of holding its World Congresses in countries where great change is occurring. We were in Germany at the fall of the Wall, in South Africa during the first democratic elections after apartheid in 1994, and in Russia in 1998. Now, we find ourselves in Belgrade also at a time of significant events.

Once again, the chosen themes of our World Congress over the next three days are appropriate to the venue. In a series of panels, we will discuss the relationship between Serbia and her neighbours, and provide comment and debate on the power of reconciliation to overcome conflict.

These discussions take place against the backdrop of the terrible events that occurred from 1991--1999 in this region and they are undertaken in the hope that dialogue will always triumph over the impulse towards violence.

Then there is discussion of the media and freedom of the press—the very reason for IPI’s existence. As we move deeper into the 21st Century, the world’s media grapples with the dazzling pace of change and the IPI community will discuss new media, as well as the influence of profits on the news. These are what we do best: leading the way on discussion of the media, while alert to the dangers to press freedom.

And IPI comes to you at a time of an important anniversary. This year is the sixtieth Anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in particular, Article 19.

IPI’s Constitution states that “[IPI] defends everyone’s personal freedom, the freedom of expression and, in particular, the basic right of freedom of the media, as stated in article XIX in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (Dec. 10, 1948).” Therefore, Article 19 is implicit in the work of IPI. In effect, it is our governing statement.

Two years after this document, in 1950, IPI was founded when 34 editors from 15 countries met at Columbia University in New York. Our organisation is therefore born from the hopes and aspirations of a world whose most recent memories were of the carnage and the horror of the Second World War. We exist, because those who gave sacrifice believed that fundamental human rights were key to the rejection of violence.

But there is another important anniversary. This year also sees the 60th Anniversary of Hubert Humphrey’s speech at the 1948 Democratic Convention in Philadelphia calling upon his party to “...walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.”

I believe that Humphrey’s words, spoken out of the past, are relevant to the Serbia of today.

Despite your best efforts Mr President and the hard work of many committed people in this country, it is my opinion that Serbia has yet to fully enter the assembly of nations who have undertaken this democratic journey.

Mr President, when I think of these shadows, I am reminded of:

- Slavko Curuvija, the owner and director of the daily *Dnevni telegraf* and the magazine *Evropljanin*, shot dead on 11 April 1999.
- Or the murder of Milan Pantic, a correspondent in Jagodina for the Belgrade daily *Vecernje Novosti*. Pantic was found dead in front of his home on 11 June 2001.
- Or, Dada Vujasinovic, a freelancer and contributor to the Belgrade magazine *Duga*, whose death remains unexplained to this day.

According to my information, no individuals have been formally charged with these murders. They remain unsolved and the investigations into their deaths are either stalled or no longer active.

Mr President: I call upon you in fraternity and in our mutual belief in human rights and democracy to do everything possible to solve these murders of journalists. The impunity of the past must be faced now and those who commit murder must be punished, no matter how long after the fact.

And I say that if we fail in this endeavour, if we remain silent: through our own silence, we will condemn others to silence. That these acts will confirm to the narrow minority that murder may be committed without punishment.

These are not the values we wish to see in the 21st Century.

I say this not only because of the effect impunity has on a society, but also because I feel that Serbian society owes the independent media an important debt of gratitude. During the Presidency of Slobodan Milošević, the independent Serbian media suffered administration penalties, criminal defamation actions, and violence due to its reporting. Nevertheless, despite these pressures, the media faced down the authorities, giving the Serbian people a vital understanding of events.

Some of those journalists are here today and this is IPI's opportunity to thank them for their bravery and dedication.

However, I am not here to lecture you Mr. President. I raise these cases because of IPI's 57 year history of dealing with global press freedom violations around the world. Therefore, I speak not from the pulpit, but from the aisle of genuine concern for Serbia's media.

As I respect your own desire for democracy in Serbia, I hope you will respect IPI's desire for justice in these cases.

I will close with this thought Mr President, it has been said that the past is our definition. We may strive to escape it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it.

I know that this is your desire for Serbia and that you currently strive to make something better for the Serbian people. Both I and the assembled IPI Community wish you every success in this attempt, it is an honourable one, and we join with you today in offering you our heartfelt support.

Thank you Mr President.