



INTERNATIONAL
PRESS INSTITUTE

WORLD CONGRESS AND
57TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

14-17 JUNE
BELGRADE, SERBIA



Belgrade June 15th

IPI Opening Ceremony Speech

Hari Štajner, Belgrade Host Committee Chairman

Dear IPI members,

Welcome to Belgrade, welcome to Serbia, welcome to the IPI World Congress and 57th General Assembly.

In the course of my -short journalistic career - spanning only half a century -, I have been in various places, doing various work, but I have never felt such a pleasure as I feel now, having a chance to welcome you here and open this important event. This event is of great significance to us, journalists, and I hope that it will also be noticed by the public, one of the reasons for that being the fact that 300 renowned journalists and media professionals from 51 countries and from all continents came to Belgrade.

The IPI was established 58 years ago, dedicated - as we were told then - to the promotion and protection of press freedom and improvement of the practices of journalism. Those were the post-war years full of hardship, while the founders - a group of journalists from 15 countries - believed that a free press would contribute to the creation of a better world. Are we living in a better world today?

Probably yes, but also in a world that is much more complicated. And what is the situation with the press freedom?

During a recent international event it was pointed out that press freedom is under serious threat around the world from many sources - gangs and corrupt officials in Latin America, autocratic regimes in the Middle East, conflicts in Africa, hostile governments in Asia, as well as death threats and prosecutions in Central Asia and Europe. This sorry state of affairs is aggravated by the fact that, according to IPI's statistics, 93 journalists and media staffers were murdered worldwide in 2007, making it the second bloodiest year on record for journalism. This gives us an unequivocal answer to the question of whether the furtherance and safeguarding of press freedom today should remain the IPI's core issue.

Reading some old documents, I have found prescient words of a former IPI director, Peter Galliner, spoken 27 years ago in Nairobi, which sound perfectly true today. These words were cited by our recent director, Johann Fritz: "IPI will continue to play its role in the defence of the freedom of speech and the free flow of information; it will help those who are harassed and persecuted, it will uphold the right to communicate without government influence and restrictions and IPI will not give in to pressure, wherever they may come from."

Yes, unfortunately, free speech and free media are still hot topics, and therefore we will discuss these issues during our Congress. Also, in the following days we will try to offer answers to other burning issues facing the media in the

21st century. At the same time, of course, we won't disregard our current geographic location, and will discuss media problems in the South East Europe, mostly at the SEEMO Regional Conference.

Considering these freedoms, allow me to offer you three brilliant thoughts I came across on the ubiquitous Internet: in 399 BC, Socrates speaks to jury at his trial: "If you offered to let me off this time on condition I am not any longer to speak my mind...I should say to you, 'Men of Athens, I shall obey the Gods rather than you.'" John Kennedy: "We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people." Noam Chomsky: " Goebels was in favour of free speech for views he liked. So was Stalin. If you are in favour of free speech, then you are in favour of freedom of speech precisely for views you despise."

Aside from the serious discussions awaiting us, I hope that you will have a chance to acquaint yourselves with my country, which is now going through another political crisis, after the dramatic events in October 2000, when we toppled the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milosevic. As was recently described by a local professor: since the earliest days of its history, Serbia has always been a point of confluence, interaction and clashes of various, often contradictory influences and 'models': civilizational, religious, political and ideological. The same situation persists today, as you will witness yourselves, especially if you take one of our post-congress tours around Serbia.

I warmly recommend you to use your free time to get to better know the host city of our Congress, situated at the intersection of the Eastern and Western Europe and at the confluence of two big European rivers. Right now we are in one of its most monumental buildings, whose construction began in 1936, the House of the National Assembly; in the following days you will see some other points of interest, like The Old Court, built at the end of the 19th century, The Royal Palace, a part of the Bohemian and Medieval Belgrade, as well as the Sava Center.

Belgrade has been destroyed more often than most other cities in Europe and some of the most recent devastations are still visible in the centre of the city. However, it has always been rebuilt, in an incredible variety of styles, and after all, after a millennium of exciting and often difficult history, Belgrade has recently been nominated as the "City of the Future in Southern Europe".

Dear IPI members, The Host Committee and the IPI staff have done their best to make your participation in the Congress and the time you will spend in Serbia most memorable and enjoyable. I hope that in the following days you will have a chance to see this for yourselves, that your stay in Belgrade will be an unforgettable experience, and that you will not regret having accepted our slogan and invitation to - BE IN BELGRADE.