

Transcript of the Speech by Professor Jerzy Buzek
President of the European Parliament
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Good morning.

I am glad that there are so many young people attending this meeting: the best thing that we can do for democracy is to support the contact between generations and strengthen the connection between democracy and free media.

The simple question that I would like to begin with, is: Why do we care about free media? I believe that democracy, individual freedom as well as economic freedoms can bring us benefits in our individual and social lives. Thanks to them we not only feel better as humans, but are provided with a higher standard of life. Democracy gives us an opportunity to pursue our goals and we should fight for democracy.

What is the main tool that we should use to fight for democracy? It is information and free media as well as the courage of journalists who understand the meaning of pluralism.

Nonetheless, before tackling the problem of free media in Turkey and Western Balkans we should not forget that the situation of upon free media in the European Union can be improved. We should be also critical to ourselves.

Let me start with my personal remarks. My CV is pretty complicated: first I was responsible for a trade union '*Solidarity*'. Later I become Prime Minister. That is not always the easiest of transitions. We were fighting for freedom and we were saying "no freedom without solidarity" and "no solidarity without responsibility". We tried to be responsible. The main reason for this was that we wanted to change our lives because we were more deprived of freedom.

Our constitution was formally perfect. We had a very 'democratic' constitution in the communist times. It included everything - from free media to freedom of expression.

However except for the constitution and legal issues a country must build institutions, procedures and have an independent judicial system. Without these, constitutions do not work. If we think about Turkey or Western Balkans let us remember that a legal text is not everything. In our very 'democratic communist times' freedom of expression was limited because censorship was everywhere. To preserve freedom, an entire culture had to exist hidden from the state, in the underground.

During my time in the *Solidarity* movement I helped to print an underground newspaper. In the Poland of the 1980s this was not easy. I remember how we used to organise ourselves - newspapers were printed in people's living rooms, in churches, in basements. Printing machines were smuggled from West Berlin, Austria or Sweden - from all over Europe.

Distribution was the most dangerous activity. We took risks and some of us spent quite a few months in prison and the reason was always the same. We believed - as I still do today - that freedom of expression is a fundamental right. A right worth taking serious risks for! For us it kept alive the sense of being part of Europe. But first and foremost it could help create a better world to live in, in our country.

The first crucial issue is to check not only legal regulations but also how they are implemented and what kind of obstacles they face. The second important issue is that we should do everything to protect journalists. Last year 44 journalists were killed and 90% of these were local journalists. We need to concentrate on giving tangible help to journalists: giving them consular assistance, communication network security, crisis response cell phones and follow-up in individual cases. This should be an explicit new mandate for the EEAS - European External Action Service.

Human rights and freedom of expression are some of the most important areas of activity of our Parliament and we have two Committees dealing with these. In 1993 we awarded the Sakharov Prize to a Bosnian newspaper called *Oslobodjenje* and a few years later to Zhanna Litvina, President of the Belarus Association of Journalists. We awarded it to representatives of Russia and journalists from countries all over the world.

My next point is that in this changing world the definition of journalism and media is also changing. A non-professional blogger is also a journalist and his blog is also media. Fortunately it is difficult to stop the whole internet but still we must fight for the right of access to the media - what is sometimes called the 'freedom to connect'. The European Parliament has called for the support of the 'Global Network Initiative' which defends the freedom of expression and privacy on the internet. We need common standards between states but also a code of conduct within the industry.

My last point is that the mere act of voting is not enough for a society to be democratic. We need independent free media, but we also need pluralism in this media. People need to be able to test, shape and criticise different opinions. Pluralism means to build true competition between the media. Sometimes help from the level of public institutions is needed to keep the competition.

The retreat from the principles of freedom of media in some Western Balkan countries and in Turkey is not acceptable. Citizens need to be properly informed and it is only the media which can give them this information. And give a voice to citizens' concerns. I am sure that conferences like this one could help us to be together - the European Parliament, the Commission and Member States - to defend democracy means to defend free media. For me the two are - as a matter of fact - the same.

Thank you very much for your attention.