

Press release: Foreign Secretary underlines UK support for media freedom and human rights in Russia

In a speech at the Plekhanov University, in Moscow, Boris Johnson also took the opportunity to underline the UK's support for civil society and basic freedoms by meeting a range of civil society representatives and heard first-hand about the state of human rights in Russia.

The Foreign Secretary referenced the restrictions placed on media in Russia – reiterating that the UK believes that an open and free media is essential to any functioning democracy.

Addressing a room of students and journalists in Moscow, he recalled his own experiences growing up during the Cold War, and praised the benefits of a free, diverse and open civil society, as a way to boost economic growth and productivity.

If you look at both of our societies today it is obvious that the free market, in which people are free to find a market among the rest of the population for whatever goods they choose – within reason – to sell, and at whatever price they choose to sell them, is a more effective system of furnishing humanity with its desires than any other system. It was that brute fact alone that ensured the demise of communism.

Yet that freedom – free market economics, or capitalism – is simply not enough on its own.

That is why I want to make the case again today for the economic benefits of freedom of expression. I want to argue that the more tolerant a society is, the more supportive of free speech it is, the more likely that society is to be rich and successful.

I am sure that everyone can see that the media have played a crucial role in western democracies in holding politicians to account, and in telling the truth to power.

So a free media is in the interests of taxpayers, of shareholders – and of consumers. So it is in the interests of prosperity. Indeed it is no accident that if you look at the global prosperity index, and then you look at the societies where journalists are free and well treated, you will see that the most prosperous societies are the ones where freedom of speech is most cherished.

Equally if you have a society where journalists are shot because they investigate the business doings of the rich and powerful, then you will tend to find countries that are less economically successful, less equal, and less attractive as places to invest.

We have huge difficulties in our relationship [with Russia] today. We cannot ignore those difficulties and the UK will remain firm in its principles. We are forward looking.

But equally I hope I don't have to belabour my credentials as an admirer of this country. I not only have Russian ancestry but am the first Foreign Secretary in history to be christened Boris – and may be the last for some time. I look back at that time in the 1990s, when in my conversations with Russian journalists and politicians we seemed to share the same ideals of freedom: free markets, freedom under the law, freedom to speak your mind without fear of intimidation, freedom to express yourself and your sexuality provided you do no harm to others.

And I hope that moment of convergence will seem not to have been a fluke, not an illusion, not a mirage or a false dawn. I hope that time will come again.