

**The Eloquence of the Act of Gathering:
Reflections on the 80th PEN International Congress, Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), 2014**

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The gathering of hundreds of writers from around the world matters because it is a force for imagination and transparency. Our charter is clear. We believe in unlimited freedom of expression. But we also believe that no matter how controversial or difficult our words are, the ultimate purpose is to bring people together.

John Ralston Saul

I have been a member of PEN Melbourne since 2004. This year I was privileged to attend the 80th PEN International Congress in the city of Bishkek, as one of two official delegates for PEN Melbourne. Vice President Judith Rodriguez was my fellow delegate. Beginning in 1986, Judith has attended eighteen PEN International congresses. Naturally she was greeted with delight by many returning delegates from the seventy-three PEN centres represented in Bishkek.



Seated with Judith Rodriguez
at the Assembly of Delegates.

Judith Rodriguez was a generous mentor as the Congress formal proceedings unfolded (a day of PEN International committee meetings; three days of the meeting of the Assembly of Delegates), and just as present to the energetic exchanges surrounding the meetings.ⁱ

Plainly this is a time of increasing violence in large parts of the world. As observed by John Ralston Saul, President of PEN International, ‘each outbreak of state or insurgency violence [always] includes an assault on free expression. Writers are killed or silenced. Debate is silenced or sidelined. Propaganda flourishes’.ⁱⁱ Affirming a need for solidarity amongst PEN

centres everywhere, in Bishkek John Ralston Saul described PEN as ‘a very rough-and-tumble democracy’ in spirit. Through every aspect of the Congress, it was moving and motivating to witness this spirit ‘in action’ in a range of languages simultaneously; it was invigorating to witness the ambitious scope of engagement with issues and ideals of free expression, whether at global, local, or ‘glocal’ levels. The current case list produced by PEN International’s Writers in Prison Committee comprises over nine hundred writers of all kinds who are ‘detained or otherwise persecuted for their peaceful political activities or for the practice of their profession’.ⁱⁱⁱ It feels true to say that these writers—their literature, their individual histories, and their collective significance—were never far from the minds of those gathered in Bishkek for the 80th Congress.

Visiting Bishkek

In the morning of 28 September, after a five hour flight from Istanbul’s Ataturk International Airport, the cityscape of Bishkek appeared bright green with avenues of old trees still in full leaf. Beneath autumn sunshine, and against a distant backdrop of the soaring, snow-covered Tian Shan mountains, Bishkek was also jammed with car traffic; dilapidated, with pavements crumbling and ambitious construction projects long-unfinished; soberingly grandiose in its Soviet-style public monuments, although the severity of adjacent squares and thoroughfares was softened by garden beds in flower.



Left: On Abdrakhmanov street, in front of the Opera and Ballet Theatre, the statue of Tokombaev Aaly (1904–88) national poet and member of the Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyzstan. Right: Abandoned building site at Lev Tolstoy Street.

Over the four days that followed (Monday 29 September–Thursday 2 October) the timetable of Congress events began with the departure of chartered buses at 8.30am. The same buses returned delegates to hotels by 10pm each night at the earliest. Planned with the utmost consideration for warmth of hospitality, the schedule was full, encompassing opera performance and traditional dancing in a splendid yurt; a concert by young musicians of the Aga Khan Ensemble; knowledge sharing workshops; a literary forum with the rubric ‘Free the Word!’. Anyone wishing to explore Bishkek informally needed to venture out during the Congress program. The array of Congress locales, however, made possible an experience of the dramatic contrasts presently characterising Bishkek’s built environment. Venues included the so-called Great Hall of the Manas Cinema (opened in 1966 as the largest widescreen

cinema in the USSR), the marble-clad National Library of the Kyrgyz Republic dating to 1984 (the library itself was founded in 1934), and the stolidly constructivist National Museum of Fine Arts (dating to 1974), its concrete façade in severe disrepair—also the new luxury of the Damas Hotel and wedding venue, with its glass-vaulted hall, and the campuses of two universities opened since Kyrgyzstan became independent from the USSR in 1991.

The free *Bishkek Guidebook* provided by tourist company Kyrgyz Concept notes that the city of just under one million people offers ‘a last chance to ... glimpse some of the remains of the Soviet Union’. As a first-time visitor to Bishkek, I was keenly aware that so many ‘glimpses’ and impressions resisted easy interpretation. Yet the residues of the Soviet era, both more and less tangible, often seemed to me still predominant and unyielding. For example, in my own and others’ copies of the free *Bishkek Guidebook*, introductory pages about local culture showed several words whited out by hand: hasty corrections, or a hotly contested history? In the same guidebook, under the heading ‘Security’, the concluding lines of advice were, ‘Always carry with you a copy of your passport! Never hand over original documents—especially when checked by the police!’. These admonishments I read in the context of ongoing and uneven police reform taking place in Soviet successor states. According to one study of November 2013, ‘in the post-Soviet space, the police remain one of the least-reformed government institutions, infamous for graft, collaboration with organized criminal groups, and human rights violations’.^{iv}

Kyrgyz Concept also supplied Congress delegates and visitors with a ‘Free Tourist Map’ of Bishkek. Apparently even now structured by inaccuracies dictated by the Soviet regime, this map made possible a memorably inscrutable experience of the city. After lunch on day two of the Congress, by prior arrangement, certain delegates (including Judith Rodriguez) visited local schools, to meet students and speak about literature. Meanwhile, together with three new PEN friends, I thought to exit the Congress venue for an unscheduled wander through city streets. It was a glowing autumn afternoon, and we decided to search out the rectangular green space marked ‘Botanical Garden’ on the free map. We walked much further than anticipated, dodging unruly traffic (countless taxis, and secondhand cars, both left- and right-hand drive), until finally we encountered a set of white iron gates below a deep, spreading canopy of trees; the gates were closed, but unlocked. On such a bright weekday, Melbourne’s Botanical Gardens would have been teeming with lovers, students, and young children. Though luxuriant with botanical specimens, these gardens in Bishkek were eerily empty of any visitors, for all the world as though having been abandoned by the relevant civic authorities since 1991. Once-ornamental pathways and plantings were extravagantly overgrown. Later, I mentioned the inaccuracies of the free map to Kätlin Kaldmaa, Congress delegate from Estonia PEN. Recollecting childhood excursions as a citizen of the Soviet Union, as well as travels within the Soviet Union, Kätlin cheerfully exclaimed, ‘but a city map, any map, *must* be unreliable, *of course!*’ (Like the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Estonia seceded from the Soviet Union in 1991.)

The Historicity of the 80th Congress

Hosted by the Central Asia PEN Centre, the 2014 Congress in Bishkek was of particular historic consequence for the combination of its location and scale. Part of the scene was set in 2005, when the PEN International Women Writer’s Committee and the Central Asia PEN Centre organised a regional conference of women writers in Bishkek, adopting the theme ‘Women and Censorship’.^v In a letter to PEN centres dated 22 July 2014, John Ralston Saul predicted that ‘the 80th Congress will be an important and complex meeting’, carefully

describing Kyrgyzstan as ‘a country where there is the greatest experimentation with free expression and democracy’.^{vi}

More than once during the Congress speakers referred to Bishkek as ‘the only place in Central Asia where a PEN congress could happen’. This was one message of the report commissioned earlier in 2014, ‘PEN’s Free Expression Concerns in Kyrgyzstan’, which also highlights the unevenness and vulnerability of the country’s free expression environment, with special reference to the rising ideological influence of the Russian Federation.^{vii} For the Central Asia PEN Centre, a key aim of the 80th Congress was to risk the political, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic challenges of bringing together writers from the five republics of the Central Asia region: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—while sourcing independent (hence transparent) funding for the event.

To gather in defence and celebration of free expression is an eloquent gesture, if not a positive intervention in itself. And clearly the convergence in Bishkek of over two hundred Congress attendees—writers and advocates for writers from around the globe—represented a powerful opportunity to focus local attention on values fundamental to the PEN Charter. In an unexpected and welcome development, during the Congress, Almazbek Atambayev, President of the Kyrgyz Republic, asked to meet with John Ralston Saul. A delegation of five seized the opportunity for dialogue, raising, amongst other urgent matters, the widely denounced case against ethnic Uzbek journalist Azimjon Askarov, who is currently serving a life sentence in prison on the outskirts of Bishkek.^{viii} Amnesty International has designated Askarov a ‘prisoner of conscience’.^{ix}

The Chair’s Report presented at the meeting of the PEN International Writers in Prison Committee also gave a wider perspective on the sensitivities of the geopolitical setting for this year’s Congress: ‘Bishkek sits at the centre of a vast region undergoing turbulence and change and repression of freedom of expression: Russia to the north, China to the East; Iran and Iraq to the south, Turkey to the west—those countries are responsible amongst them for the majority of cases on the Writers in Prison case list’.^x

The Assembly of Delegates

Of course to gather in defence and celebration of free expression is, inevitably, to better recognise how regions, countries, and individuals are distinctive in their forms of attack on writers and free expression; how they differ, too, in their horizons of possibility for civil society activism, as for access to information and education. This is the vital point of attendance at the PEN International congress—and for participation in the three-day Assembly of Delegates. In Bishkek the setting for the Assembly of Delegates was beneath the glowing chandeliers of the Damas banquet hall, where Judith Rodriguez and I were seated between delegates from Mexico and Macedonia.

It was here, during the Open Session of the first day, that delegates from Independent Chinese PEN and the Tibetan Writers Abroad PEN Centre stood to remind the Assembly of the plight of harassed, interrogated, and imprisoned writers whom they represent, and the effects of the government of China’s merciless treatment of these people. Straight afterwards delegates from Chinese PEN took the floor. They asserted that ‘the Chinese government imprisons writers who have broken the law’. Despite the soaring space of the banquet hall, the atmosphere created by this riposte was highly charged. For a few long moments I forgot to breathe. Ten minutes later, in acknowledgement of the palpable shift in atmosphere, PEN

International Vice President Joanne Leedom-Ackerman responded by observing that ‘PEN values the presence at Congress of delegates from Chinese PEN’, while naming as ‘the guerrilla in the room’ the fact that ‘we do have irreconcilable differences in the way we view freedom of expression’. Later during the Assembly a resolution on the People’s Republic of China submitted by the Tibetan Writers Abroad PEN Centre was adopted.^{xi} In all, finally, despite mounting pressures of time, and a sudden shortage of paper, some twenty-six resolutions were proposed and accepted.^{xii}



The Assembly of Delegates beneath the chandeliers of the Damas banquet hall.

Perhaps most vividly to a first-time delegate, the discussion and voting on resolutions demonstrated again and again the need for extreme clarity of purpose in speaking out to the Assembly, and in the scope and wording of the resolutions themselves. Generated through the act of gathering at the annual congress, the final versions of these statements become a topical resource, a substantiation of awareness and aims shared amongst PEN’s international network of centres. To be of greatest benefit, they must be articulate in their critique, correct in their facts, resonant in their calls for ethical action and change. So it felt energising to assist Zöe Rodriguez, President of PEN Sydney, in adding to Resolution 11 on Surveillance a new sentence citing Australia’s ‘National Security Amendment Bill No. 1’, which was passed by both houses of parliament on 1 October. If this is the only 2014 resolution in which Australia is specifically mentioned, the reference is phrased in terms of ‘deep concern’.^{xiii}

Doubtless the most momentous resolution approved at the Bishkek Congress was number 18, focused on the anti-LGBTQI legislation (‘which restricts the right to freedom of expression’) already in place in the Russian Federation, in Nigeria, in Iran, and recently introduced in the Kyrgyzstan parliament.^{xiv} Detailed discussion preceding the vote on this resolution confirmed that it represented ‘a first’ for any PEN Congress and for PEN International, in that it takes a position regarding freedom of expression and LGBTQI communities around the world—a position against homophobia. Here once more the strenuousness of PEN’s democracy was dramatically highlighted: a rhetorical question asked against the resolution elicited a round of scattered applause.

By contrast to this fractious mood, the ‘Presentations on Proposed New Centres’ were met with ready receptivity, and linger as a poignant memory from the Assembly of Delegates. Each speaker conveyed the tremendous emotive force behind arguments for the founding of a new centre. The result was unanimous acceptance of four new PEN Centres: Wales PEN Cymru; Honduras PEN; Eritrea in Exile PEN; Liberia PEN. In ratifying the proposed new centres, the Assembly was refreshed of the symbolic and constructive power of coming together in accord. There are now one hundred and forty-seven PEN centres dispersed around the globe.

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For this particular PEN member, the 2014 Congress in Bishkek was eye-, ear- and mind-opening. Above all, it yielded richer perspectives on the formidable task facing every PEN centre in its commitment to campaigning for freedom of expression. So much resourcefulness and creativity is involved; even where freedom of expression can be easily enjoyed, it is more vulnerable than might be supposed. In this epoch of escalating threat to humanist ideals, the efforts of PEN members to continue working according to their consciences are myriad and ongoing.

Also under the heading ‘Security’ in the free *Bishkek Guidebook* was the counsel ‘Avoid large crowds of people and groups of conspicuous people’. I read this and laughed aloud. Without doubt, the ‘crowd’ involved in 80th PEN International Congress was large, varied, and voluble. I travelled to Bishkek to experience that crowd; to listen and learn, mingle, make friends, and be counted within it, precisely because it was a group of people, on balance, willing to be conspicuous. It was a group of people alert to the limitations and positive agency of the written word, and attuned, therefore, to the eloquence of the act of gathering downtown in Bishkek.

ⁱ On the organisational structure of PEN, see <http://www.pen-international.org/who-we-are/>. The PEN International office works in support of PEN centres around the world, particularly through the four Standing Committees: Translation & Linguistic Rights (concerned with diversity and translation); Writers in Prison (supporting writers at risk and the freedom to write); Writers for Peace, and Women Writers. There are two ad hoc committees: Governance, and Digital Rights.

ⁱⁱ See the September 2014 Monthly Letter from John Ralston Saul at <http://www.pen-international.org/09/2014/monthly-letter-from-john-ralston-saul-international-president/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.pen-international.org/campaign/how-to-campaign/caselist/#sthash.jUIqNNy4.dpuf>.

^{iv} Erica Marat, ‘Reforming the Police in Post-Soviet States: Georgia and Kyrgyzstan’, *LeTort Papers* no. 17 (November 2013), published by the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and US Army War College (USAWC) Press, p. ix, available at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub1184.pdf>. See also the opening paragraph of the report ‘PEN’s Free Expression Concerns in Kyrgyzstan’, commissioned by PEN International’s Writers in Prison Committee in anticipation of the 80th Congress at <http://www.pen-international.org/newsitems/pens-free-expression-concerns-in-kyrgyzstan/#sthash.t9gjpWpI.dpuf>.

^v Judith Buckrich, Vice President of PEN Melbourne (at that time Chair of the PEN International Women Writers Committee) took part in this conference (Bishkek, 24–28 June 2005). For a personal account of this gathering, see the essay by Ren Powell (then Norwegian PEN representative for the International PEN Women Writer’s Committee) at

http://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v2_4_2006/current/in_conference/powell.html; also the online booklet *The PEN Story* published by PEN International (2013), p. 14, at http://issuu.com/peninternational/docs/the_pen_story.

^{vi} See the July 2014 Monthly Letter from John Ralston Saul at <http://www.pen-international.org/07/2014/july-letter-from-john-ralston-saul-international-president-to-the-pen-membership/?print=print>.

^{vii} This report was commissioned from Cathal Sheerin (Europe Researcher and Campaigner for the PEN International Writers in Prison Committee), and can be read in full at <http://www.pen-international.org/newsitems/pens-free-expression-concerns-in-kyrgyzstan/#sthash.t9gjpWpI.dpuf>.

^{viii} Hadicha Askarova, Askarov's wife, had earlier addressed the Assembly of Delegates. For a detailed account of the meeting with the President of the Kyrgyz Republic see John Ralston Saul's November Letter to the PEN membership at <http://www.pen-international.org/11/2014/letter-from-john-ralston-saulinternational-president-to-the-pen-membership/#sthash.BZ5151HP.dpuf>.

^{ix} Askarov's case was also highlighted by PEN International on 15 November 2014, to mark this year's Day of the Imprisoned Writer—see <http://www.pen-international.org/newsitems/day-of-the-imprisoned-writer-azimjon-askarov/>.

^x 'PEN International Writers in Prison Committee Report', 80th PEN International Congress Delegate Pack, p. 16.

^{xi} See the 2014 Resolution 5 at <http://www.pen-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/5.-RESOLUTION-China.pdf>.

^{xii} The final texts of all twenty-six resolutions can be found at <http://www.pen-international.org/campaign/how-to-campaign/resolutions-adopted-at-congress-bishkek-kyrgyzstan-2014/>.

^{xiii} This bill is documented at

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=s969.

^{xiv} See the 2014 Resolution 18 at <http://www.pen-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/18.-RESOLUTION-on-Anti-LGBTQI-Legislation-which-Restricts-the-right-to-Freedom-of-Expression.pdf>.

Together with Masha Gessen (American PEN), young British journalist and critic Juliet Jacques, known for her work on the transgender experience, was invited to Congress to speak to the Assembly of Delegates on this issue, and it was hugely enjoyable to meet and share conversations with her. Following Congress, Juliet Jacques published an article with the *London Review of Books* in connection with Resolution 18—we are most grateful that she kindly agreed to make this available for republication in our *Quarterly*. For background on this resolution see also the article by Marian Botsford Fraser (Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee) at <http://www.pen-international.org/11/2014/the-storm-sewers-of-bishkek-lgbt-freedom-of-expression-and-the-pen-charter/>.

30 September 2014: afternoon in the Botanical Gardens, Bishkek.

