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## Letter from John Ralston Saul to the PEN membership

*November 20, 2014*

Dear PEN Members, Dear friends,

A few weeks ago, two hundred and fifty writers from almost 80 PEN Centres came together in Bishkek. Nothing like this has been tried before. And it probably would not have been possible elsewhere in the region.

This 80th Congress was an illustration of why PEN exists. We came to a part of the world where our presence could have an effect on the situation. Let me put this another way: our very presence was an important act.

It was difficult to put together, difficult to fund and complicated throughout. But Dalmira Tilepbergenova and her Central Asian PEN Centre did a wonderful job, along with Jena Patel and many others from PEN International, as well as Markéta Hejkalová, who chairs the Congress Committee and Hori Takeaki, who encouraged the idea of the Congress.

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I'll come back to what happened in Bishkek, but first a few words about Kazakhstan. Hori Takeaki, Carles Torner and I flew there before the Congress. At the invitation of Kazakh PEN and its President, Bigeldy Gabdullin, we went to Astana, the new capital. An astonishing creation of commodities wealth, built in a decade on the old model of the grand planned city with a wide variety of modern styles.

Kazakhstan doesn't pretend to be a democracy. It has strong leadership and wealth.

Our primary purpose in going there was to visit the country's writers, some of whom were also coming to Congress. We met many of them, as well as supporters of PEN like Islambek Salzhanov. No one can doubt the vibrancy of Kazakh writing and its relevance.

We also went because of the freedom of expression situation. We have two important cases of writers in prison – Vladimir Kozlov and Aron Atabek. Bigeldy organized a meeting with Nurlan Nigmatulin, who is the Head of the Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It was a long and complex discussion. We then met with Colonel Baurzhan Maratovich Berdalín, the Director of the prison system and three of his senior officers. One very positive outcome was an offer to visit Vladimir Kozlov in prison. The next day, Vladimir Karcev of Kazakh PEN and Carles went to see him. During the visit, Mr. Kozlov wrote a short message to all of the writers coming to the Congress. A few days later it was read in the Assembly by Bigeldy.

Takeaki and I also met with Mr. Kozlov's wife in the old capital of Almaty, as well as other human rights activists. Finally, with Kazakh PEN, we held a Press Conference. I think I should describe it as an unusual event in that it dealt mainly with free expression and there was clearly discomfort, particularly around the Atabek case. However, we explained our belief in his innocence. And the roof didn't fall in. As I said earlier, much of this trip was a simple demonstration of how we at PEN talk and act everywhere in the world. Free expression almost always requires those with power to develop a thicker skin. That is not such a momentous requirement. After all, we writers have to do it to survive our critics. All that is needed is a thicker skin and an acceptance that disagreement coming from those in a minority of opinion or culture is not treason. It is merely disagreement, which is part of normal life. Police everywhere have difficulty with this simple truth, but politicians everywhere have an obligation to accept that disagreement is healthy.

We will continue working with Kazakh PEN to demonstrate how true this is.

\* \* \*

Now back to the Congress and Bishkek. Let me mention only a few things.

We are all concerned with the rising tide of Anti-LGBTQI laws around the world. These laws attack both free expression and literature because they attempt to limit the expression of a part of society.

Masha Gessen was one of our special guests and was a great help as we developed our strategy in this area. There was a full discussion in the Assembly, including the participation of Kyrgyz leaders of the local LGBTQI community. There were larger private meetings. A strong resolution was passed which dealt with the most problematic states and provides PEN International with the Assembly's authority to fully engage on this issue.

\* \* \*

The Congress was also a celebration of Central Asian literature and culture. Writers and filmmakers came from all five of the region's countries including Olzhas Suleimenov as a special guest from Kazakhstan. There was a showing of Sadyk Sher-Niyaz' remarkable film, Kurmajan Datka: Queen of the Mountains.

On the opening evening, Anna-Lena Laurén of Finland chaired a discussion of the Russia/Ukraine's situation between Andrey Kurkov, the Ukrainian writer and Masha Gessen.

At the cultural evening, the Canadian Yann Martel spoke and the Kyrgyz, Talip Ibraimov. People were electrified by an experimental group of young musicians developed by the Aga Khan Music Initiative. Poetry of some of the delegates including Dalmira's and other writers accompanied the music.

\* \* \*

The size of the Congress meant we were in two hotels and events were held all over the city, at universities and museums. It was a logistical challenge, but it meant that our presence was felt everywhere. A number of our delegates went into schools to talk with the students. After the Congress, the Ural Altay Network, involving Centres and chaired by Kaiser OzHun met at Lake Issyk Kul.

\* \* \*

In the middle of the Congress, Almazbek Atambayev, the President of the Kyrgyz Republic asked to see me. This was an important gesture. Dalmira, Takeaki, Carles and Yann Martel came with me.

It was a long and challenging meeting. We explained our view of the Askarov case and why we are calling for his release. One outcome was a second long meeting with Aida Salyanova, the Prosecutor General of Kyrgyzstan, involving Carles, Marian Botsford Fraser, Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee, Ann Harrison, our Program Director and our regional expert, Cathal Sheerin. There was an agreement that we would be allowed to visit Mr. Askarov in prison, but this has not yet happened.

We also talked at length with the President about the draft anti-LGBTQI law slowly making its way through the Kyrgyz Parliament.

My sense after all of our meetings and investigations is that this proposed law is a political tool being used by a small group of Members of Parliament, who are using the subject to advance their careers. They believe there is a portion of the population they could stir up around this issue and so everyone will be afraid to call their bluff. The question is, will anyone have the strength of ethical will to oppose them.

Going back to the meeting with the President, on a positive front, we proposed a program of support for literary translations, which he embraced with great enthusiasm. We will follow how this develops. And are ready to help if that is useful.

\* \* \*

A great deal more happened at the 80th PEN International Congress and you will hear much more about the other decisions taken.

We held our post-Congress Board meeting in a small farming village in the north. For two days we worked hard on future strategies for PEN. We'll report back to you on this in a separate letter.

One thing we decided was to try to hold every third Congress in a place like Bishkek, where our presence could contribute to something important in the local situation.

Next year from October 12 to 17, we will gather for the 81st Congress in Quebec City, a place which is historically important, beautiful and culturally on the cutting edge. We will be there at the invitation of the Centre

québécois du P.E.N. International and their President, Émile Martel. It should be a remarkable gathering at the heart of francophone culture in the Americas. And I know that the Congress will focus on the importance of translation and the defence of languages.

\* \* \*

Finally, Yang Lian finished his second term on the Board and Sylvestre Clancier decided not to run for a second term. Both of them could be counted on to bring fresh ideas to our meetings. We thank them and we will miss them.

Josep-Maria Terricabras finished his second term as Chair of the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee. It was thanks to Terri that we have the Girona Manifesto, an important contribution. He is now the Vice-President of the Green Party in the European Parliament.

Two new Board members were elected. Teresa Cadete, President of Portuguese PEN, and Margie Orford, President of South Africa PEN. Simona Škrabec was elected by the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee as their new Chair and this election was confirmed by the Assembly. We all welcome them and look forward to working with them.

Once again, thank you to Dalmira and Jena and all who worked so hard with them to make this Congress possible.

With best wishes,

John Ralston Saul  
International President



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