

**BEING BELARUSIAN**  
**32<sup>nd</sup> Convention of Belarusians of North America**  
**Notes for remarks by Hon. David Kilgour**  
**Lord Elgin Hotel**  
**Ottawa**  
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President Survilla of the Rada BNR

In the mid-1990s as a Canadian MP, I visited Minsk and met with a number of persons, some at the Rada but mostly in private. Even in those freer days, they asked me not to criticize Stalin for any of his inhuman acts in Belarus, presumably out of concern for possible consequences for them and their families. In flying out of Minsk's new airport, I was struck by how few passengers there were.

### **Rada of Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR)**

The admirable main goal of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic for almost a century has been to preserve the independence of Belarus while it was an independent state, and to regain independence in periods when Belarus was an oppressed country inside the Soviet Union or other foreign occupation.

The RBDR is highly concerned today by the latest threat to the independence of Belarus since President Alexander Lukashenko earlier began his efforts to "integrate" Belarus with Russia. I understand that the initiative several years ago ended when Lukashenko came to understand that instead of Minsk taking over Moscow it would under President Putin be the other way around.

Given Lukashenko's gross mishandling of the economy and his fear of prosecution for crimes against humanity in Belarus during his presidency, the possibility that he might offer to give up Belarusian sovereignty if granted immunity by Putin remains a major concern.

While the world's people of good will hope that Russia will respect its 1994 Budapest commitment to the independence of Belarus, RBDR endeavours focus mainly on a democratic change of regime in Belarus. At this time, however, we understand with great regret that President Putin will do everything in his power to absorb Belarus. It would become another Chechnya with similar consequences.

### **Joanna Survilla's Requests on behalf of RBDR**

Permit me to repeat some major requests by the highly-respected Joanna Survilla on behalf of the RBDR and all free Belarusians:

1. Canada, The United States and other nations should help Belarus to become a truly independent democracy, which can be achieved only if no “carte blanche” is given to Mr. Putin on issues regarding Belarus.
2. Canada, the United States and others should assist the people of Belarus to obtain information from sources other than the regime’s propaganda machine. Independent media- newspapers, radio and TV - are the most valuable gift democracies could provide the people of Belarus in their struggle against the totalitarian regime now in place.
3. Canada, the United States and other should stop regarding Russian as one of the languages of Belarus. Russian has been forced on the people for more than a century at the expense of Belarusian. If broadcasts of RFL/RL and the planned Voice of America broadcasts to Belarus are in Russian, RBDR would consider it as an attempt to assist Moscow to achieve imperialistic goals instead of helping Belarus to achieve democracy. Belarusian is understood by those residents who find it easier to speak Russian because they have been schooled in the language of the colonizer.
4. Canada, the United States and others should assist the democratic opposition inside Belarus by providing it with the means to survive. One of the main tools of oppression in the hands of Lukashenko is his ability to deprive those who dare to speak up against his rule of their employment and income. Some compensation should be available to such persons to assist them to continue to advocate democracy and the rule of law.
5. Canada, the United States should help the people of Belarus to achieve decent living standards. Because of Belarus was ignored by the democratic world at the beginning of the 1990s, it later became an easy prey for the Kremlin. If the democracies had helped Belarus as it did its neighbours, it might today have a strong economy and be an active member of the community of democratic nations.

A free and sovereign Belarus can become an effective buffer between NATO-member countries and Russia, which would promote peaceful co-existence among the diverse countries in central and eastern Europe. It is in the interest of most nations to give Belarus an opportunity to play the role a democratic Belarus would be delighted to assume.

### **2010 “Election” in Belarus**

In December 2010, the International Steering Committee of the Council for a Community of Democracies joined with numerous governments and NGOs in condemning the recent election in Belarus. Among the concerns noted:

- Dozens of people protesting the official results of the vote and journalists were severely beaten; more than six hundred were detained, including seven out of ten presidential candidates... Closed trials that have already taken place are a parody of justice, with false witnesses from among the police, fabricated evidence, and no access to lawyers and the public...
- Alexander Lukashenko, who will rule his country for the fourth consecutive term in an absence of free and fair elections, threatens opposition members with harsh criminal prosecution and many years of prison terms... the government of Belarus has once again turned elections into a meaningless mockery of a democratic process and left people of Belarus no other choice but to protest in the streets... We support the OSCE conclusions not recognizing the elections as free and fair...
- We urge that no democratic government... treat Alexander Lukashenko as a legitimate leader. Only by embracing democratic principles will Belarus be able to join fully the region’s progress towards development and economic growth... We stand in solidarity with democracy activists in Belarus and join them in their demand of freedom for their country.

## **Russia and Putin**

In his excellent book *Fragile Empire* (2013), Ben Judah conducted interviews across Russia over several years and clearly cares deeply for the well-being of the Russian people. Readers learn how, since 2000, Putin and his slogans ‘managed democracy’, ‘dictatorship of law’, and ‘vertical of power’, became mostly corruption and bad governance.

A ‘Videocracy’ resulted, for example, from Putin’s first term as president. Television news had undone earlier Russian leaders from Brezhnev to Yeltsin, so Putin seized the two largest networks and exiled their owners. “... TV editors (got) calls from ‘up top’ setting the agenda; the secret services (called) reporters to tell them (they’d) gone too far, and journalists were frequently murdered.” Russians relying on such televised news understandably tend to remain loyal to Putin.

“The Great Turn” occurred in 2003 when Putin lurched towards totalitarianism. He had Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia’s richest oligarch, arrested and thrown into a Siberian prison after the other accused him of being “corrupt and incapable”. This was the ‘dictatorship of law’. Judah concludes that Putin was seen by many Russians in 2013 as “a thief who has stolen the state” by giving Russia “the formal institutions of a 3 democracy, but gutting them of any meaning”. Like Yeltsin, concludes Judah, Putin cannot leave power for fear of arrest.

## **Diaspora roles in Canada**

I’ve been asked to say something about the place of diaspora communities in Canada and what makes them successful contributors to their own, as well as to broader Canadian cultural and political spaces.

The short answer is that Canada does not seek to force any newcomer into a melting pot akin to the legendary one operating in the United States. In both our countries, tens of millions of immigrants/refugees have arrived in successive waves since the 1880s and earlier. In Canada, we believe in a multiculturalism, which assumes that all people are of equal worth and should be given the right to choose their own life-styles within the law. One of these laws bans inciting hatred towards any identifiable community, culture or religion.

With some adjustment bumps, our model really does work. Many Canadians thus identify with the open arms Angela Merkel is offering to Middle East refugees arriving in Germany. My own church here in Ottawa is sponsoring a family from Syria.

You represent many waves of immigration and, as with other groups, strive to make connections that will strengthen and empower your community as a whole.

Permit me to suggest that in as many communities as feasible across North America you connect with your local representative at the national, provincial/state and local level. Sometimes, it’s more productive to do so with their staffers. One goal is to develop trust and understanding, so that if help is needed on an issue your community knows whom to contact quickly in confidence that positive action will result. Elected persons and their staffs are as human as all of us. If a stranger calls the office asking for something, you are less likely to respond quickly, but if it’s someone you know is truthful you are likely to act quickly in the way they request, especially if Belarus, for example, is not well known.

Continued success to you in future.