

UPF Canada's Second Webinar: Viewing North Korea from Within

Robert Duffy
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Canada -- With speakers from Canada, Russia and the Netherlands, the second program in a series entitled "Viewing the DPRK from Within," was broadcast from Montreal, Canada on May 13, 2022. The webinar, co-hosted by UPF Canada and UPF EUME, featured a Korean-Canadian social anthropologist, a Russian member of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies in Moscow, and a Dutch businessman, all of whom have had extensive dealings with North Korea.

The series was designed to give a voice to those uncommon folk from the Western world who have travelled extensively to the DPRK and who have studied life in that country during their professional or academic careers.



With audiences from France, Russia and Korea, interpretation was offered in those three languages. Indeed, registrants from every continent including East Asia and Australia participated in the program.

The event was introduced by UPF co-host secretary-general **Robert Duffy** and moderated by Dr. **Franco Famularo**, president of UPF-Canada.

Dr. Okkyung Pak, social anthropologist from Montreal, was the first speaker. Her topic, "North Korean Educational Philosophy," focussed, with slides, on the apparently wholesome educational culture on all levels of study, and the contributions made by filmmakers who were allowed to film in and about North Korea. She highlighted issues addressed in the films, such as unfair and inaccurate characterizations of North Korean life (*People Are the Sky*), and differences in the way post-Korean War orphans were dealt with by the North and the South (*Kim Il Sung's Children*). In conclusion, she targeted the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1892-95 as the foundational social movement that served not only as an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolution, effectively bringing an end to the Choseon Dynasty, but which became the

basis for Kim Il Sung's "Juche" philosophy of self-reliance. The strong sense of social responsibility embodied in the humanistic aphorisms that "Human Being is Heaven," and "People are Masters and They Decide," serves as the underlying theme of North Korean educational philosophy, according to Pak.

The next speaker, **Dr. Alexander Zhebin**, leading researcher at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies in Moscow, focussed on the success of the DPRK ruling elites in maintaining political and social stability through and beyond the transition period following Kim Jong-il's death. Efforts by outside influences "to detect, single out, the more so to support any person or a group as an alternative to the Kim's ruling family," have proven unsuccessful in undermining the unity of the ruling elites -- "a key factor of the DPRK's survival as a sovereign entity."



Preventing factions from developing within the Workers' Party of Korea, along with the tendency of the grassroots population to blame hostile international sanctions for food shortages, has actually strengthened the regime's position. Also, Zhebin pointed out, Koreans in the northern part of the peninsula have for centuries struggled with climate and other natural conditions in the effort for food security, enabling them to endure extraordinary levels of privation.

The hoped-for signs of potential discord in the regime after Kim Jong-il's death having failed to materialize, in spite of signs of discord between ideologues and pragmatists and differences of approach between civil and military bureaucracies, highlight, according to Zhebin, a major factor in the unity of regime factions -- the observation that in other socialist regimes, top leaders have perished in their attempts to destabilize their regimes in failing to unite with their leader to the end.

In the recent WPK 8th Congress of January 2021, a major reshuffling placed experienced functionaries in every sphere of the WPK and government activity whom Kim Jong-un can rely on, allowing him to focus on the most important national issues.

Zhebin suggested that the "young leader" is following a mature political approach in his management style and his willingness to forgive certain mistakes of officials, allowing them to participate in public life again. The fact of disagreements in policy approaches between conservatives and progressives, or in economic models, does not signal social disintegration. He concludes by rejecting the likelihood of radical changes from above ("Glasnost") or from below because of the level of social control. He notes that the regime is investing heavily in social infrastructure -- dwellings, etc. and not only in "means of deterrence." Ending on an optimistic note, Zhebin believes that the current regime in North Korea can continue to develop in spite of the limitations of economic sanctions.

Finally, **Mr. Paul Tjia**, a businessman with a consultancy firm based in the Netherlands, spoke using a PowerPoint format to highlight his contention that "more engagement with North Korea is needed." Software development, video games and animation production were cited as possible areas of collaboration with a well-developed DPRK workforce in these areas.

Academic cooperation in agriculture and wind energy are areas that could be fruitful in developing a culture of engagement with elements of the DPRK. Tjia pointed out that economic isolation has failed to deter the country from developing its nuclear capabilities. A better approach than the American one of "pressure and more pressure" might be for the European Union to be "more active in fostering people-to-people contacts and maximizing the international exposure of North Korea."

Starting with "small projects in various fields by companies, NGO's, academics and peace organizations," business and academic cooperation could follow. According to Tjia, differences of ideology and politics should not be a problem. A striking example of this view was the visit in the 1990s of UPF founders, Rev. and Mrs. Moon, ardent anti-communists, with DPRK founder, Chairman Kim Il-sung. Tjia noted that after the visit, the Moons started several cooperative projects with the DPRK: the Potonghang Hotel and the World Peace Center, both in Pyongyang, among them. He concluded that personal dialogue with members of the DPRK regime would help confidence-building, and that he could help arrange such meetings.



After Mr. Tjia's presentation, the moderator invited Mr. **Jacques Marion**, co-chair of UPF-Europe and the Middle East, to share his views on the topic at hand. He expressed the value of this series of webinars. Eschewing the tendency in the media and elsewhere to encourage the choosing of sides between hostile blocks, as if a new Cold War was an acceptable way forward, he rather focussed on the ongoing efforts of UPF to build "bridges of understanding" in areas of conflict as its fundamental responsibility, noting that former heads of state and others at the recent Summit Council for World Peace Conference in Seoul also called for a strategy of dialogue and of political, social and cultural interactions between North and South Korea.

Presentations were followed by audience QandA, with lively exchanges about topics such as the "Juche philosophy" and the potential for various types of tourism to create opportunities for exchanges. Mr. Tjia mentioned that North Korea has created several new tourist facilities and destinations, hoping to benefit from an influx of visitors once COVID is no longer a factor.

It was strongly suggested that Europeans engage with the DPRK as members of middle powers who will fit better psychologically and practically than those who have been in conflict with the DPRK.

Much interest was expressed in continuing this series of dialogues with those who are able to shed light on life from within North Korea. The session was concluded with final comments from UPF-Canada secretary-general Robert Duffy.

To watch the webinar, click below.

[Viewing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea \(DPRK\) from Within \(English\)](#)

[Viewing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea \(DPRK\) from Within \(French\)](#)

[Viewing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea \(DPRK\) from Within \(Korean\)](#)