

## Testimony of Inna Arolovich

My name is Inna Arolovich. I'm a member of the Board of the New York Immigration Coalition and a Vice Chair of the American Association of Jews from the Former USSR, New York Chapter. The mission of the American Association of Jews from the Former USSR is to represent interests of the Russian-speaking immigrant community, protect Russian Americans' civil rights, promote their active civic participation and integration into American society. Most of Russian-speaking Americans even in the first generation learned English, applied their education and experience acquired in the former Soviet Union and became successful engineers, programmers, scientists, educators, lawyers, physicians, businessmen, electronic technicians and so on. Alec Brook-Krasny became a first Russian-speaking politician, member of the NYS Assembly.

However, our ethnic group has a significant number of elderly people who came to the United States as refugees in advanced age many of whom tried to study English, but have not succeed. Many of them veterans of WWII, victims of Soviet persecution or Holocaust survivors. They are patriots of their new country and became American citizens, and they would like to carry out their right and responsibility – to vote, however, their poor knowledge of English doesn't allow them to fully participate in the elections. There are some election districts in New York City that have a significant number of Russian-speaking citizens – up to 20% of population. A lot of them are being shut out unfairly of the voting process. These people don't vote because they are not registered because they unable read the materials in English to do so.

There were a lot of cases of despicable relationship toward the Russian-speaking seniors who didn't speak English at the election polling places in 2000 when a Russian-speaking person ran for a position of assemblyman for the first time and people tried to write-in his name. I spoke at the City Council and VAC hearings about these misconducts. Because of our and the NYIC efforts, now we have many Russian-speaking inspectors and coordinators, and even policemen at polling places. Since Census 2000 indicated that Russian is the fourth spoken at home language in New York City after English, Spanish and Chinese, we turned to the NYS elected officials with a request to provide translation of election materials into Russian also.

After long struggle, finally the amendment No. 7 to the NYS Election Law, Chapter 244 was adopted and was signed into the law in July 2009. *"The law mandates the New York City Board of Elections to provide the same information in Russian that it provides in languages other than English on its website. It must also produce and disseminate citywide a booklet that includes: a) **voter registration form** in English with instructions in Russian, b) instructions in Russian regarding the criteria and application process for obtaining an **absentee ballot** and c) a section with general voter information in Russian including frequently asked questions."* Actually, this is not enough. We consider that an **election ballot**, **affidavit ballot** and **annual notification of registration** where date of elections and address of a polling place is provided should also be translated in Russian. Polling places must demonstrate a **Bill of Voter's Rights** translated not only into Spanish, Chinese and Korean, but also into Russian. We believe that the NYC Board of Elections must also provide **Russian interpreters** at the legislative districts where the Russian-speaking population constitutes over 5%.

The NYS Russian Language Law was supposed to take in effect on January 1, 2010, however, even two years later it still hasn't work properly: none of required election materials have been translated, no Bill of Voter's Rights translated into Russian was demonstrated at any polling place. On the BOE website information of the Poll Site Locator, Dates to Remember and the link to the BOE's new site entitled "votethenewwayny.com" still need translation into Russian.

I received complaints from thirteen election inspectors from Brooklyn and Queens:

Nelya Livak, David Shamrakov, Faina Kreymerman, Raisa Shpringel, Raisa Balagula, Vilyam and Maya Gil, Asya Bondar, Lyudmila Kindyuk, Bella Akhmechet, Eliazar Bloshteyn, Saveliy Kaplinsky – from South Brooklyn, Assembly districts 45, 46 and 47 and Maya Gurevich - Assembly district 28, Rego Park.

All of them wrote about necessity to have Russian interpreters, indicated above election materials translated into Russian, to have **larger font on election ballots** and one more thing that is not required by the new law, but very important:

The voters need some **information about candidates** in order to make a deliberate decision for whom to vote. Before all City voters received by mail a Voter City Guide where they received a short information about candidates for every position and their programs, what they stand for. Now voters feel lost, they are coming to the polling place and asking: "For whom should I vote?" Or don't come at all because they don't want to vote automatically with no any knowledge about candidates. Some inspectors suggested that polling places would be provided with leaflets with pictures of candidates and short information on them translated in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Russian. Without information about candidates, voters with poor command of English may be easily manipulated by people who advise them to vote for somebody.

Voting is the most important act of civic participation and it cannot be taken away from a community because of poor English proficiency of its members.