



ARTICLE

A Polish Invention or a Copy of the Soviet Model? Electoral Practices during Parliamentary Elections in Poland under the Communist Rule (1944–1980)

Michał Siedziako 

Department of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science and Security Studies, Szczecin, Poland; Historical Research Office, Institute of National Remembrance, Szczecin, Poland
msiedziako@wp.pl

One of the main characteristics of the Soviet domination sphere in Europe after the Second World War was the unification of political systems of the countries within the Soviet Union. This paper examines the Soviet impact on the electoral system of the People's Republic of Poland, a country often considered to have been the most unique among the Eastern European states. This article argues that although there were some important differences between the electoral codes in the USSR and communist-led Poland, the effects of the elections in both countries were the same: popular voting could not pose any threat to the power of their communist parties. This resulted from practices – similar in both countries – not included in the electoral law. This leads to the conclusion that the differences between the elections in the Soviet Union and post-war Poland were rather illusory.

Introduction

By taking part in free elections, citizens of democratic countries express their political preferences and choose their political representatives. General elections held in the Soviet Union and its satellite states after the Second World War had a somewhat different meaning and functions.

Theodore H. Friedgut signals the problem: ‘The question is often raised by scholars, students, and journalists as to why the Soviet regime continues to hold elections if these do not provide the opportunity to choose policy or personalities’.¹ Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter ask: ‘Why did political regimes, which were radically opposed to liberal democracy, imitate one of the crucial features of that antagonistic system?’² Such questions reflect, on the one hand, the nature of elections in the Soviet bloc, where there existed certain ruling authorities called ‘representative’ but where the citizens were unable to choose their members. On the other hand, they constitute evidence of academic curiosity concerning elections in the former Soviet bloc in general.

Until recently this curiosity had to remain unsatisfied due to the fact that source materials were hard to access. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, many archives were opened, which enabled more thorough research. Looking into the materials kept in the post-communist archives, one can make numerous new and interesting assumptions, as well as verify and elaborate on the conclusions from earlier studies. Voting in the Soviet Union and its satellite states is still a vast and mostly uncharted field of research for historians, political scientists and sociologists.

One of the intriguing issues within this field are the dependencies between the electoral code in the Soviet Union and elections in the countries considered to be its ‘outer empire’, among which was the

¹ Theodore H. Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 137.

² Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter, ‘Non-Competitive Elections in 20th Century Dictatorships: Some Questions and General Considerations’, in Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter, eds., *Voting for Hitler and Stalin. Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2011), 10.

People's Republic of Poland. The most absorbing questions related to this problem are as follows: (1) What role did the Soviets play in the adoption of a certain electoral system in post-war Poland? (2) Was their involvement limited only to providing guidelines for the Polish communists or did they play a more active role? (3) To what extent was the electoral system in Poland a reflection of the Soviet patterns, and to what degree were Polish electoral practices locally devised? (4) Did any deviations from Soviet conceptions lead to some specific consequences? I attempt to provide answers to all these questions in this essay.

To begin with, the chronological framework of the essay must be explained. The initial date is 1944 which, as historians generally agree, marks the beginning of communist rule in Poland. The year 1980 may seem less obvious as a final date. Yet, it was in March of 1980 that the very last typically 'socialist' Sejm elections were held. The next general elections took place over a year later than scheduled – in the autumn of 1985 – as a result of a political crisis which began with a series of strikes in the 1980s and the establishment of Solidarity and, later, the imposition of martial law. The elections were preceded by reforms aimed at finding a new voting formula that would help the ruling party regain social trust and legitimisation.³ The objective was not met; even the official voting results fell far from the socialist standards (the voter turnout was barely 80 per cent). The following elections of 1989 were partly democratic, with results that determined the collapse of the communist dictatorship in Poland and triggered the 'snowball effect' across other countries in the region.⁴ Thus, the choice of the year 1980, which marks the end of relative stabilisation in communist-ruled Poland, seems justified.

The research, the results of which are presented in this essay, was based on materials held in a number of Polish archives. Among these materials, of great importance were the documents left behind at the headquarters of the Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*; PZPR) that governed Poland as a one-party state from 1948 to 1989, now kept in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw. Materials left behind by the communist apparatus of repression, which I located in the Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, were very useful. In order to complete a list of sources and to provide information missing in the archival documents, I interviewed several persons who had been involved in organising elections in communist-ruled Poland. As for the electoral system of the Soviet Union, the basis for my research was mainly the Western literature on the topic.

The article is structured as follows. At the outset, I characterise the electoral system of the USSR, its legal basis as well as its political practice, as it is a reference point for the analysis of the situation in Poland. Then I describe the first experience of elections in Poland in the period when communist rule was being shaped. Subsequently, I discuss the Sejm elections in 1952 and 1957, both of which were in many ways unique and constituted important steps in the formation of the Polish electoral system for the next two decades, when communist rule was relatively stable. In the next part I examine the electoral practices of that period, which I compare with the Soviet model. At the end of the text I present the conclusions of my analysis.

Elections in the Soviet Union: General Characteristics

The Soviet voting system developed over several years that followed the October Revolution of 1917. Voting methods used throughout the country immediately after the creation of the Soviet Union were varied and very different from the procedures typical of Western general elections. This was due to the conditions of a ferocious political struggle, as well as a military one, under which the Soviet general elections were held in the 1920s. Alex Pravda called them 'semi-civil-war-elections'.⁵

³ Jacques Rupnik, 'The Military and "Normalisation" in Poland', in Paul G. Lewis, ed., *Eastern Europe: Political Crisis and Legitimation* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 154–75.

⁴ Dragoș Petrescu, *Entangled Revolutions: The Breakdown of the Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedica, 2014), 44–6.

⁵ Alex Pravda, 'Elections in Communist Party States', in Stephen White and Daniel Nelson, eds., *Communist Politics: A Reader* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1986), 29.

To fight off their political opponents, the communist leaders made it difficult for them to participate in elections, both actively and passively. Only those individuals who met certain Bolshevik-approved criteria were considered voting-eligible. The groups who were not considered voting-eligible included, among others, people benefiting from hiring others or from interest on capital, in addition to merchants and clergymen. In order to maintain full control over the results, the Bolsheviks imposed the procedure of open ballot. Anyone critical of such measures faced repressions. A multi-stage control over the line-up of representative ruling bodies of higher rank was provided by means of indirect election. Soviets of lower rank delegated their representatives to higher bodies.⁶

It was only during the Stalin era that certain measures, which were to be perpetuated over the next decades, were brought in. The 1936 Stalinist constitution of the Soviet Union established a relatively conventional power structure.⁷ At the heart of the system of representative bodies was the bicameral Supreme Soviet of the USSR, with members elected by general vote. Similar soviets were established for each republic of the federation. Citizens could also vote for their representatives to soviets of lower rank, going down the levels of the USSR's administrative and territorial divisions.

A separate chapter of the Stalinist constitution was dedicated to the electoral code. Elections to each soviet was to be held 'based on common, equal and direct right to vote by secret ballot'.⁸ Both active and passive suffrage was granted to every citizen of the Soviet Union who

turned 18, regardless of their racial and national affiliation, sex, religion, education, possession, social background, wealth and former actions, . . . save the mentally challenged and people who were sentenced to deprivation of the right to vote by a legal court.⁹

After the Second World War, the age requirement for passive suffrage was raised. In the case of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, only citizens who had turned twenty-three were allowed to run for a post; with other soviets of highest rank the age minimum was twenty-one.¹⁰ The candidates could be put forward by social organisations and worker associations: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), trade unions, cooperatives, youth organisations and cultural associations.¹¹

Comprehensive voting regulations, identical for the whole federation, were introduced by decisions of appropriate soviets of highest rank in each republic in the years 1937 and 1950. In accordance with them, any elections were to be held in single-mandate constituencies. The right to put forward candidates was granted to

central bodies of social organisations and associations of workmen, as well as to their republican bodies on the following levels: national, district and regional, and also to general assemblies of factory workers, company workers, Red Army soldiers in military units, and to general assemblies of peasants in kolkhozes, in villages and housing developments, and to workmen in sovkhozes.¹²

⁶ Georg Brunner, 'Elections in the Soviet Union', in Robert K. Furtak, ed., *Elections in Socialist States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23. See also: Stephan Merl, 'Elections in the Soviet Union, 1937–1989: A View into a Paternalistic World from Below', in Jessen and Richter, *Voting for Hitler and Stalin*, 279–85.

⁸ The Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 5 Dec. 1936, in Adam Bosiacki and Hubert Izdebski, *Konstytucjonalizm rosyjski. Historia i współczesność* [The Russian Constitutionalism. The History and the Present] (Kraków: Arcana, 2013), 416.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 416–17. All excerpts from Polish-language sources and publications have been translated for the purpose of the current article.

¹⁰ Brunner, 'Elections', 23.

¹¹ Constitution, 5 Dec. 1936, in Bosiacki and Izdebski, *Konstytucjonalizm rosyjski*, 417.

¹² Cited in: Zbigniew Szeliga, *System wyborczy do najwyższego organu przedstawicielskiego w europejskich państwach socjalistycznych* [The Electoral System in Elections to Supreme Representative Bodies in European Socialist States] (Lublin: Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1989), 99.

The last constitution of the USSR, dated 7 November 1977, did not bring in any significant changes to the existing electoral code.¹³

Contrary to the country's apparently democratic regulations, the first and foremost characteristic of the elections in the Soviet Union was depriving the voters of any choice whatsoever. Only one candidate was put forward in each single-mandate constituency; in order to become a member of a soviet for which the candidate ran, he had to get an absolute majority of votes.¹⁴ It created a curious situation in which all the participating candidates had to be elected, so as to complete the line-up of soviets. As Stephan Merl wrote: 'The real choice left to the people on election day now was either to vote for the candidate or to be shot'.¹⁵

In such circumstances, the selection of candidates for deputies was of paramount importance in the whole electoral process.¹⁶ This was when the real decisions were made as to who would sit on each soviet. Any nominated and registered candidate could be sure of getting elected. The candidates were selected in the structures of the CPSU. The communist authorities instructed the lower-ranking bodies on the criteria for putting forward candidates in every constituency. The line-up of the soviets was, in accordance with the intentions of the party decision makers, to reflect the social fabric of the country. Thus, each soviet had to be made up of a suitable number of persons of various professions, women, people of a given age, etc.¹⁷

The bodies of the CPSU, although in charge of decision making, hardly ever exercised the right to put forward candidates.¹⁸ The selected candidates were later put up for official nomination during assemblies (until 1977, those had to be assemblies of organisations specified in the regulations of the electoral law; after the constitution was changed the regulations included assemblies of employee collectives) held in a workplace, where it was easy to call a meeting of a large group of people. Prior to selecting a specific individual during an assembly, party decision makers carefully studied their resumes, looking for the 'suitable' rather than the 'best' ones. If there were several assemblies held in various workplaces in a given district, it was the responsibility of party officials to make sure the same candidate was put forward during all the assemblies.¹⁹ Later on, a large open assembly, a kind of rally (carefully directed in accordance with the party scenario), would be held in a constituency, during which 'the only suitable candidate' was officially declared. Afterwards this candidate was formally registered with the right electoral commission.²⁰

Since voters going to the polls had no alternative they could choose, the preceding electoral campaigns were, in fact, far more important than the voting itself.²¹ The candidates did not face any competition for their mandates, so there was no rivalry at all, and yet the elections were used as a tool to indoctrinate society. Electoral campaigns made it possible for the authorities to reach society through a larger number of communication channels, providing an opportunity to organise mass meetings in the places of employment, to distribute a larger-than-usual number of propagandistic materials and to send agitators to citizens' homes. Most families in the Soviet Union experienced such a visit, during which a trained activist conducted a political talk, at least once before every election. In addition, during electoral campaigns propaganda in the traditional media – the press, radio and, with the growth of its popularity, also on television – intensified as well. In the period

¹³ Brunner, 'Elections', 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23–4.

¹⁵ Merl, 'Elections', 283.

¹⁶ Martin Harrop and William L. Miller, *Elections and Voters: A Comparative Introduction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 20.

¹⁷ Brunner, 'Elections', 34–5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹ Max E. Mote, *Soviet Local and Republic Elections: A Description of the 1963 Elections in Leningrad Based on Official Documents, Press Accounts, and Private Interviews* (Stanford: The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1965), 24, 27–31.

²⁰ Brunner, 'Elections', 40–2.

²¹ Jessen and Richter, 'Non-Competitive Elections', 22.

leading to the elections, various propagandistic actions were conducted on a mass scale. Indoctrination was also conducted by means of having the citizens participate in electoral procedures, such as the selection of candidates and work in electoral commissions.²² Over time as much as 15 per cent of the country's population became actively involved in various forms of pre-election activities and in the organisation of the electoral process.²³ Owing to this, they were supposed to become politically aware Soviet citizens who actively participated in the country's political life and expressed their support for the existing socio-political situation through their deeds.

One part of the pre-election campaign was that the candidates running for deputies would meet their voters. Like the nomination assemblies described above, such meetings were carefully planned. The official part that comprised speeches extolling the achievements of the government and the party was followed by an artistic part – a concert or a dance performance.²⁴ If any discussions with the voters were allowed during such meetings, no strictly political issues were raised; what was discussed was a range of everyday problems that the citizens faced, e.g. housing matters. The opportunity for an average voter to speak out publicly was hailed as 'an achievement of the Russian democracy'.²⁵ As aptly put by Max Mote, 'It is democratic, so their thinking runs, to let people grumble a bit about the problems which have been created for them'.²⁶

Oddly enough, no special electoral programme was announced prior to elections. Instead, there were operational programmes of the authorities, which the citizens knew from the resolutions passed during the sessions of the CPSU.²⁷ Apart from the numerous successes of the communist authorities, one of the characteristic topics of the election propaganda was contrasting the socialist elections with the elections in the Western countries, especially the United States. A handful of typical arguments was used in order to prove the superiority of the Soviet system. As the Soviet propaganda put it, any elections in the Western democracies were run by the capitalists, who deprived workmen and farmers of any influence on their legislature. It was argued that large groups of citizens in the West had their voting rights limited and that terror, corruption, fraud and forgery were all inextricably linked to elections there.²⁸ Such arguments could easily be adopted by the average citizen in the Soviet Union, where no tradition of free competitive elections had been established.²⁹

Propaganda in the electoral campaigns reached the citizens of the Soviet Union via all the possible channels of communication. The newspapers were full of reports on the elections, the radio broadcast election-related news and so did the TV as it became more and more common in Russian households.³⁰ In order to secure their victory in the campaigns, Soviet decision makers went as far as to make sure more food products were available in the shops before the elections.

On voting day, efforts were made to provide a solemn atmosphere. The polling stations were decorated with national flags and flowers; the 'communist youth' stood guard by the ballot boxes. Although each station was provided with a polling booth, very few people used it.³¹ If anyone went into the booth, it meant they wanted to put a tick on the official poll card they had received from the elections

²² Pravda, 'Elections', 48.

²³ Ibid., 9; Victor Zaslavsky and Robert J. Brym, 'The Functions of Elections in the USSR', *Soviet Studies* 30, 3 (1978), 365.

²⁴ Mote, *Soviet Elections*, 57–8; Jessen and Richter, 'Non-Competitive Elections', 9.

²⁵ Mote, *Soviet Elections*, 58–64.

²⁶ Ibid., 64.

²⁷ Szeliga, *System wyborczy*, 37.

²⁸ Mote, *Soviet Elections*, 53–6.

²⁹ Pravda, 'Elections', 28–9.

³⁰ Mote, *Soviet Elections*, 45. See also: Ellen Mickiewicz and Andrei Richter, 'Television, Campaigning, and Elections in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia', in David L. Swanson and Paolo Mancini, eds., *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy: An International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and Their Consequences* (New York: Praeger, 1996), 107–27.

³¹ Pravda, 'Elections', 35.

board and, as there was only a single name on the card, such voting made absolutely no sense. It was enough to cast a 'blank' ballot into the box, a practice that most voters shared.³²

Nearly 100 per cent (sometimes even exactly 100 per cent) voter turnout and nearly 100 per cent of ballots being cast in favour of the communist candidates, as reported after the elections, were used to confirm society's undivided support of the communist authorities.³³ Typically of totalitarian regimes, in order to achieve the desired turnout the Soviet authorities not only used electoral fraud but also attempted to actually mobilise all the citizens to cast a ballot.³⁴ In order to succeed, strong pressure was put on the citizens. Every voter was subjected to all-embracing propaganda culminating on election day. Extremely high turnout resulted from the fear of repressions as well; even though over time the Soviet repressive measures abated (the breakthrough came with the death of Stalin in 1953), the old fear of danger remained and affected the way people behaved.³⁵

In order to increase the vote share of the favoured candidates, the communist authorities resorted to ballot rigging. One method of raising the voter turnout was to remove some voters from the electoral roll. The decreased number of voting-eligible citizens was then used to estimate the turnout percentage.³⁶ Another relatively commonplace practice to increase the voter turnout (one fully tolerated by the authorities) was casting a vote 'in lieu of' an absent voter. In lieu of voters who did not show up at the polling station, the ballot was cast by their neighbours, canvassers or even members of the electoral commissions.³⁷

The official results of the elections in the Soviet Union in no way indicate the actual degree of participation. The real turnout, according to various scholars, was between a few and a dozen or so percentage points lower. Rasma Karklins estimated it at 90 to 95 per cent, while Victor Zaslavsky, Robert J. Brym, Martin Harrop and William L. Miller put it at around 75 per cent.³⁸ Nevertheless, it was still very high, which does not come as a surprise in light of the aforementioned mobilisation strategies employed during the campaign by the Soviet authorities.

First Electoral Experiences in Post-War Poland

While the legitimate authorities of the Republic of Poland remained in exile in London (and their representatives in the country under German occupation were the underground civil structures and the Home Army), from 1944 onwards in the areas intended for incorporation into post-war Poland (and for the time being controlled by the Red Army) the foundations were being laid for the new communist rule. In order to legitimise the new power, however, elections had to be held. The communist-dominated Provisional Government in Warsaw was required to do so in accordance with the decisions made by the leaders of the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union in Yalta in February 1945.

Aware of having relatively low support in Poland, Polish communists attempted to put off the elections for as long as possible. As part of this attempt, a referendum was called on 30 June 1946, in which the Poles were asked three general questions: (1) Are you in favour of abolishing the Senate? (2) Do you wish to embed an economic system which began with an agricultural reform and nationalisation of the most important sectors of the national economy, in the prospective constitution, on condition that the basic rights of private enterprise are secured? (3) Do you wish

³² Rasma Karklins, 'Soviet Elections Revisited: Voter Abstention in Noncompetitive Voting', *American Political Science Review* 80, 2 (1986), 452; Mote, *Soviet Elections*, 73–4.

³³ See: Stephen White, 'Russia', in Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver, eds., *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010), 1649–50, 1654–5.

³⁴ Juan J. Linz, 'Non-Competitive Elections in Europe', in Guy Hermet, Richard Rose and Alain Rouquié, eds., *Elections without Choice* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978), 45.

³⁵ Karklins, 'Soviet Elections', 462–5; Friedgut, *Participation*, 114–15.

³⁶ Karklins, 'Soviet Elections', 452–3; Zaslavsky and Brym, 'Functions', 365–6.

³⁷ Friedgut, *Participation*, 115–16; Zaslavsky and Brym, 'Functions', 366; Karklins, 'Soviet Elections', 453.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; Zaslavsky and Brym, 'Functions', 366; Harrop and Miller, *Elections and Voters*, 21.

to have the western borders of the country, along the Baltic Sea and the rivers Oder and Lusatian Neisse, secured?³⁹

In a campaign that preceded the referendum, the communists and their allies called for voting ‘three times in favour’ (blank ballots cast into the box were also regarded as such). In order to distinguish themselves from the communist camp (then called the ‘democratic camp’), the largest legally operating opposition party – the Polish Peasants’ Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*; PSL) with Stanisław Mikołajczyk, a former prime minister of the Polish government in exile, at the helm – led a campaign to persuade the voters to say ‘nay’ to the first question and ‘yea’ to the other two. A much smaller, but also legal, independent Christian-Democratic party – the Labour Party (*Stronnictwo Pracy*; SP), under the leadership of Karol Popiel – also encouraged the general public to vote against the communist wishes, and so did various national organisations and those recruited from the Home Army ranks, still continuing to operate underground.⁴⁰

A campaign prior to the referendum of 1946 was not a typical political campaign. Making use of large-scale propaganda tools, including the state administration, the Polish communists brought in a range of repressive measures against the underground movement, the legal opposition or even the ordinary citizens.⁴¹ The PSL activists were dismissed from work and arrested under false pretences; their local offices were inspected and any propaganda materials confiscated. There were also cases of physical assault and even murder committed by the officers of the Public Security Office and Citizen’s Militia. The Polish Army, Public Security Corps and Border Protection Corps were also involved. Additionally, in March 1946 a secret State Security Committee was established under the leadership of General Michał Żymierski, the role of which was to coordinate the actions of the above institutions in the pre-referendum campaign.⁴²

All this time the Soviet Union supported and supervised the actions undertaken by the Polish communists. Grzegorz Motyka, who has analysed both the Polish and Russian documents, wrote of this period:

The Soviets had a constant and complete control over the events in Poland. Stalin received at least two parallel reports on the situation in the Polish government and the whole country. One of the reports was prepared by the Soviet ambassador in Poland, Victor Lebedev, whose ambition went beyond his diplomatic function – a fact which resulted in a mounting tension between him and Bolesław Bierut and over time led to the former being removed from office. The other report was made by Colonel Semen Davidov, a Soviet instructor from the Ministry of Public Security, who took the post after General Nikolai Selivanovsky in March 1946. Regardless of this practice of submitting reports, members of the Polish authorities would make a pilgrimage to the Kremlin to ‘take counsel’ on difficult matters from the Soviet leadership.⁴³

The role of the Soviets in the referendum was far greater than mere ‘assistance’ offered to the Polish authorities. Upon the request from Bolesław Bierut, president of the State National Council (the

³⁹ Czesław Osękowski, *Referendum 30 czerwca 1946 roku w Polsce* [The Referendum of 30 June 1946 in Poland] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2000), 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 93, 97; Ulotki reakcyjnego podziemia [Flyers of the Reactionary Underground], file BU 1572/453, 213–21, 234, 240–63, 272, Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej [The Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance] (AIPN), Warsaw; Referendum to podstęp [The Referendum is a Ruse], file BU 1572/458, 86, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁴¹ Odpis wyciągu ze sprawozdania na Głosowanie Ludowe w dniach 29 i 30 czerwca 1946 r. przesłany z Ministerstwa Informacji i Propagandy [A Copy of the Summary from the Report on the People’s Voting on 29 and 30 June 1946, Sent from the Ministry of Information and Propaganda], file BU 00231/86/2, 3, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁴² Wytczne operacyjne Nr 00167/III Naczelnego Dowódcy Wojska Polskiego Przewodniczącego Państwowej Komisji Bezpieczeństwa [Operational Guidelines No. 00167/III of the Supreme Commander of the Polish Army, Chairman of the State Security Committee], 29 March 1946, file BU 0296/28/7, 1–14, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁴³ Grzegorz Motyka, *Na białych Polaków oblawa. Wojska NKWD w walce z polskim podziemiem 1944–1953* [Hunting the White Poles. The NKVD Troops in the Fight Against the Polish Underground 1944–1953] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), 352.

self-styled communist-dominated parliament), a special guest arrived in Warsaw on 20 June 1946: Colonel Aron Palkin, head of the independent Department 'D' in the Ministry of Public Security of the Soviet Union, which specialised in evaluation and forgery of various documents. A common plan of action was written on 22 June during a meeting between Palkin, Davidov, Bierut and the General Secretary of the Polish Workers' Party, Władysław Gomułka. Following this meeting, a group of officers from the Soviet security apparatus came to Warsaw and worked there until 27 August.⁴⁴

The most common fraudulent methods employed during the referendum included altering the content of a ballot, rescinding, destroying and ballot stuffing. Such practices were not possible in all of the lowest-rank electoral commissions because of the representatives of the opposition participating in their work, which is why the forgeries were carried out further on, in district offices, where the records of the precinct electoral commissions were fabricated.⁴⁵ The above-mentioned Soviet officers assisted in vote-rigging at the central level. As stated by Nikita Petrov, an independent Russian historian, they counterfeited 6,000 voting reports in electoral precincts by forging around 40,000 signatures.⁴⁶

According to the official announcement on the voting results, published only on 12 July 1946, 11,857,986 out of 13,160,451 people eligible to vote took part in the referendum, among whom 7,844,522 (66.15 per cent) said 'yea' to the first question, 8,896,105 (75.02 per cent) to the second one, and 10,534,697 (88.84 per cent) to the third.⁴⁷ The real statistics submitted straight to Bierut were discovered in the archives many years later by the historian Andrzej Paczkowski.⁴⁸ Those statistics clearly show that the overwhelming majority of the voting-eligible Poles – 11,691,500 out of 12,971,978 – took part in the referendum and their answers were far from what the party leaders wanted to see: 26.9 per cent of those who voted said 'yea' to the first question, 42 per cent to the second question, and 66.9 per cent to the third.⁴⁹ It is thus clear that the degree of vote-rigging was enormous.

The referendum not only gave the Polish communists extra time to reinforce their position and to battle the opposition before the proper election; it also enabled them to examine the public mood. Aware of the real voting outcomes, the party leaders knew in which regions their popularity was the lowest and thus they could choose precisely where to increase the propaganda or raise the restrictive measures in the following months.⁵⁰ The fact the communists went so far as to commit acts of electoral fraud helped the opposition, still working legally, realise it would be impossible to derail the process of establishing a communist dictatorship in Poland with ballot papers.⁵¹

The methods exercised in the pre-referendum campaign were used by the communists before the elections to the Legislative Sejm on 19 January 1947. The Polish Workers' Party electoral campaign once again became a great propagandistic action. Following the example of the Soviet Union, party

⁴⁴ Nikita Pietrow, 'Sztuka wygrywania wyborów' [The Art of Winning Elections], *Karta* 18 (1996), 121–2, 125.

⁴⁵ Osękowski, *Referendum*, 125–31; Wytuczne dla Wojewódzkich Komitetów Bezpieczeństwa w sprawie ubezpieczenia akcji Głosowania Ludowego [Guidelines for the Voivodeship Security Committees on the Security of the People's Voting Campaign], June 1946, file 00231/86/2, 122, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁴⁶ Pietrow, 'Sztuka', 122.

⁴⁷ 'Ogłoszenie Generalnego Komisarza Głosowania Ludowego o wyniku głosowania ludowego z dnia 30 czerwca 1946 roku' [The Announcement of the General Commissar of the People's Voting on the Results of People's Voting on 30 June 1946], *Monitor Polski*, 12 July 1946, no. 61, item 115.

⁴⁸ Andrzej Paczkowski, ed., *Referendum z 30 czerwca 1946 r. Przebieg i wyniki* [The Referendum of 30 June 1946. Its Course and Results] (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1993).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁰ Wytuczne dla pracy Wojewódzkich Komitetów Bezpieczeństwa na okres przedwyborczy [Guidelines for the Work of the Voivodeship Security Committees in the Pre-election Period], 17 July 1946, file BU 00231/86/1, 139–50, AIPN, Warsaw; Instrukcja Dyrektora V Departamentu MBP [Instruction from the Director of the 5th Department of the Ministry of Public Security], file BU 00231/86/1, 206, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁵¹ Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980* [Political Opposition in the People's Republic of Poland 1945–1980] (London: Aneks Publishers, 1994), 31.

agitators were to reach every voter directly.⁵² All attempts to organise public anti-government demonstrations were suppressed by the military and public security forces.⁵³ Soldiers and functionaries were also involved in agitation activities.⁵⁴

A range of methods was adopted to persecute Mikołajczyk and his party, the PSL. Their ballot registration and campaign were obstructed, representatives of the PSL were removed from electoral boards, the voters who supported its candidates were forced to cancel their signatures and the candidates themselves to resign. In order to force people to do as expected, various acts of terror were committed: dismissal from work, confiscation of assets, illegal arrest, physical violence, intimidation and even political murder. In the areas where the PSL enjoyed the greatest support, the communist authorities rescinded ten of its electoral rolls, thus rendering some 5.3 million people (22 per cent of the total population) unable to vote.⁵⁵ The Ministry of Public Security recruited almost 50 per cent of those sitting on electoral boards, who assisted in another planned fraud.⁵⁶

On 10 January 1947 the group led by Colonel Palkin once again arrived in Warsaw.⁵⁷ Palkin reported to Stalin that

in order to maintain full conspiracy, Bierut and the leading circles of the Polish Workers' Party were ordered to take additional steps which included: changing ballot boxes in some constituencies, increasing the vote share of the favoured candidates, and preparing two versions of the election reports – one of which missed the figures – where the election boards were free from the PSL-recruited men of confidence. Such incomplete reports would then be given to three men from the Polish Workers' Party, so as to be filled in with appropriate data.⁵⁸

According to the official results published, only on 3 February 1947, the voter turnout was 89.9 per cent, among whom 80.1 per cent had supported the 'democratic bloc' led by the communists, 10.3 per cent the Polish Peasants' Party (PSL), 4.7 per cent the Labour Party (SP), 1.4 per cent the Catholic groups seeking cooperation with the communists, and 3.5 per cent the '*Nowe Wyzwolenie*' (New Liberation), a splinter group that had broken away from Mikołajczyk's party. Both the results and the voting process were denounced by the PSL, which lodged fifty-two protests in various constituencies and one general protest (all of them rejected). According to Mikołajczyk, as many as 60 to 70 per cent of the voting-eligible population supported his party.⁵⁹ Yet, after the 1946 referendum, the Polish communists were much better prepared for election fraud. By placing carefully

⁵² Komitet Centralny Polskiej Partii Robotniczej [The Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party] (KC PPR), Instrukcja Nr 2 O pracy agitacyjnej w Obwodzie Wyborczym [Instruction No. 2 on the Agitation Work at the Electoral Precinct], 1 Dec. 1946, file BU 00231/86/1, 217/5–11, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁵³ Wytuczne dla akcji tłumienia i likwidacji demonstracji ulicznych, marszów chłopskich itp. [Guidelines for the Suppression and Liquidation of Street Demonstrations, Peasant Marches, etc.], 7 Jan. 1947, file BU 00231/86/1, 251–3, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁵⁴ Jarosław Wtorkiewicz, *Wojsko Polskie w akcji propagandowej i wyborach do Sejmu Ustawodawczego w 1947 roku* [The Polish Army in the Propaganda Campaign and the 1947 Elections to the Legislative Sejm] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2002); Czesław Osękowski, *Wybory do sejmu z 19 stycznia 1947 roku w Polsce* [The Sejm Elections of 19 January 1947 in Poland] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2000), 59–85.

⁵⁵ Mieczysław Adamczyk and Janusz Gmitruk, eds., *Falszerstwa wyborcze 1947. Dokumenty falszerstw wyborczych w Polsce w roku 1947* [Electoral Frauds 1947. The Documents of Electoral Frauds in Poland in 1947], vol. 1–2 (Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego and Wszechnica Świętokrzyska, 2000–2); Michał Skoczylas, *Wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego z 19 stycznia 1947 r. w świetle skarg ludności* [The Legislative Sejm Elections of 19 January 1947 in Light of the Citizens' Complaints] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2003), 41–96; Rozkaz Nr. 0017/III [Order No. 0017/III], 10 Jan. 1947, file BU 00231/86/1, 259–64, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁵⁶ Osękowski, *Wybory*, 66–7.

⁵⁷ Pietrow, 'Sztuka', 126.

⁵⁸ Cited in *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Janusz Wrona, introduction to *Kampania wyborcza i wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego 19 stycznia 1947* [The Electoral Campaign and Elections to the Legislative Sejm of 19 January 1947], ed. Janusz Wrona (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 1999), 40–1.

selected and loyal people in the structures of the electoral apparatus, they could easily cover up the actual election outcomes.⁶⁰ Even today, only the results from single constituencies have been made public, and they are used to confirm discrepancies between the official and actual results.⁶¹

Even though we have been unable to determine the actual results of the elections of 19 January 1947, what we know is the mechanisms of electoral fraud, which in most cases were committed by precinct electoral boards. The ballots cast in favour of the PSL were replaced in order to increase the vote share of the communist candidates, extra votes were dropped into ballot boxes or whole boxes were replaced and previously fabricated figures were put in the reports.⁶² This time, Polish communists were so well prepared for the overall operation that no assistance from Colonel Palkin and his team was necessary. According to the colonel's report sent to Stalin, the actual percentage of the votes for the 'democratic bloc' was around 50 per cent, while in the countryside it was 70 per cent.⁶³

The first experience of voting in Poland under communist rule did not quite meet the Russian standards. Yet the manner in which both the referendum and the elections to the Legislative Sejm were carried out suggested that the communists would make every effort to impose them. The two voting situations contained elements that would later become typical of the electoral code in Poland as modelled on the Soviet mechanisms. Such elements included, for example, insisting that voters give up the right to a secret ballot, voting with no 'crossing out', giving back 'blank' ballot papers (a practice encouraged during the referendum), striving for the highest turnout, obstructing the opposition from participating in the election, total control over the electoral apparatus and using every method available (including fraud) in order to secure universal support for the Communist Party.

Implementation of the Soviet Model

The next elections in Poland took place under different political circumstances, as the communists broke up the legal opposition after the elections to the Legislative Sejm. In the autumn of 1947 Mikołajczyk, fearing arrest, fled the country, helped by the British and American embassies. He was evacuated to Great Britain; afterwards he moved to the United States, where he continued his political activity in the Polish émigré circles. After Mikołajczyk's flight, the decimated anti-communist partisans in Poland no longer posed any threat to communist rule. In September 1947, a Moscow-inspired Cominform was set up – a new incarnation of the Comintern, the function of which was to enable the Soviets to control their 'fraternal' parties in other states.

In mid-1948, the communist leadership changed. Gomułka, who began to show some signs of independence from the Kremlin, was replaced by Bierut, considered to be more loyal to Moscow.⁶⁴ In December of the same year, the Polish Socialist Party was incorporated by the Polish Workers' Party. The Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) that emerged from that fusion was to rule the country for the next forty years. Beside the PZPR, only two other parties were allowed to continue legal activity: the United People's Party (*Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe*; ZSL) and the Democratic Party (*Stronnictwo Demokratyczne*; SD). All the same, this political pluralism proved to be rather illusory, as both of them were controlled by the communists. After 1948, state terror became more widespread and could affect not only political opponents of the communist rule but any citizen, either on a real or a false suspicion.⁶⁵ In 1952, the Legislative Sejm passed a new constitution which was modelled

⁶⁰ Osekowski, *Wybory*, 143.

⁶¹ Wrona, introduction to *Kampania wyborcza*, 40–1; Kamila Churska-Wołoszczak, *Referendum ludowe i wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego w województwie pomorskim (1946–1947)* [The People's Referendum and the Elections to the Legislative Sejm in the Pomeranian Voivodeship (1946–1947)] (Bydgoszcz–Gdańsk: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2014), 236–7.

⁶² Osekowski, *Wybory*, 145; Bogusław Barnaszewski, 'Jak fałszowano wybory w roku 1947' [How the Elections of 1947 were Falsified], *Odra* 9 (1991), 21.

⁶³ Pietrow, 'Sztuka', 126.

⁶⁴ See, e.g.: Anita Prazmowska, *Władysław Gomułka. A Biography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

⁶⁵ Andrzej Paczkowski, *Od sfalszowanego zwycięstwa do prawdziwej klęski. Szkice do portretu PRL* [From Faked Victory to Real Defeat. Sketches for the Portrait of the People's Republic of Poland] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 56.

on the 1936 Soviet constitution. From then on, the official name of the state was the People's Republic of Poland.

The constitution made the Sejm one of the chief governing bodies in the country. The electoral regulations passed by the Legislative Sejm in August 1952 were based on the Soviet tradition. Specifically, they derived from the 1950 electoral regulations for the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union.

If analysed outside the historical context and realities of the time, the new electoral code might seem to lay the foundations for future democratic elections. It rendered any elections general, equal and anonymous. It also allowed various organisations – political, vocational, cooperative, peasant, youth and other ‘mass organisations of the working people’ – to put forward candidates for MPs but this was, as in the Soviet Union, a rather wide range of entities. The voters would support a specific slate, from which they could, in addition, cross out the names they did not support (but the blank ballots cast ‘with no crossings-out’ were also counted). In order to win, every candidate had to receive at least 50 per cent plus one of the votes cast in a given constituency (with the minimal turnout of 50 per cent). Each slate (formally, there was an option to register many of them in every constituency) could only include as many names as the scheduled number of MPs in a given district. Of key importance was the regulation which said that voting must take place, regardless of the number of slates registered within a constituency.⁶⁶ The combination of such regulations and their practical enforcement made the Sejm elections of 1952 resemble the Soviet model.

From the very beginning, the communist rulers intended that only one slate would be registered within a constituency to include candidates recruited from all the official organisations (under the leadership of the PZPR); this slate was labelled as put forward by the National Front (*Front Narodowy*; FN), a cover association of all officially operating organisations.⁶⁷ Members of the electoral boards, verified by the party, made sure that any alternative slates were rejected, regardless of the fact that they were legally obliged to register them.⁶⁸ Following the regulation which stated that the number of names on each slate should match the number of seats available in a given constituency, it rendered voters deprived of any choice, because within each constituency the total number of candidates would be the same as the number of MPs eligible for election. The only deviation from the Soviet model was the fact that while single-member constituencies were typical of the USSR (and only one candidate would run for the office in each of them), in Poland multi-member districts were introduced in order to create an impression the electoral process would allow for an alternative. Yet across those multi-member constituencies 425 candidates to Sejm would compete for 425 mandates, so there was, in fact, no choice at all.

During the electoral campaign that preceded the voting the communist apparatus of repression once again played a significant role. The officers of the secret political police did their best to discover and punish all and every form of criticism towards the upcoming election, which was scheduled for October 1952.⁶⁹ The omnipresent communist propaganda called the elections super-democratic (as opposed to elections held in the West, controlled and tampered with by ‘evil capitalists’) and the

⁶⁶ Ustawa – Ordynacja wyborcza do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej [The Electoral Code Act for the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland], *Dziennik Ustaw*, 1 Aug. 1952, no. 35, item 246.

⁶⁷ Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej [The Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party] (KC PZPR), Notatka w sprawie zasad ordynacji wyborczej do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej [Note on the Principles of the Electoral Law for the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland], 1952, file V/21, 419, RG 1354, Archiwum Akt Nowych [The Archive of Modern Records] (AAN), Warsaw.

⁶⁸ KC PZPR, Notatka w sprawie organizacji wyborów do sejmu [Note on the Organization of the Sejm Elections], 26 July 1952, file V/23, 60, RG 1354, AAN.

⁶⁹ Wybory – Materiały Rady Państwa i Gabinetu Ministra Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego [The Elections – Materials of the State Council and the Minister's of Public Security Cabinet], 1952, file BU 00231/86/91, AIPN, Warsaw.

FN candidates were presented as the best of the best.⁷⁰ The PZPR campaign activities were supported by the SD and in the rural areas by the ZSL.⁷¹

The slates in each constituency were completed in accordance with socio-political guidelines laid out by the communist leadership. Those guidelines determined the number of the PZPR representatives in the Sejm benches, as well as the number of representatives of other parties, trade unions and other official organisations, workmen, peasants, the youth, women, MPs of a given age, etc. The guidelines were distributed among the constituencies, where suitable candidates were subsequently found. Prior to official nomination, candidates were verified for their political views and background by both party officials and political police officers.⁷²

Moscow kept track of the overall preparations for elections in Poland through its embassy in Warsaw. Various people, among whom were Jakub Berman (the third most powerful person in the party and the entire state, a member of the party committee that oversaw the apparatus of public security), Kazimierz Witaszewski (director of the Personnel Department in the Central Committee of the PZPR), Zenon Nowak (secretary of the Central Committee), or Stefan Matuszewski (director of the Department of Administration in the Central Committee), met the Russian embassy employees and supplied them with detailed intelligence on election-related regulations, actions and the course of candidate selection.⁷³

On account of the regulations and practices described above, the most important element of elections was the voter turnout, which could be regarded as an indicator of the electoral victory of the communist-controlled FN. Besides, the authorities wanted ballots to be cast with ‘no crossings-out’ – for all the selected candidates. Although, formally, going to the polls was voluntary, people who failed to show up at the station by a certain hour were forced to do so by groups of canvassers. What is more, according to the documents discovered in the archives over the last years, there were further cases of electoral fraud.⁷⁴ Many election reports were written in pencil, which made fraud easier. The documents show signs of the original figures being erased and replaced with new statistics.⁷⁵ A common practice was to decrease the number of people eligible to vote given in the

⁷⁰ Jacek Wojsław, ‘Kampania propagandowa towarzysząca wyborom do Sejmu z 26 października 1952 roku’ [The Propaganda Campaign Accompanying the Sejm Elections of 26 October 1952], *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały* 9 (2010), 133–53; Biuro Ogólnopolskiego Komitetu Frontu Narodowego [The Bureau of the Nationwide Committee of the National Front] (BOKFN), Program wyborczy Frontu Narodowego [The Electoral Programme of the FN], 1952, file 8, RG 183, AAN.

⁷¹ Centralny Komitet Stronnictwa Demokratycznego [The Central Committee of the Democratic Party] (CK SD), Odprawa aktywów na ogólnopolską konferencję wyborczą Frontu Narodowego w Warszawie w dniu 30 sierpnia 1952 roku [Briefing of Core Activists to the Nationwide Electoral Conference of the National Front in Warsaw on 30 August 1952], file 1/375, 14–6, RG 1438, AAN; Wydział Organizacyjny Naczelnego Komitetu Zjednoczonego Stronnictwa Ludowego [Organisational Department of the Supreme Committee of the ZSL], Udział ZSL w kampanii wyborczej do Sejmu PRL [Participation of the ZSL in the Electoral Campaign to the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland], 1952, file 113, Archiwum Zakładu Historii Ruchu Ludowego [Archive of the Department of the History of the People’s Movement] (AZHRL), Warsaw.

⁷² Joanna Olejniczak, *Wybory do Sejmu i rad narodowych w województwie bydgoskim w okresie tzw. małej stabilizacji (1956–1970)* [The Elections to the Sejm and National Councils in the Bydgoszcz Voivodship During the so-called Small Stabilization (1956–1970)] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2010), 178.

⁷³ Notatka z dziennika I sekretarza Ambasady ZSRS w Warszawie Piotra Turpit’ko o przebiegu rozmowy z kierownikiem Wydziału Kadr KC PZPR Kazimierzem Witaszewskim [A Note from the Diary of Pyotr Turpit’ko, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Warsaw on the Course of the Conversation with the Head of the Human Resources of the PZPR Central Committee Kazimierz Witaszewski], 24 Sept. 1952, in Aleksander Kochański and others, eds., *Polska w dokumentach z archiwów rosyjskich 1949–1953* (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000), 159–61.

⁷⁴ Michał Siedziako, ‘Manipulacje i fałszerstwa wyborcze w wyborach do Sejmu PRL (1952–1985)’ [The Manipulations and Forgeries in the Elections to the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland (1952–1985)], *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 27, 1 (2016), 116–23.

⁷⁵ Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza [State Electoral Commission] (PKW), Protokoły Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej – Okręg wyborczy nr 1 m. st. Warszawa [Reports of the State Electoral Commission – Constituency No. 1 the Capital City Warsaw], 1952, file 99, 50–1, 110–1, 158–9, 418–9, 580, RG 876, AAN; PKW, Protokoły Obwodowych Komisji

documents. Another practice included changing votes cast in a flawed manner into valid ones – cast, of course, in favour of all the candidates from a slate.⁷⁶

According to the official figures, in Sejm elections of 1952 the voter turnout reached 95.03 per cent and the overwhelming majority of ballots (99.8 per cent) were cast in favour of all the candidates for MPs (all of them were thus elected).⁷⁷ The Sejm saw the arrival of 273 MPs from the PZPR, 90 from the ZSL, 25 from the SD, and 37 independent ones.⁷⁸ A wide degree of manipulation and fraud makes it impossible to estimate the real turnout and support for the National Front slates. Bearing in mind the aforementioned conditions under which the elections took place – pre-election repressive measures, voter intimidation, the pressure exercised by groups of canvassers, the omnipresent propaganda – it can be assumed that the actual outcomes were only a little lower than the official figures.

The methods applied during the 1952 elections, such as registering only one slate, adopting various forms of pressure on the voter body, as well as rigging the official documents, all became a common practice in the following years. The foundations were laid and such practices continued to be exercised during the next decades of communist rule in Poland, even though they underwent certain modifications that resulted from a transformation of the overall political system.

Elections during Gomułka's Thaw

The next Sejm elections were held during the so-called thaw, which affected the Eastern Bloc after Stalin's death in 1953. In Poland, the culmination of the thaw came with the events of October 1956, which saw Gomułka, who had remained imprisoned during the Stalinist era, back in power. All around the country, voices calling for change could be heard.⁷⁹ Among the suggested changes was democratisation of suffrage before the upcoming parliamentary elections (the Sejm's first term was scheduled to end in the autumn of 1956). Decisions made during the session of the Politburo at the beginning of October 1956, still without Gomułka's participation, sought to respond to such demands. The new electoral code would allow the number of names from a slate to exceed the number of seats. The communist decision makers fully realised the danger of letting voters cross out the names of less popular candidates; this was, however, counterbalanced by the possibility of casting blank ballots. In this case, the ballot was counted in favour of candidates from the so-called 'mandate seats', which included only a few first positions from a slate (their number depending on the size of a constituency). This solution became a part of the new elections law passed on 24 October 1956. At the same time, the majority of practices from the 1952 law – multi-member districts, ability of various

Wyborczych – Okręg wyborczy nr 17 Poznań i województwo poznańskie [Reports of the Precinct Electoral Commissions – Constituency No. 12 Poznań City and Voivodeship], 1952, file 115, 64–5, 108–9, 126–7, 184–5, 218–19, RG 876, AAN.

⁷⁶ PKW, Protokoły Obwodowych Komisji Wyborczych – Okręg wyborczy nr 40 Szczecin i województwo szczecińskie [Reports of the Precinct Electoral Commissions – Constituency No. 40 Szczecin City and Voivodeship], 1952, file 138, 49, 110, 141, 167, RG 876, AAN; PKW, Protokoły Obwodowych Komisji Wyborczych – Okręg wyborczy nr 44 Wrocław i województwo wrocławskie [Reports of the Precinct Electoral Commissions – Constituency No. 44 Wrocław City and Voivodeship], 1952, file 142, 56, 150, RG 876, AAN.

⁷⁷ 'Obwieszczenie Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej w sprawie wyników wyborów do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w dniu 26 października 1952 roku' [The Announcement of the State Electoral Commission on the results of the Elections to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland on 26 October 1952], *Monitor Polski*, 28 Oct. 1952, no. A-91, item 1414.

⁷⁸ Janina Zakrzewska and Tadeusz Mołdawa, *Polska Ludowa* [The People's Poland], vol. 3 of *Historia sejmu polskiego* [The History of Polish Sejm], ed. Andrzej Ajnenkiel (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1989), 304; Jacek Jędruch, *Constitutions, Elections and Legislatures of Poland, 1493–1993. A Guide to Their History* (New York: EJJ Books, 1998), 319.

⁷⁹ See: Paweł Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite. Poland 1956* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

organisations to put up candidates, universal franchise, etc. – were upheld.⁸⁰ The elections were finally scheduled for 20 January 1957, thus prolonging the current term of the Sejm.

‘Only a candidate who enjoys the greatest degree of public trust can be chosen. Anyone who does not enjoy a great deal of voter trust will, undoubtedly, fail to be an MP’, declared Gomułka in his speech delivered during the Eighth Session of the Central Committee of the PZPR in October 1956, shortly after taking the post of First Secretary.⁸¹ The party leadership had no intention of losing control over the selection of prospective MPs, however, and in order to keep it, they had to make use of practices tested in 1952. First of all, they needed to select the members of electoral boards, among whose tasks was registering the district slates; and since democratisation was the official slogan, this had to be done in secret. In November 1956, secretaries of the local party committees were instructed that every board had to be subjected to thorough scrutiny and no independent slates could be registered in any case whatsoever.⁸²

Although there was no interference with the spontaneous process of putting forward candidates for MPs during meetings of various groups, it was not permitted to register independent slates nor to include all of the suggested names on the only list of the Front of the Nation’s Unity (*Front Jedności Narodu*; FJN) – a new name for the 1952 National Front – registered in each constituency. The Front slates were thoroughly analysed and approved by the party authorities within every province. In the case of some candidates, decisions were made at the communist HQs. All the same, all attempts to place independent candidates who enjoyed support of the local communities on the Front slates were unsuccessful. More often than not, this led to growing tensions and protests; but those failed to achieve any results.⁸³ According to the statistics of the Central Committee of the PZPR, 60,000 candidates had been put forward for election countrywide, whereas the Front slates contained 723 names (with 459 parliamentary seats available).⁸⁴

What was unique about the campaign that preceded the 1957 elections was the fact that although only one slate was registered in every constituency, there was actually a competition taking place between the registered candidates who represented various social-political organisations.⁸⁵ The most considerable tensions were felt between the candidates from the ZSL and the PZPR, and between candidates affiliated with various factions within the PZPR itself. Since there were more candidates than seats, there was a danger that people not fully supported by the party leadership – those in favour of, for example, more far-reaching democratic reforms – could be elected. Not every candidate from the FJN slates enjoyed the support of the CPSU leaders, so they were corrected a few times.⁸⁶

The Soviet leaders received a report on the situation in Poland in early January 1957. The document mentioned the overall unstable situation in the country, the fact that many candidates were put forward ‘whose political sympathy raises serious doubts’, and the ‘friends of the USSR’

⁸⁰ Ustawa – Ordynacja wyborcza do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej [The Electoral Code Act for the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland], *Dziennik Ustaw*, 24 Oct. 1956, no. 47, item 210.

⁸¹ Cited in: Paweł Machcewicz, introduction to *Kampania wyborcza i wybory do Sejmu 20 stycznia 1957* [The Electoral Campaign and Sejm Elections of 20 January 1957], ed. Paweł Machcewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2000), 8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸³ PKW, Skargi i zażalenia na decyzje okręgowych komisji wyborczych (1-2) [Complaints Against Decisions of District Electoral Commissions (1-2)], 1957, file 310–11, RG 876, AAN; PKW, Sprawozdanie Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej z wyborów do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej przeprowadzonych dnia 20 stycznia 1957 roku [Report of the State Electoral Commission from the Elections to the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland on 20 January 1957], 1957, file 307, 196, RG 876, AAN.

⁸⁴ Machcewicz, introduction to *Kampania wyborcza*, 14.

⁸⁵ Robert Skobelski, ‘Ostatnia odsłona odwilży. Kampania przed wyborami do Sejmu PRL ze stycznia 1957 roku’ [The Last Stage of the Thaw. Campaign Before the Elections to the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland in January 1957], *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 35, 1 (2020), 407–11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 414–15; Machcewicz, introduction to *Kampania wyborcza*, 19–20; KC PZPR, Protokół nr 127 z posiedzenia Sekretariatu KC w dn. 18 grudnia 1956 roku [Proceedings No. 127 from the Meeting of the Secretariat of the PZPR Central Committee on 18 December 1956], file V/42, 127, RG 1354, AAN.

were not on the slates. The report also contained a quote from Edward Ochab, the former First Secretary of the Central Committee, who said that the party could lose the upcoming election.⁸⁷

We can make a strong assumption that upon reading the report, the Soviet leadership decided to exert some pressure to calm the situation in Poland. Most likely as its consequence, on 7 January 1957 the leaders of the PZPR made a very important decision: they expressed their intention to change the strategy and the election slogans which encouraged people to vote for ‘the best from the slate’. Party members were called to ‘vote actively for the FJN slates, without crossing out or changing anything’.⁸⁸ In the following days, similar appeals to the general public were made by Gomułka, who, being seen as a prisoner in the Stalinist era and supporter of the ‘Polish road to socialism’, enjoyed a great deal of social support at the time.⁸⁹ Polish society was thus asked to voluntarily resign from its newly-granted right to limited choice. In the face of Gomułka’s tremendous popularity, the majority of voters who went to the polls on 20 January 1957 heeded the calls to ‘vote without crossings-out’.

According to the official statistics the elections turnout reached 94.14 per cent and the FJN candidates won 98.4 per cent of the votes. It is symptomatic that, countrywide, the highest support was given to the candidates not affiliated with any party (94.26 per cent); slightly lower support went to the representatives of the SD (90.8 per cent) and the ZSL (89.17 per cent), and the lowest to those of the Communist Party (87.95%) – with the exception of Gomułka himself and his closest associates, who came back to power during the Eighth Session of the Central Committee of the PZPR in October 1956.⁹⁰ One of the local party activists, Jan Antoniszczak from Lesser Poland, who was running for the Sejm from the so-called mandate seat, did not obtain the required majority of votes. His case shows that, theoretically, the electoral system deployed in Poland in 1957 did enable voters to eliminate unpopular candidates for MPs. Yet this never happened again, which indicates how effective were the methods adopted by the PZPR for electoral campaigns.

The aforementioned results can be regarded as an illustration of certain tendencies in society (a high level of support for Gomułka but generally lower for the party candidates than for non-partisans). With reference to the 1957 election, there are also archival documents confirming a variety of acts of electoral fraud and other illegal practices, such as decreasing the number of eligible voters, but also allowing people to cast a ballot in someone else’s stead (e.g. one person voting for the whole family if they lived at the same address).⁹¹ As before, the state security apparatus (although superficially reorganised within the political changes of that period) took care of the proper course of the electoral campaign.⁹² In the way they were conducted, the January 1957 elections

⁸⁷ Zayavleniye zaveduyushchovo IV Evropeiskovo Odieleniya Ministerstva Innostrannykh Del SSSR Alexandra Gorchakova o khodie podgotovki k wyboram w Seym Polskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [Information of the Head of the IV European Branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, Alexander Gorchakov, on the State of Preparations for the Elections to the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland], 5 Jan. 1957, fond 5, opis 28, dielo 481, 18–24, Rossiysky gosudarstvenny arkhiv noveishei istorii [The Russian State Archive of Contemporary History], Moscow.

⁸⁸ Protokół nr 152 posiedzenia Biura Politycznego w dniu 7 stycznia 1957 roku [Proceedings No. 2 of the Political Bureau Meeting on 7 January 1957], in Machcewicz, *Kampania wyborcza*, 250.

⁸⁹ ‘Analysis of Polish Elections January 1957, Munich’, 24 May 1957, HU OSA 300-8-3-4193, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Publications Department: Background Reports, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, <https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:da5874df-7724-4ace-8096-459a09569c1a> (accessed 18 Jan. 2021).

⁹⁰ ‘Obwieszczenie Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej o wynikach wyborów do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej przeprowadzonych dnia 20 stycznia 1957 roku’ [The Announcement of the State Electoral Commission on the results of the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland Elections of 20 January 1957], *Monitor Polski*, 22 Jan. 1957, no. 5, item 30.

⁹¹ E.g.: PKW, Protokoły Obwodowych Komisji Wyborczych Okręg Wyborczy Nr 8 – Białystok [Reports of the Precinct Electoral Commissions – Constituency No. 8 – Białystok], 1957, file 177, 101, 124, RG 876, AAN; PKW, Protokoły Obwodowych Komisji Wyborczych Okręg Wyborczy Nr 18 – Gdańsk [Reports of the Precinct Electoral Commissions – Constituency No. 18 – Gdańsk], 1957, file 187, 262–5, RG 876, AAN.

⁹² Rozkaz wiceministra spraw wewnętrznych w sprawie pełnej mobilizacji funkcjonariuszy wszystkich służb bezpieczeństwa [Order of the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs on the Full Mobilisation of Officers of All Security Services], 16 Jan. 1957, file BU 01225/271, 8–9, AIPN, Warsaw; Sprawozdanie z działalności organów MSW w okresie

helped voters to realise that real democratisation was out of the question and the thaw was coming to an inevitable end.

The only step towards democratisation to which the authorities gave their consent at that time was the permission to put forward more candidates than the number of seats in the Sejm; but all those candidates were still placed in one and the same slate. Grass-roots initiatives to put forward competing slates turned out to be out of the question (because such slates would not be registered); so did any rivalry and real choice between candidates placed in one slate (because the authorities had put great emphasis on selecting ‘the most suitable’ candidates, whose names were put in the first places, the so-called ‘mandate’ ones, by voting ‘with no crossings-out’).⁹³

Elections during the Stabilisation of the Communist System

The next six Sejm elections, which were held during Gomułka’s rule (1961, 1965 and 1969) and the Edward Gierek decade (1972, 1976 and 1980), can all be regarded as elections held in the period when the political system was relatively stable and when electoral practices successfully tested in previous years were being applied. That enabled the party leadership to compose the Sejm in accordance with their concepts. Changes of electoral law in that period were rather superficial and did not have much impact on the course of the elections.

From 1961, the Sejm had a constant number of MPs – 460. They were invariably ‘elected’ in multi-member districts. In each constituency only one slate was registered every time under the banner of the FJN, which was possible due to complete control over the composition of electoral boards at various levels.⁹⁴ Although there were more candidates than seats, only those from the first positions of the slates became MPs, the number of whom corresponded to the number of seats within a given district (in a three-member constituency, they were the first three positions on the slate, a four-member constituency – the first four, etc.). Blank votes, with no crossings-out, were still preferred by the communist authorities and considered valid, counted in favour of the first candidates on the slates.

The aforementioned cosmetic changes in the electoral code were introduced in 1976. In terms of elections, it can be said the overall regulations were finally adjusted to the common practices and the operations of the FJN were formally legitimised.⁹⁵ From then on, elections would have to be held within the framework of their electoral platform. It was only a formal change, however, as in practice such a rule had been followed since the 1950s. By formalising the Front’s role in elections, the communist authorities came into another legal argument against prospective attempts at registering independent slates.⁹⁶

wyborów do Sejmu [Report on the Activities of Organs of the Ministry of Interior Affairs During the Sejm Elections], 30 Jan. 1957, file BU 01355/85/110, 252–65, AIPN, Warsaw.

⁹³ For more, see: Robert Skobelski, *Powiew demokracji. Wybory do Sejmu PRL z 1957 roku* [A Breeze of Democracy. Elections to the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland in the year 1957] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2021).

⁹⁴ E.g. PKW, Proponowane przez prezydium wojewódzkich rad narodowych składy komisji wyborczych [Composition of Electoral Commissions Proposed by the Presidencies of Voivodeship National Councils], 1961, file 399, RG 876, AAN; Kancelaria Rady Państwa [The State Council Office] (KRP), Składy komisji wyborczych: korespondencja z KC PZPR, pisma o powołaniu poszczególnych osób w skład komisji wyborczych [Members of Electoral Commissions: Correspondence with the PZPR Central Committee, Letters on Appointing Individual Persons to Electoral Commissions], 1969, file with no signature, Archiwum Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Archive of the President of the Republic of Poland] (APRP), Warsaw.

⁹⁵ Ustawa – Ordynacja wyborcza do Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej i rad narodowych [The Electoral Code Act for the Sejm of the People’s Republic of Poland], *Dziennik Ustaw*, 17 Jan. 1976, no. 2, item 15.

⁹⁶ KC PZPR, Informacja nr I/21/80, Zgłoszenie Leszka Moczulskiego i Tadeusza Stańskiego jako kandydatów na posłów [Information No. I/21/80, Putting Forward Leszek Moczulski and Tadeusz Stański as Candidates for MPs], 22 Feb. 1980, file XII/3806, AAN; KC PZPR, Informacja nr I/23/80, Działania Konfederacji Polski Niepodległej w Lublinie [Information No. I/23/80, The Activity of the Confederation of Independent Poland Party in Lublin], 25 Feb. 1980, file XII/3806, AAN.

The main characteristics of the electoral system in Poland during this time included solutions adopted in the earlier years, 1952 and 1957, among which were:

- (1) total control over election management bodies by the Communist Party and the Security Service (electoral boards responsible for registering slates and calculating voting results were made up of verified, trusted people);
- (2) registering only one slate per district under the banner of the FJN and making it impossible to register independent slates;
- (3) composing the FJN slates in accordance with a socio-political criterion laid down by the PZPR leadership, which determined the number of representatives of various parties, social groups and professions in the Sejm, the composition of which was to reflect the overall society;⁹⁷
- (4) registering a larger number of candidates on the FJN slates than the number of available seats, which introduced a division into 'seat' positions and 'no-seat' positions and conveyed an illusory impression of choice;
- (5) careful selection of candidates for MPs, who were verified by the Communist Party apparatus and the secret political police; it was at this stage of the electoral process that the real choice was made – if anyone was put in a 'seat' position, they could be certain of getting 'elected' on the election day;⁹⁸
- (6) involvement in electoral campaigns of all the official organisations and state institutions that participated in and co-financed these campaigns, all of which turned out to have been large propaganda operations every time they were staged;
- (7) insistence upon the highest voter turnout possible and upon the practice of open ballot, without any crossings-out (for the candidates from 'seat' positions);
- (8) modifying the election results by means of electoral fraud, mostly by decreasing the number of people eligible to vote, which would, in fact, raise the turnout;
- (9) almost 100 per cent official voter turnout and the election of every candidate from the 'seat' position in each voting situation was to indicate the electoral victory of the PZPR and its 'allies', as well as the socialist society's unanimous support of the goals set by the communists.⁹⁹

Elections held in accordance with the above rules performed the functions typical of elections organised in all the socialist states.¹⁰⁰ Firstly, it was a mobilising function – participation in the campaign and the elections mobilised the normally passive citizenry to demonstrate their support of the communist system. The second function performed by means of electoral propaganda was indoctrination of the public in a spirit of the communist ideology and promotion of the goals set by the party leadership. Thirdly, elections played an integrative role, stirring the overall society and all the official organisations, including the Communist Party, into some action 'for the common benefit'. Fourthly, among the most important functions of the socialist elections was their legitimising function. Regularly held elections were expected to legitimate power which could barely be called democratic.

⁹⁷ Stanisław Nizio (former PZPR activist, head of department in its Voivodeship Committee in Szczecin in the 80s) in discussion with the author, July 2012; Stanisław Ciosek (former PZPR activist, first secretary of its Voivodeship Committee in Jelenia Góra in the 1970s and member of its central management in the 1980s) in discussion with the author, Oct. 2013. Jerzy J. Wiatr (professor of social sciences, former PZPR activist, in the 1980s the director of the Institute of Basic Problems of Marxism and Leninism in Warsaw) and Andrzej Werblan (professor of human science, former PZPR activist, before 1989 a long-time MP) in discussion with the author, Apr. 2012.

⁹⁸ Nizio, discussion; Ryszard Kowalski (former PZPR activist, member of its Voivodeship Committee in Szczecin Secretary) in discussion with the author, Feb. 2013; KC PZPR, Notatka w sprawie rozmów z posłami i kandydatami na posłów (A Note on the Discussions with MPs and Candidates for MPs), 1976, file VII/43, 23, RG 1354, AAN.

⁹⁹ For further information see: Michał Siedziako, *Bez wyboru. Głosowania do Sejmu PRL (1952–1989)* [Without Choice. The Elections to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland (1952–1989)] (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2018), 193–268; George Sakwa and Martin Crouch, 'Sejm Elections in Communist Poland: An Overview and a Reappraisal', *British Journal of Political Science* 8, 4 (1978), 403–24.

¹⁰⁰ Pravda, 'Elections', 45–53; Zaslavsky and Brym, 'Functions', 362–71.

However, bearing in mind the fact that all Sejm elections in Poland after the Second World War up to the 1980s were fully controlled by the Communist Party (the 1957 elections to some extent excepted), a fact of which the public were all too aware, the legitimising function was performed only illusorily too.

A careful overview of electoral practices in Poland during the period under discussion, and their comparison with the mechanisms that governed the organisation of the Soviet elections, helps to pinpoint not only a wide range of similar solutions, but also differences. The most striking similarities included:

- (1) the content of electoral propaganda – anti-Western, anti-American, stressing the degree of socialist development and numerous successes of the communist-led authorities;
- (2) combining democratic electoral code and extremely anti-democratic practices (e.g. formally speaking, a wide range of institutions had the right to put forward a candidate, in practice: see below);
- (3) the highest-ranking party leadership laying down the criteria for candidate selection;
- (4) certain candidate nominations were decided by the party leadership and their local authorities and each candidate was carefully verified;
- (5) the Communist Party did not come forward openly, but rather protected itself ‘on a wide front’; in Poland this function was performed by the Front of the Nation’s Unity while in the Soviet Union there was a variety of collective groups, e.g. employees in a workplace;
- (6) all the candidates expected to win a seat were ‘elected’ by general vote (there was one exception to this rule in Poland, in 1957);
- (7) majority vote was the rule and absolute majority the requirement in order to win a seat;
- (8) votes free of ‘crossings-out’ were considered valid; blank votes cast into the ballot box were counted as being in favour of the candidates;
- (9) electoral success was measured by voter turnout which, according to the official statistics, was always around 100 per cent;
- (10) in order to reach so high a turnout, the communist authorities resorted to manipulation and fraud, in which the most common practice was decreasing the number of eligible voters.

Elections held in communist-ruled Poland were different from the Soviet elections in the following aspects:

- (1) On the national level, the most supreme elected organ was, following the Polish tradition, the Sejm; the system of multiple soviets was not implemented, although it was reflected on the local level by the system of national councils (Polish: *rady narodowe*).
- (2) The Soviet single-member districts were replaced in Poland with multi-member constituencies.
- (3) From 1957 onward, the number of Sejm candidates was always higher than the number of seats; thus, there was some choice, at least formally.

The important fact was that, from 1957 onward, there was more than one candidate put forward for each seat. This was one of the most crucial criteria that allowed Alex Pravda to distinguish two separate electoral systems in the states of the former Eastern Bloc: the plebiscitary elections (elections in, among others, the Soviet Union were modelled on this system) and the limited-choice elections (as in, e.g., Poland).¹⁰¹ And yet, it must be stressed that in the face of numerous control mechanisms applied by the Communist Party, even the limited-choice system offered only an illusion of a choice. Even though a brief look at the history of elections in Poland and the Soviet Union might suggest some degree of independence from Moscow, the Polish electoral system could only be implemented because it brought the same results as the Soviet model. The communist leadership in the Soviet Union would

¹⁰¹ Pravda, ‘Elections’, 33.

never have approved of elections that posed a threat to the party's rule in Poland. The Polish communists would not let anything like this happen, either.

Conclusion

The implementation of a certain electoral code after the Second World War in Poland was the result of the country's dependence on the Soviet Union. At first, the Soviets provided the Polish communists with military support and helped them conduct electoral fraud during the first post-war elections (i.e. the referendum and elections to the Legislative Sejm), in which independent parties still participated. After the removal of those parties in 1947, over the next few years the Soviet-inspired communists were introducing political practices from the Soviet Union to Poland on their own, without direct help from the Soviets.

Being characterised by the rule 'one seat – one candidate', the electoral code of the Soviet Union was, in a way, the 'perfect model' implemented by the PZPR (with a minor change: the multi-member constituencies) during the elections to the Sejm in 1952. It was the period of the most extreme Stalinisation of life in Poland and fraught with attempts at making the country mirror the Soviet Union as much as possible.

In the wake of Stalin's death came some degree of liberalisation, as a result of which the Polish electoral code was further modified slightly. The main change included introducing several candidates for one seat in the Sejm, which created an illusion of a 'limited choice'. However, candidates were still selected in accordance with socio-political criteria laid down by the PZPR leadership and they were verified and approved by the party. In terms of numerous particular solutions, as of 1957 the electoral code remained an exact copy of the 'ideal' Soviet model. Despite its superficial distinctness, the Polish system allowed for the Soviet-inspired electoral practices to be used, which enabled the Polish communists in power to maintain total control over composition of the Sejm. The Soviets, in turn, accepted this Polish 'distinctness' because it yielded the same effects as in the Soviet Union.

The composition of the parliaments in both countries was controlled by the Communist Party, and thus the party exercised full control over their activities. In these circumstances, the parliamentary system in the Soviet Union or in Poland under the communist rule was a mockery. All genuine decisions were made inside the party's governing bodies, and the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland or the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union only formalised their implementation, since the decisions of the top-notch party officials did not have the force of law per se. Characteristically, in key issues all the deputies would vote unanimously. An interesting observation is that as in the mid-1980s the electoral system in the People's Republic of Poland began to operate less smoothly than before (cf. the 1985 elections mentioned at the outset), so the resulting Sejm of the 1985–9 term began to demonstrate a certain autonomy from the party decision-making centre (although that autonomy fell short of regular insubordination).

To return to the question posed at the outset: Why did the communists need the elections when they did not allow people to elect their representatives? It will not be too much of a risk to say that the aim was, above all, to provide the absolute rule of the Communist Party with a façade. Creating a semblance of democracy, this façade camouflaged the true centre of authority. For the propaganda, regularly organised elections were an argument in support of the thesis that the communist countries possess a 'government of the people'. Without elections, substantiating this assumption (even when it was no more than a propagandistic lie) did not seem possible.