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## The elections and legitimation of Communist rule in Poland after the Second World War

### Abstract

The article discusses the significance of elections to the process of legitimation of the communist rule in Poland after the Second World War. The main research question is whether the elections gave the totalitarian/authoritarian rule real legitimacy and if they did (or didn't), then why. The author draws broader conclusions from the example of Poland, which is his focus. The departure point of his analysis is the discussion of the circumstances in which the communist rule was established in Poland in the years 1944–1947, when the first two post-war general votings took place: the referendum and the elections to the Legislative Sejm. Further discussed are the first elections to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland in 1952, during which practices used in the Soviet Union were implemented to the greatest extent, unsurpassed in entire the history of the communist rule in Poland. Presenting the characteristics of the Sejm elections in the following years, the author concentrates on their social perception, with a view to its connection to the article's central issue of legitimation. In the final section, the influence of the elections on the legitimation of communist authorities is juxtaposed with the classical theories of legitimation by Max Weber and David Beetham. In the conclusion the author points out that the legitimation imparted on the communist rule by the elections was just as illusory as the choice presented to the voters.

**Keywords:** elections in communist states, elections under totalitarian/authoritarian regime, electoral fraud, legitimation of power, the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland

## Introduction

Regularly-held elections are one of the most basic manners of legitimating power in democratic states. Yet cyclical elections took place in nearly all the dictatorships of the 20th century, including the Central and Eastern European states which fell under the dominion of the Soviet Union after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Even though the electoral systems of the West were fundamentally different from such elections, in the opinions of numerous scholars they too were mostly conducted in order to legitimize power.<sup>2</sup> But, in light of new research, was it really so? Did such elections truly matter for legitimating the communist rule, and why? In this article I will attempt to answer these questions. I make use of the case of Poland, with which I am most familiar, yet — bearing in mind that all the elections ever held in all the satellite states of the Soviet Union followed similar procedures (in fact, there were two models, the limited-choice or plebiscitary elections, but both led to the same results) — I am of the opinion the case study of Poland can help draw further conclusions.

### 1. The beginnings of the communist rule in Poland

In order to delineate the relationship between the legitimization of communist rule and the elections conducted in the post-war Poland, it is necessary, first and foremost, to focus on the circumstances under which the Polish communists came to power after the Second World War, and determine the character of the elections that took place during this time. It should be noted that at the end of the Second World War, there were two political bodies aspiring to power in Poland. One of them was the legal Government of the Republic of Poland in exile (operating in London), with Prime Minister Tomasz Arciszewski of the independent Polish Socialist Party (Polish: Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, hereafter: PPS) at its helm as of November 1944. In July 1944, with the support from the Soviet Union, the Polish communists established their own cabinet led by the socialist (and crypto-communist) Edward Osóbka-Morawski, which at first was dubbed the Polish Committee of National Liberation (Polish: Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego) and later, as of 1945, the Provisional Government (Polish: Rząd Tymczasowy). This political body was set up in the areas which were being liberated by the Red Army and which, in accordance with Stalin's plans, were to encompass

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others: *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships*, eds. R. Jessen, H. Richter, Frankfurt am Main–New York 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others: A. Pravda, "Elections in Communist Party states," [in:] *Communist Politics: A Reader*, eds. S. White, D. Nelson, Basingstoke–London 1986, pp. 27–54; M. Żyromski, "Rola i funkcje wyborów w systemach niedemokratycznych," *Przegląd Politologiczny* 2016, no. 3, pp. 109–116.

the territory of post-war Poland. At the beginning of 1945 the Western Allies regarded the government under Arciszewski to be the only legal political representation of Poland and ignored the Soviet-backed government established in Lublin. By contrast, Stalin would only recognize the communist rule of Poland under Osóbka-Morawski.

This deadlock was broken by the leaders of the US (President Franklin D. Roosevelt), Great Britain (Prime Minister Winston Churchill) and the Soviet Union (Marshal Joseph Stalin) during the Yalta Conference in February 1945. Representatives of Poland were not invited to the meeting. Following the Yalta Agreements a new coalition government, called the Provisional Government of National Unity (Polish: Tymczasowy Rząd Jedności Narodowej, hereafter: TRJN) and accepted by all the allied powers, was to be installed in Warsaw. It was to be established by means of a reorganization of the communist Provisional Government, “with the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland itself and from Poles abroad.”<sup>3</sup>

The TRJN was created during negotiations held in Moscow in June 1945, which the Soviets allowed only the selected Polish democratic leaders to attend. The majority of Polish democrats had no intention to come to an understanding with communists anyway, as they regarded the London government-in-exile the only true political representation of Poland. The composition of the TRJN included some independent politicians, such as the former PM and leader of the Polish Peasant Party (Polish: Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, hereafter: PSL) Stanisław Mikołajczyk (who adopted a realistic approach and believed that any political work aimed at establishing an independent and democratic Poland must make use of every possibility, even under most unfortunate circumstances),<sup>4</sup> but the Polish communists maintained their dominant position in it. Between June and July 1945, the TRJN was recognized as the legitimate political representation of Poland by the governments of France and Sweden and later on, following a previous announcement, those of the United States and Great Britain. The British were at first going to grant their full acceptance of the new Polish authorities only if the TRJN officially vowed to conduct free elections in the near future, but they retracted this condition influenced by the Americans.<sup>5</sup> The Polish government-in-exile reacted with a storm of protest and a proclamation which said that “even in the case of revoking its recognition, it will continue to be the one and only legitimate Government, as its power comes not from international recognition, but from the will

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Crimea Conference (Yalta, 11 February 1945), Luxembourg Centre Contemporary and Digital History, [https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/report\\_on\\_the\\_crimea\\_conference\\_yalta\\_11\\_february\\_1945-en-d0503236-c181-4b84-b8ae-d233645365ac.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/report_on_the_crimea_conference_yalta_11_february_1945-en-d0503236-c181-4b84-b8ae-d233645365ac.html), p. 5 (accessed: 28.12.2021).

<sup>4</sup> For further information see e.g. A. Paczkowski, *Stanisław Mikołajczyk czyli klęska realisty (zarys biografii politycznej)*, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>5</sup> K. Kersten, *Jalta w polskiej perspektywie*, Londyn–Warszawa 1989, p. 171.

of the Polish nation and inalienable rights of the Republic of Poland.”<sup>6</sup> However, as the historian Krystyna Kersten rightly put it, “words, although justified morally and legally, could not shape the reality.”<sup>7</sup> Along with the official recognition of the Polish authorities in Warsaw, the Western Allies revoked their support for the London-based Arciszewski cabinet, which was an act of acceptance of the *status quo* in Poland that resulted from Stalin’s efforts to pursue a policy of *faits accomplis*. In the country, the position of the Polish communists became significantly strengthened — with solid international recognition the communist-dominated power centre in Warsaw won an important legitimating argument.

The Yalta Report obliged the newly-formed Polish government in Warsaw “to the holding of free and unfettered elections as soon as possible on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot. In these elections all democratic and anti-Nazi parties shall have the right to take part and to put forward candidates.”<sup>8</sup> Aware of the rather slim chances they had in these elections if everything was conducted following these rules, the Polish communists managed to postpone the actual voting for the new representative body. It was mainly for this reason that the June referendum of 1946 was called, in which the voters had to answer three questions:

1. Are you in favour of abolishing the Senate?
2. Do you wish to embed in the prospective constitution an economic system that began with an agricultural reform and nationalization of most important sectors of the national economy assured that basic rights of private enterprise will be secured?
3. Do you wish to have the Western borders of the country, along the Baltic Sea, the rivers Oder and Lusatian Neisse secured?<sup>9</sup>

Propaganda of the so-called “democratic camp” that was made up of the Polish Workers’ Party (Polish: Polska Partia Robotnicza, hereafter: PPR) and its collaborators, mostly communist-controlled factions, called for voting “3 times yea.” The largest legally operating opposition party — the PSL under Mikołajczyk — pushed for a “nay” to the first question. The independence-seeking Polish underground movement also encouraged people to vote against the communists’ wishes. The most robust clandestine organization recruited from the soldiers of the Home Army (Polish: Armia Krajowa; formally dissolved in the January of 1945), that is Freedom and Independence (Polish: Wolność i Niezawisłość), while in general opposed to conducting any referendum at all, in a pre-referendum campaign tried to talk people into giving a “yea” only to the last question. As for the underground national organizations, such as the National Military Union (Polish: Narodowe Zjednoczenie Wojskowe) and the National Armed Forces (Polish:

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. after: *ibid.*, p. 172. All translations from Polish-language sources have been made ad hoc for the purpose of the present article by the author.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Crimea Conference (Yalta, 11 February 1945), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. after: C. Osękowski, *Referendum 30 czerwca 1946 roku w Polsce*, Warszawa 2000, p. 32.

Narodowe Siły Zbrojne), they would encourage the voters to say “nay” to all the referendum questions.<sup>10</sup>

During the pre-referendum campaign, the Polish communists adopted a very aggressive rhetoric, varied and large-scale propagandistic activities, as well as various forms of repressive measures utilized by the ever-growing apparatus of public security against their political opponents (e.g. arrest, battery, confiscation of property, dismissal from work, and even political murder). All of this clearly suggested that the PPR leadership had no intention whatsoever to heed the actual opinion of the general public in Poland. The results of the referendum were forged, with some help given by a group of officers who specialized in counterfeiting documents and were specially sent to Poland by the Soviet Ministry of State Security.<sup>11</sup>

According to the official statement issued by the General Commissar for People's Voting and published in Polish Monitor only as late as on July 12, 1946, out of 13,160,451 persons eligible for voting, 11,857,986 took part in the referendum, among whom 7,844,522 (66.15%) gave a “yea” to the first question, 8,896,105 (75.02%) gave a “yea” to the second, and 10,534,697 (88.84%) to the third one.<sup>12</sup> However, the data published only as late as the 1990s by historian Andrzej Paczkowski indicate that even though the majority of eligible voters did participate in the referendum (11,691,500 out of 12,971,978), the actual responses were different from what the PPR leadership had wished for. Only 26.9% of eligible voters gave a “yea” to the first question, 42% to the second, and 66.9% to the third.<sup>13</sup> The scale of illegal interference with the process was thus enormous.

Various acts of fraud were sometimes committed in an ostentatious manner, which left even some of the communists activists feeling apprehensive about the whole process. Celina Budzyńska, affiliated with the communist movement ever since the Second Republic of Poland and continuing her political career during the People's Republic of Poland (and, at that time, the principal of the Central PPR Party School in Łódź) recalled how the referendum votes were rigged:

The Łódź Committee or any other election commission would occupy a large school auditorium, where the party activists segregated ballot papers: “3 times nay” would go straight to the furnace burning in the basement, and the activists would write down “3 times yea.” I felt really upset. Even though ever since my childhood years I had been told the end justified the means and that us — the party — knew better what was good for the country, for the Polish people, that socialism was the ultimate goal. I cannot remember ever having any misgivings that the communist rule, which had implemented an agricultural reform, brought down

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 93, 97.

<sup>11</sup> See N. Pietrow, “Sztuka wygrywania wyborów,” *Karta* 1996, no. 18, pp. 121–129.

<sup>12</sup> See: Announcement of the General Commissioner of the People's vote of June 30, 1946, Polish Monitor of 1946 No. 61, item 115.

<sup>13</sup> Zestawienie ogólne (bez obwodów zamkniętych) wg województw, [undated document], [in:] *Referendum z 30 czerwca 1946 r. Przebieg i wyniki*, ed. A. Paczkowski, Warszawa 1993, p. 159; Zestawienie ogólne (bez obwodów zamkniętych) wg województw z podziałem na główne zgrupowania głosów, [undated document], [in:] *ibid.*, p. 161.

unemployment and was raising the country from the rubble, had to be defended. And yet, I was deeply ashamed that such a defence had to be carried out through fraud and manipulation. It was with a heavy heart that I would be sitting all by myself in the principal's office on the first floor (no-one from the school management was there). All of a sudden, an old German fireman came in and partly with words, partly with gestures made me turn around and look out of the window: outside, thousands of burned scraps of paper were floating around over the courtyard, the wind carried those "3 times nays" way over Wólczańska Street, the sun was shining over this first-ever social protest against an imposed, unwanted authority.<sup>14</sup>

Elections to the Legislative Sejm (Polish: Sejm Ustawodawczy) were held only in January 1947. During the pre-election campaign repressive and propagandistic measures became more intensive, acts of electoral fraud better planned. The true results are still unknown; it was possible to determine them only for single constituencies.<sup>15</sup> According to the official announcement, 89.9% of those eligible for voting took part in the elections, among whom 80.1% supported the "democratic bloc" (dominated by the PPR, with the participation of the communist-oriented PPS and smaller parties controlled by the communists), 10.3% voted for the PSL, 4.7% for the Labor Faction (Polish: Stronnictwo Pracy) — which was the second, besides the PSL, independent political party at the time, Christian-Democratic in its creed and soon likewise to be totally broken up — 1.4% for the Catholic groups oriented towards collaboration with the communist government, 3.5% for the communist-controlled PSL "Nowe Wyzwolenie" (New Liberation). Both the results and the voting process were discredited by Mikołajczyk's PSL, which lodged fifty-two protests in various constituencies and one general protest, in which different acts of electoral fraud were described in detail (all of them were rejected by the communist authorities). According to Mikołajczyk, as many as 60 to 70% of the voting-eligible population supported his party.<sup>16</sup> As historian Janusz Wrona wrote, "in all likelihood, this reflected the actual electoral preferences, even though, as a result of adoption of a variety of vote-rigging methods on different levels of the election procedure, their true result countrywide is impossible to determine."<sup>17</sup> A somewhat different opinion was expressed by Krystyna Kersten, who believes that although the election results were undoubtedly manipulated, what with the practices used by the Polish communists it would have been unlikely for the PSL to have collected so many popular votes.<sup>18</sup> This opinion is shared by historian Czesław Osękowski.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> C. Budzyńska, *Strzępy rodzinnej sagi*, 1997, p. 463.

<sup>15</sup> See: J. Wrona, "Wstęp," [in:] *Kampania wyborcza i wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego 19 stycznia 1947*, ed. J. Wrona, Warszawa 1999, pp. 40–41; K. Churska-Wołoszczak, *Referendum ludowe i wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego w województwie pomorskim (1946–1947)*, Bydgoszcz–Gdańsk 2014, pp. 236–240.

<sup>16</sup> J. Wrona, "Wstęp," pp. 40–41.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> K. Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1944–1948*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 262–263.

<sup>19</sup> C. Osękowski, *Wybory do sejmu 19 stycznia 1947 roku w Polsce*, Poznań 2000, p. 149.

The Western powers, although thoroughly informed of the situation in Poland by the PSL activists, did not respond in a more energetic manner to blatant cases of abuse during the organization and conduct of the elections.<sup>20</sup> The governments of the United States and Great Britain went only as far as to issue a statement, in which they declared that the election of January 19, 1947 could not be regarded as meeting the international obligation undertaken by the TRJN.<sup>21</sup> Yet they did not revoke their recognition of the communist authorities in Poland, thus giving the new power in Warsaw the green light.

## 2. The first elections to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland

The next election in Poland took place under different political circumstances — the armed forces of the independence-seeking underground movement were liquidated, the legal opposition broken up and the remaining parties subordinated, the Polish Socialist Party absorbed by the PPR in December 1948. What emerged from this fusion — the Polish United Workers' Party (Polish: Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, hereafter: PZPR) — was to rule the country for the next forty years, in concert with its “satellites”: the United People's Party (Polish: Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe, hereafter: ZSL) and the Alliance of Democrats (Polish: Stronnictwo Demokratyczne, hereafter: SD). Poland became a satellite state totally dependent on the Kremlin's will, with the social-political structure that mirrored the Soviet model.<sup>22</sup> On July 22, 1952, the Legislative Sejm adopted the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland,<sup>23</sup> corrections to which were made by Stalin himself.<sup>24</sup> One of the institutions that the new document created

<sup>20</sup> See *Dokumenty fałszerstw wyborczych w Polsce w roku 1947. Memoriał Polskiego Stronnictwa Ludowego w sprawie wyborów w Polsce złożony wraz z załącznikami w dniu 18 grudnia 1946 roku Ambasadorom Stanów Zjednoczonych, Wielkiej Brytanii i Związku Sowieckiego w Warszawie*, eds. M. Adamczyk, J. Gmitruk, Warszawa–Kielce 2000; *Dokumenty fałszerstw wyborczych w Polsce w roku 1947. Drugi memoriał Polskiego Stronnictwa Ludowego w sprawie wyborów w Polsce, złożony wraz z załącznikami w dniu 18 stycznia 1947 roku Ambasadorom Stanów Zjednoczonych, Wielkiej Brytanii i Związku Sowieckiego w Warszawie*, eds. M. Adamczyk, J. Gmitruk, Warszawa–Kielce 2002.

<sup>21</sup> K. Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy*, p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> For further information see, among others A. Werblan, *Stalinizm w Polsce*, 2009; A. Garlicki, *Stalinizm*, Warszawa 1993; D. Jarosz, *Polacy a stalinizm 1948–1956*, Warszawa 2000; P. Osęka, *Rytuały stalinizmu. Oficjalne święta i uroczystości rocznicowe w Polsce 1944–1956*, Warszawa 2007; J. Eisler, “Stalinizm — pojęcie, cechy konstytutywne, specyfika polska,” [in:] J. Eisler, *Co nam zostało z tamtych lat. Dziedzictwo PRL*, Warszawa 2016, pp. 173–185.

<sup>23</sup> See: Constitution of the Polish People's Republic passed by the Legislative Assembly on July 22, 1952, *Journal of Laws of 1952 No. 33*, item 232.

<sup>24</sup> K. Persak, “‘Troskliwy opiekun i światły doradca Polski Ludowej’. Poprawki Józefa Stalina do Konstytucji PRL z 22 lipca 1952 roku,” [in:] *PRL. Trwanie i zmiana*, eds. D. Stola, M. Zaremba, Warszawa 2003, pp. 187–209.

was the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland (Polish: Sejm Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej).<sup>25</sup>

In the overall history of the communist rule in Poland, the first elections to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland, held in October 1952, bore the greatest resemblance to the Soviet electoral procedures.<sup>26</sup> In spite of a seemingly democratic electoral system,<sup>27</sup> only one slate was registered in each constituency, under the banner of the National Front (Polish: Front Narodowy, hereafter: FN), which contained the number of only as many candidates as the number of MPs eligible for election. Although formally other, competing slates could be registered, the PZPR blocked such an option with the total control of the apparatus in charge of conducting the overall election, that is, electoral commissions of various levels.

Candidates for electoral commissions within a constituency were approved by provincial party committees and members of district election commissions — by regional committees with some assistance from a representative of the provincial

<sup>25</sup> For further information on the political system established by the 1952 Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland see, among others: L. Mażewski, *System rządów w PRL (1952–1989)*, Warszawa–Biała Podlaska 2011; M. Kallas, A. Lityński, *Historia ustroju i prawa Polski Ludowej*, Warszawa 2003; T. Mołdawa, “Konstytucyjne podstawy ustroju Polski Ludowej,” [in:] *Władza w PRL. Ludzie i mechanizmy*, eds. K. Rokicki, R. Spalek, Warszawa 2011, pp. 11–25; A. Dudek, “‘Pierwsza władza’. Model nadzoru PZPR nad władzą ustawodawczą, wykonawczą i sądowniczą,” [in:] *Władza w PRL*, pp. 55–61.

<sup>26</sup> See M. Siedziako, “Przygotowanie wyborów do Sejmu PRL I kadencji w 1952 roku jako element procesu sowietyzacji Polski po II wojnie światowej,” *Prace Historyczne* 144, 2017, no. 4, pp. 739–758; M. Siedziako, “A Polish invention or a copy of the Soviet model? Electoral practices during parliamentary elections in Poland under the Communist rule,” *Contemporary European History* 33, 2024, nr 1, pp. 98–116. For further information on the 1952 Sejm elections see especially: A. Zaćmiński, *Kampania wyborcza i wybory do Sejmu PRL I kadencji z 1952 r. Studium totalitarnej elekcji parlamentarnej*, Bydgoszcz 2020. For further information on the elections in the Soviet Union see, among others: *Voting for Hitler and Stalin*, passim; G. Brunner, “Elections in the Soviet Union,” [in:] *Elections in Socialist States*, ed. R.K. Furtak, New York 1990, pp. 20–52; M.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 1965; T.H. Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR*, Princeton 1979, pp. 71–154; V. Zaslavsky, J. Brym, “The functions of elections in the USSR,” *Soviet Studies* 30, 1978, no. 3, pp. 362–371.

<sup>27</sup> As Wojciech Sokół wrote on this subject: “From a technical and legal perspective a large number of institutional solutions adopted by the communist states positively differed from analogous regulations applied by stable democracies. The voting hours were long and electoral procedures ensured an easy access to election commissions, which were also set up aboard the ships or in hospitals, complete with portable ballot boxes in order to reach the disabled. However, elections held in the communist-controlled world were governed not only by formal regulations, but also by informal solutions, especially a highly effective verification of nomination, as well as both positive and negative stimuli for voting” (W. Sokół, “Systemy wyborcze w Polsce Ludowej — uwarunkowania, mechanizmy i konsekwencje polityczne,” [in:] *Wybory i referenda w PRL*, eds. S. Ligarski, M. Siedziako, Szczecin 2014, p. 28). See also: M. Siedziako, “Mechanizmy kontroli PZPR nad składem Sejmu PRL (1952–1985),” [in:] *Partia, państwo, społeczeństwo*, ed. K. Rokicki, Warszawa 2016, pp. 157–160.

party committee. Election administrators were selected with special care, and those assuming such responsibilities in a district had to seek an approval of the provincial party leadership, while in a constituency the approval had to come from the Central Committee. Administrator nominees had to be both “experienced” and “politically unfaltering.”<sup>28</sup> The Public Security Office played an important role in their selection and “politically uncertain” individuals were removed from the commissions. The final composition of such bodies was mostly dominated by the PZPR activists.<sup>29</sup> Even though there were no such formal regulations, the provincial committees of the PZPR gave instructions on the overall activities of electoral commissions.<sup>30</sup>

In order to run a successful electoral campaign, the PZPR authorities had to make sure that also the FN committees were composed only of communist-approved members. Final decisions on the personal composition of the National Election Committee (Polish: Ogólnopolski Komitet Wyborczy, hereafter: OKW) for the FN were made during a session of the Secretariat of the Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee of the PZPR on August 25, 1952.<sup>31</sup> Bolesław Bierut became its chairman and his deputies were Wiktor Kłosiewicz (chairman of the Central Council of Trade Unions), Władysław Kowalski (president of the ZSL), and Jan Dembowski (president of the Polish Academy of Sciences). Besides, the OKW for the FN comprised several dozen people who, solely for propagandistic reasons, represented different social as well as professional groups, regime organizations, and others.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to what the Polish communists claimed, the FN was never a platform for agreement and cooperation between various groups, but rather a screen that covered yet another piece of a reality in which the one and only decision-making body remained, in fact, the PZPR, responsible for both the FN’s election manifesto and its political activities.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereafter referred to as AAN), Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (hereafter referred to as KC PZPR), sign. V/23, Notatka w sprawie organizacji wyborów do Sejmu, 26 July 1952, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> T. Wolsza, A. Zaćmiński, *Ludzie listy piszą... Referendum i wybory do Sejmu w korespondencji Polaków (1946–1952)*, Bydgoszcz 2013, pp. 209–210; T. Rochatka, “Aparat bezpieczeństwa w Wielkopolsce a wybory do sejmiku w 1952 roku,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 18, 2011, no. 2, p. 286; R. Skobelski, “‘Kto pragnie Polski silnej i szczęśliwej — głosuje na kandydatów Frontu Narodowego’. Wybory do Sejmu PRL z 26 października 1952 roku,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 28, 2016, no. 2, p. 456.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance AAN, Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza w Warszawie (hereafter referred to as PKW), sign. 5, Sprawozdanie z pracy Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej za okres od 1 X–22 X b.r., [undated document], p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/17, Protokół nr 189 posiedzenia Sekretariatu BO, 25 August 1952, [unpaginated].

<sup>32</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/23, Skład Ogólnopolskiego Komitetu Wyborczego Frontu Narodowego, [undated document], p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> See: AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/22, Załącznik nr 1 do protokołu nr 181, 29 July 1952, p. 21.

Among the lower ranks of the FN structure, in a way similar to electoral commissions, special trust was required from chairmen of the FN committees, who had to fill in a eight-page-long personal form and provide a positive reference obtained from the local office of Public Security.<sup>34</sup> Chairmen were approved of by the appropriate party authorities (either the provincial or district committees). The day-to-day running of the electoral campaign was left to teams of the PZPR representatives who had joined the FN structures.<sup>35</sup>

The final step intended to equip the PZPR with total control over the composition of the prospective Sejm was to make lists of candidates for MPs. It was at this stage of organizing the process that decisions were made as to who would go to the Sejm. Although both the constitution and the electoral system specified which bodies could put forward candidates for MPs, in practice such candidates were selected during meetings of the FN committees.<sup>36</sup> Any independent initiative was out of the question. The party leadership had planned in advance that candidates selected during the FN meetings would have to be singled out beforehand for inclusion into a “bloc,” in which the so-called allied factions were fully controlled by the PZPR.<sup>37</sup> Decisions on the personal composition of the Sejm of first term in office were made long before the election day. The Secretariat of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the PZPR addressed such issues in two sessions, on September 5 and 11, 1952. During the latter, a list of candidates put forward for MPs was analyzed and instructions which regulated the selection process all over the country were adopted.<sup>38</sup>

Under such circumstances, any attempts at putting forward independent candidates, i.e. citizens who enjoyed local popularity and were not mere figureheads on FN slates but truly represented local communities, proved fruitless. An interesting case study here is that of Czesław Skowroński, a veterinarian from Żychlin. In a letter sent to the National FN Committee by leaders from several dozen villages, he was described as “a man fully dedicated and well known among smallholding and medium-holding peasants in cooperatives and state collective farms, a man respected in our area for his moral and political codes, an honest and

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<sup>34</sup> J. Sudoł, *Wybory do Sejmu z dnia 26 X 1952 r. w województwie bydgoskim*, [MA thesis, Kazimierz Wielki Academy in Bydgoszcz], Bydgoszcz 2003, p. 47 [typescript in author's private collection].

<sup>35</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/23, Notatka w sprawie organizacji wyborów do Sejmu, 26 July 1952, pp. 57–59; AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/22, Wytyczne dla KW i KP w sprawie przygotowań do kampanii wyborczej (projekt), August 1952, p. 322.

<sup>36</sup> J. Olejniczak, *Wybory do Sejmu i rad narodowych w województwie bydgoskim w okresie tzw. małej stabilizacji (1956–1970)*, Toruń 2010, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/21, Notatka do projektu ordynacji wyborczej, [undated document], [unpaginated].

<sup>38</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/17, Protokół nr 191 posiedzenia Sekretariatu BP, 5 September 1952, [unpaginated]; AAN, KC PZPR, sign. V/17, Protokół nr 192 posiedzenia Sekretariatu BP, 11 September 1952, [unpaginated].

righteous citizen of People's Poland, who for his struggle with the German occupier was granted the Medal of Freedom and Victory, and the post of a chairman of the PTA in the 11-year-old school in Żychlin".<sup>39</sup> Suggesting that his name should be included on the FN slate, the authors of the letter claimed that "everyone will gladly vote for such a candidate in droves."<sup>40</sup> Skowroński enjoyed immense popularity among the locals — yet even so he did not seem trustworthy enough for the communist authorities to become an MP.<sup>41</sup>

The composition of the Sejm, formally chosen on October 26, 1952, was thus decided long before the election day. Supposing a specific person appeared on the FN slate, in a situation where there were no opponents their being "elected" was in fact certain — getting enough support from over a half the voters within a constituency was but a formality. The communist authorities called for casting ballots openly and with "no crossings-out." In order to support the FN slate, voters did not even have to cross anything on the ballot paper. Massive participation in the election process (it was the voter turnout — in 1952 at the level of 95.03% — that would each time indicate the electoral success of the PZPR and its "allies") was ensured with ubiquitous propaganda and large-scale repressive measures. In order to be able to declare the results that the authorities had wished for, turnout figures were also raised through various forms of electoral fraud.

Various election reports drawn up by district commissions and preserved to this day offer more than a shred of evidence for tampering with the official election results. Very often such report forms were filled in with a pencil,<sup>42</sup> which rendered electoral fraud so much easier. Some reports show signs of the original

<sup>39</sup> AAN, Biuro Ogólnopolskiego Komitetu Frontu Narodowego (hereafter referred to as BOKFN), sign. 86, List do Centralnego Frontu Narodowego w Warszawie, 6 October 1952, pp. 54–56.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Archiwum danych o posłach," Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, <http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/ArchAll2.nsf> (accessed: 29.12.2021). On the bottom-up selection of candidates irrespective of the local party authorities see also: R. Skobelski, "Kto pragnie Polski silnej i szczęśliwej — głosuje na kandydatów Frontu Narodowego," p. 455.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance: AAN, PKW, sign. 99, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 24 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 26 October 1952, pp. 50–51; AAN, PKW, sign. 106, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 78 w okręgu wyborczym nr 8, 26 October 1952, pp. 160–161; AAN, PKW, sign. 115, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 31 w okręgu wyborczym nr 17, 26 October 1952, pp. 64–65; AAN, PKW, sign. 134, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 2 w Pogrodziu w okręgu wyborczym nr 36 w Gdańsku, 26 October 1952, pp. 6–7; AAN, PKW, sign. 138, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 41 w okręgu wyborczym nr 40, 26 October 1952, pp. 86–87; AAN, sign. 142, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 66 w okręgu wyborczym nr 44, 26 October 1952, pp. 134–135; AAN, PKW, sign. 149, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 130 w okręgu wyborczym nr 51, 26 October 1952, pp. 259–260; AAN, PKW, sign. 156, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 54 w okręgu wyborczym nr 58, 26 October 1952, pp. 110–111.

figures being erased and replaced with new statistics.<sup>43</sup> A relatively common practice included decreasing the number of eligible voters in the prepared documents. In some cases, those particular changes were initialled by a commission member,<sup>44</sup> yet, a large number of documents with new figures written over the erased ones are missing any signatures or annotations.<sup>45</sup> Many reports show annotations that are signs of pressure exerted on the voters, e.g. detailed information on the reasons for not showing up at the polling station, even after the canvassers' intervention (at times such absentees were identified by name and surname).<sup>46</sup> Traces of similar practices can be found in the documentary evidence from other elections of the communist era. Although over time they became fewer in number (e.g. pencils were used less and less and changes in the election reports were initialled more frequently), but a thorough analysis of the archives still lets us discover them in each Sejm election before 1989.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance: AAN, PKW, sign. 99, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 24 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 26 October 1952, pp. 50–51; AAN, PKW, sign. 99, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 288 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 26 October 1952, p. 580.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance: AAN, PKW, sign. 99, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 192 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 26 October 1952, pp. 384–385; AAN, PKW, sign. 99, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 302 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 26 October 1952, pp. 608; AAN, PKW, sign. 115, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 18 w okręgu wyborczym nr 17, 26 October 1952, p. 39; AAN, PKW, sign. 134, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 80 w okręgu wyborczym nr 36, 26 October 1952, p. 164; AAN, PKW, sign. 138, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 35 w okręgu wyborczym nr 40, 26 October 1952, p. 73.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance: AAN, PKW, sign. 99, Protokół głosowania sporządzony w dniu 27 X 1952 r. przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 232 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 26 October 1952, p. 464; AAN, PKW, sign. 106, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 69 w okręgu wyborczym nr 8, 26 October 1952, p. 142; AAN, PKW, sign. 138, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 23 w okręgu wyborczym nr 40, 26 October 1952, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance: AAN, PKW, sign. 134, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 113 w okręgu wyborczym nr 36, 26 October 1952, p. 233; AAN, PKW, sign. 106, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 68 w okręgu wyborczym nr 8, 26 October 1952, p. 141; AAN, PKW, sign. 115, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 15 w okręgu wyborczym nr 17, 26 October 1952, p. 33; AAN, PKW, sign. 138, Załącznik do protokołu głosowania sporządzonego przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 36 w okręgu wyborczym nr 40, 27 October 1952, p. 77; AAN, PKW, sign. 156, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 2 w okręgu wyborczym nr 58, 26 October 1952, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> AAN, PKW, sign. 170, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 81 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 21 January 1957, pp. 162–163; AAN, PKW, sign. 174, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 148 w okręgu wyborczym nr 5, 20 January 1957, pp. 30–31; AAN, PKW, sign. 245, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 48 w okręgu wyborczym nr 76, 20 January 1957, pp. 98–99; AAN, PKW, 452, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 17

### 3. Sejm elections in the following years and their social perception

Mechanisms adopted by the communist leadership during the 1952 election became an integral part of the catalogue of practices used in the Polish voting process in the following years, despite profound changes to the political reality connected with the collapse of Stalinism in the mid-1950s<sup>48</sup> and subsequent modifications of the electoral code in 1956, 1976 and 1985.<sup>49</sup> Even though, since 1957, more names were placed on the slates of the Front of National Unity (Polish: Front Jedności Narodu, hereafter: FJN; a new name for the 1952 FN) than the total number of seats, such names still originated from the same political agenda. The overall situation did not change either in the 1980s, when the FJN was

w okręgu wyborczym nr 15, 16 April 1961, pp. 36–37; AAN, PKW, sign. 452, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 13 w okręgu wyborczym nr 15, 16 April 1961, pp. 168–169. AAN, PKW, sign. 454, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 79 w okręgu wyborczym nr 17, 16 April 1961, pp. 212–213; Archiwum Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (hereafter referred to as APRP), Kancelaria Rady Państwa (hereafter referred to as KRP), folder [without a signature] titled: Protokoły głosowania okręgowej i obwodowych komisji wyborczych, Okręg nr 1 — m. st. Warszawa, Protokół głosowania sporządzony przez Obwodową Komisję Wyborczą nr 150 w okręgu wyborczym nr 1, 19 March 1972, [unpaginated]; APRP, KRP, folder without a signature, titled: “Materiały terenowe. Protokoły głosowania okręgowych i obwodowych komisji wyborczych. Okręg nr 2 — woj. st. Warszawskie,” Protokół głosowania na posłów w obwodzie nr 176 w okręgu wyborczym nr 2, 21 March 1976, p. 8; APRP, KRP, folder without a signature, titled: “Materiały terenowe. Protokoły głosowania obwodowych komisji wyborczych. Okręg nr 1 — Warszawa-Śródmieście,” Protokół głosowania na posłów w okręgu nr 1 obwodzie 113, 23 March 1980, [unpaginated]; APRP, KRP, folder without a signature, titled: “Materiały terenowe. Protokoły głosowania obwodowych komisji wyborczych. Okręg nr 63 — Szczecin,” Protokół głosowania na posłów w okręgu nr 63 obwodzie 25, 23 March 1980, [unpaginated]; APRP, KRP, folder without a signature, titled: “Protokoły głosowania z okręgowej i krajowej listy wyborczej (Warszawa-Śródmieście), okręg nr 1,” Protokół głosowania w obwodzie [nr 53] na posłów wybieranych z okręgowej listy wyborczej, 14 October 1985, pp. 146–147. For further information see: M. Siedziako, “Manipulacje i fałszerstwa wyborcze w wyborach do Sejmu PRL (1952–1985),” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 27, 2016, no. 1, pp. 112–139; K. Kolasa, “Mechanizmy fałszerstw wyborczych w latach osiemdziesiątych XX wieku na terenie województwa miejskiego łódzkiego w świetle solidarnościowej prasy bezdebitowej,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 11, 2007, no. 1, pp. 359–371.

<sup>48</sup> For further information on the sense of this breakthrough in the history of the People’s Republic of Poland see, among others: J. Eisler, “Jakim państwem była PRL w latach 1956–1976,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 10, 2006, no. 2, pp. 11–23; B. Brzostek, M. Zaremba, “Polska 1956–1976: w poszukiwaniu paradygmatu,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 10, 2006, no. 2, pp. 25–37; P. Machcewicz, “Zmiana czy kontynuacja? Polska przed i po Październiku ’56,” [in:] *PRL. Trwanie i zmiana*, pp. 119–158; K. Kersten, “Rok 1956 — przełom? Kontynuacja? Punkt zwrotny?,” *Polska 1944/1945–1989. Studia i Materiały* 3, 1997, pp. 7–18; J. Kochanowski, *Rewolucja między październikowa. Polska 1956–1957*, Kraków 2017.

<sup>49</sup> See: W. Sokół, “Systemy wyborcze w Polsce Ludowej — uwarunkowania, mechanizmy i konsekwencje polityczne,” pp. 23–44; M. Siedziako, “Partia wybiera, społeczeństwo głosuje. Jak wyłaniano Sejm PRL (1952–1985),” [in:] *Elity komunistyczne w Polsce*, eds. M. Szumiło, M. Żukowski, Warszawa–Lublin 2015, pp. 194–197.

replaced by the Patriotic Movement for National Rebirth (Polish: Patriotyczny Ruch Odrodzenia Narodowego) and in 1985 two candidates were obligatorily vying for every seat. Ballots cast with “no crossings-out” (voters were encouraged to do so in every election campaign) were still considered valid and counted in favour of candidates included on district slates in top positions (the so-called mandate seats). In the years 1957 to 1985 there was only one case (Nowy Sącz, 1957)<sup>50</sup> when a candidate occupying a mandate seat did not get elected. Political composition of the chamber at this time, as arranged by the PZPR leadership, changed only slightly,<sup>51</sup> as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Political composition of the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland in the years 1952 to 1985

Political affiliation	Sejm term in office								
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX
PZPR	273	239	256	255	255	255	261	261	245
ZSL	90	118	117	117	117	117	113	113	106
SD	25	39	39	39	39	39	37	37	35
Non-party	37	63	48	49	49	49	49	49	74
Total	425	459	460	460	460	460	460	460	460

Source: own study based on: *Historia sejmu polskiego*, ed. A. Ajnenkiel, vol. 3: *Polska Ludowa*, eds. J. Zakrzewska, T. Mołdawa, Warszawa 1989, p. 304; “Archiwum danych o posłach,” Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, <http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/ArchA12.nsf> (accessed: 29.12.2021).

The very last election in communist-ruled Poland, held in June 1989, was thus truly ground-breaking. It followed the compromise between the official authorities and the so-called constructive group of the opposition under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa and was agreed on as part of the arrangements during the Round Table talks. This time, the competition was for 35% of the Sejm seats, as well as for all the seats in the newly-reestablished Senate. A notable fact is that even though it was the first time in many years that the Polish citizens could make an actual choice at the polling stations, very few of them took advantage of this right: the

<sup>50</sup> On the unique Sejm elections of January '57 in Poland see, among others: R. Skobelski, *Powiew demokracji. Wybory do Sejmu PRL z 1957 roku*, Warszawa 2021; *Kampania wyborcza i wybory do Sejmu 20 stycznia 1957*, ed. P. Machcewicz, Warszawa 2000; Z. Pelczynski, “Poland 1957,” [in:] *Elections Abroad*, ed. D.E. Butler, London 1959, pp. 119–179; M. Siedziako, “Kampania wyborcza i wybory do Sejmu PRL w 1957 roku: stan badań, aktualne ustalenia i perspektywy badawcze,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 28, 2016, no. 2, pp. 279–310 and the literature pointed to in that article.

<sup>51</sup> For further information on the Sejm elections in Poland during this period see, among others: M. Siedziako, *Bez wyboru. Głosowania do Sejmu PRL (1952–1989)*, Warszawa 2018; *Wybory i referenda w PRL*; J. Olejniczak, *Wybory do Sejmu i rad narodowych w województwie bydgoskim w okresie tzw. małej stabilizacji (1956–1970)*; Z. Romanow, *Demokracja ludowa w praktyce. Wybory do Sejmu i rad narodowych w województwie koszalińskim w latach 1950–1975*, Słupsk 2020.

voter turnout in the first ballot (4th June) reached only 62.32%, in the run off (18th June) the figure was dramatically lower — merely 25.5%. The Solidarity candidates won all the 161 seats in the Sejm and 99 out of 100 seats in the Senate, so the communist camp failed spectacularly. And although June 4, 1989 did not mark the collapse of communism in Poland, it was undoubtedly one of the key events in the process of dismantling the communist regime in the country.<sup>52</sup>

Although the actual participation in the communist-era elections in Poland was in fact rather massive (various acts of electoral fraud mentioned above could only raise the figures — illustrated in Table 2 — by a dozen or so percent at most), it seems the Polish citizens were well aware of their true character. Certainly, some people were of the opinion that going to the polls was their civic duty and many accepted the social-political system around them and supported the communist authorities, yet there was a commonly shared belief that the act of voting had, in fact, a ritual character. A great many Poles who agreed to take part in communist electoral rituals were at the same time masking their true opinions of them. An expression of this way of thinking was, for instance, a letter sent by an anonymous “unhappy member of the PZPR” to the editorial board of the propagandist radio broadcast *Fala* ’49 during the 1952 election campaign. The author, making references to voting experience of 1946 and 1947, made an assumption the upcoming election would be nothing more than a comedy done in order to show foreign observers that in Poland, authorities held power as a result of people’s choices. In his opinion, only 5 to 7% of the Polish citizens eligible for voting were truly supporting the communists, but the results had been secured by the authorities: “After the election you will, once more, be bragging exultantly in your tabloids over those 98.3%, or some similar figure, who voted for you.”<sup>53</sup>

Members of the party leadership and representatives of the broadly-defined elite, especially those independent of the ruling bodies, were also aware of the true meaning of such elections. In 1976 Mieczysław Rakowski — an editor-in-chief of the communist-affiliated weekly *Polityka*, later the last Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Poland and First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR, an MP in the years 1972 to 1989 — wrote in his diary: “On March 21 an election to the Sejm was carried out. Public interest was exceptionally slight — people know very well it is but a ritual in which one must take part. The ruling communists know about it too and one should be thankful, I reckon, for they did not make

<sup>52</sup> See: A. Dudek, *Reglamentowana rewolucja. Rozkład dyktatury komunistycznej w Polsce 1988–1990*, Kraków 2014, p. 295. For further information on the Polish elections of June ’89 see, among others: *ibid.*, pp. 245–295; P. Codogni, *Wybory czerwcowe 1989 r. U progu przemiany ustrojowej*, Warszawa 2012; A. Małkiewicz, *Wybory czerwcowe 1989*, Warszawa 1994; *Wybory 1989. Dokumenty strony solidarnościowo-opozycyjnej*, vol. 1: *Kwatera Główna*, vol. 2: *Regiony*, ed. I. Słodkowska, Warszawa 2009–2010.

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous letter signed as “Nieszczęśliwy członek PZPR” [An unhappy member of the PZPR], postal stamp from Laskowice, Bydgoszcz Voivodeship, 28 August 1952, [in:] *Ludzie listy piszq...*, p. 238.

Table 2. Voter turnout during the elections to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland in the years 1952 to 1985 according to official figures

Year	Voter turnout (percentage)
1952	95.03
1957	94.14
1961	94.83
1965	96.62
1969	97.61
1972	97.94
1976	98.27
1980	98.87
1985	78.86

Source: own study based on announcements published in Polish Monitor.

the propaganda machine work at full throttle during the so-called pre-election campaign.”<sup>54</sup> Stefan Kisielewski, a conservative writer and publicist connected with the Kraków-based weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* — which was carefully distancing itself from the party viewpoint — remarked on this poignantly after the election in the same year:

I have seen it so many times before and yet the thing still seems both unthinkable and impossible. They show on TV how the whole villages are going to the polls to the tunes played by small village bands, how the intellectuals are voting, and actors, etc., they repeat over and over again that what you are voting for is for a “better tomorrow,” for the future of Poland, for this and that, but no one will mumble a single word under their breath about what everyone is aware of: that this is no election, but a humiliating comedy, as candidates are already selected and appointed.<sup>55</sup>

Kisielewski had been a member of the Sejm himself for two terms (from 1957) and collaborated with the circle of Catholic MPs known as “Znak.” He resigned from running for yet another term in 1965 as he concluded the circle had no influence whatsoever on politics.<sup>56</sup>

Monitoring specific circles and social groups, the Security Service reported critical opinions of the way the elections to the Sejm was organized practically in every electoral campaign. Such criticism naturally came from various independent or opposition groups, but also from the PZPR ranks, as well as other regime-related organizations. Some expressions of disapproval concerning electoral practices typical of the People's Republic of Poland can also be found in

<sup>54</sup> M.F. Rakowski, *Dzienniki polityczne 1976–1978*, Warszawa 2002, p. 52.

<sup>55</sup> S. Kisielewski, *Dzienniki*, Warszawa 2001, p. 642.

<sup>56</sup> M. Strzelecka, *Między minimalizmem a maksymalizmem. Dylematy ideowe Stanisława Stom- my i Janusza Zabłockiego*, Toruń 2015, p. 234.

numerous letters sent by citizens to various institutions. Sometimes the question was asked verbatim: why go through the entire election process, which is expensive, knowing that it is nothing more than fiction?<sup>57</sup>

Numerous critical opinions reached the party leadership during the consultations concerning the project of a new electoral code for the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland in 1985.<sup>58</sup> For instance, in his letter to the Chancellery of the State Council, Piotr Frendowicz from Toruń wrote that the Polish people wanted to make an actual difference and choose, rather than simply vote for, the candidates as had been the case for the past forty years. He also added that supposing the elections were to be held in accordance with the same rules, there was no use running "this old bandwagon again" and wasting envelopes that were so hard to come by.<sup>59</sup>

An anonymous voter from Gliwice wrote:

I sincerely wish for the Sejm elections to be truly democratic. It is especially vital to eliminate the shortcomings and lack of respect for the overall electoral code which were common during the elections to municipal councils [i.e. the 1984 elections to national councils — M.S.] and included acts such as: voter intimidation, casting ballots in lieu of voters who failed to turn up at the polling station, and others. It is widely known they happened on many occasions.<sup>60</sup>

What the author suggested was, among others, to ban any forms of voter intimidation, to put an end to the canvassers' visits to private apartments, and to oblige all the voters at a given polling station to abide by the rule of secret ballot (i.e. to make use of voting booths).<sup>61</sup>

Critical opinions of the electoral code in the People's Republic of Poland, expressed as part of the above-mentioned consultations, were also formed by people who considered themselves supporters of socialism in Poland. Władysław Skobelski from Gdańsk identified himself as one of those and added that he had fought for "consolidating the communist rule," so he felt permitted to speak his mind and wished to be heard. His remarks were rather balanced. In a letter sent to several institutions, he wrote, among others, that:

<sup>57</sup> For further information see: T. Danilecki, *Między zaangażowaniem, przystosowaniem i sprzeciwem. Postawy mieszkańców województwa białostockiego wobec wyborów powszechnych w latach 1957–1969*, Białystok–Warszawa 2019; T. Danilecki, "Formy oporu społecznego związanego z wyborami powszechnymi w Polsce w okresie 'małej stabilizacji' — zarys problematyki," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 19, 2012, no. 1, pp. 107–134; M. Siedziako, "Partia wybiera, społeczeństwo głośnie," pp. 214–218.

<sup>58</sup> For further information see: M. Siedziako, "Społeczna percepcja wyborów w PRL w świetle listów nadesłanych do władz podczas konsultacji projektu nowej ordynacji wyborczej do Sejmu w 1985 roku," *Dzieje Najnowsze* 50, 2018, no. 4, pp. 181–200.

<sup>59</sup> APRP, KRP, folder without a signature, titled: "Opinie indywidualne dot. 'Założeń do projektu ustawy Ordynacja wyborcza do Sejmu PRL', 1985 r., teczka 3," Letter from Piotr Frendowicz from Toruń to the State Council Office, 18 February 1985, [unpaginated].

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Letter signed "Wyborca z Gliwic" [A voter from Gliwice] to the State Council Office, [undated document], [unpaginated].

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

one's duty to cross out one's candidates on election slates provides an opportunity for a real choice. From among the running candidates the voters must choose their own members of the Sejm, in whom they are going to put their trust. It is true that such a choice will be limited, but at least it will be a choice of one out of two. Casting a blank ballot is not an act of choice, but most often an act of resignation. Almost all of my friends are of the opinion that even though they might cross a name out, it will not make a difference as the official election results will be far from true. If we fail to talk voters into believing that our election to the Sejm is really democratic and the official results are true, they will remain resigned and indifferent to everything that is taking place in the country, nobody will get them to work more efficiently, to support an election manifesto. [...] One must bear in mind the fundamental truth that even the best people who end up in the Sejm as a result of non-democratic elections will not be able to bring the country out of a crisis, because they will not win enough trust of the society; however, the same people elected in a democratic fashion can perform miracles — encourage the society to hard and efficient work that will help achieve prosperity.<sup>62</sup>

Since 1980, the communist opposition in the People's Republic of Poland would regularly launch anti-election campaigns (targeting elections to both the Sejm and the national councils). People were encouraged to boycott the elections, acts of electoral manipulation committed by the communist authorities were revealed to the public, independent efforts were made to measure voter turnout.<sup>63</sup> All of this contributed to the fact that the electoral "successes" of the communist rulers in the 1980s were significantly smaller compared to those from earlier decades, which was especially plain to see if one focused on the dramatically low (as for the communist-controlled reality) voter turnout: 74.93% during the election to national councils in 1984, 78.87% during the Sejm election in 1985, and a mere 55.01% in 1988, when the composition of national councils were decided upon for the last time.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> APRP, KRP, folder without a signature, titled: "Opinie indywidualne dot. 'Założeń do projektu ustawy Ordynacja wyborcza do Sejmu PRL', 1985 r., teczką 1," Letter from Władysław Skobelski to the State Council Office, Sejm Commission for Legislation, National Council of the Patriotic Movement for National Rebirth and other institutions, 22 January 1985, [unpaginated].

<sup>63</sup> For further information see, among others: S. Ligarski, "Społeczeństwo polskie wobec wyborów do sejmu w 1976 i 1980 roku," [in:] *Opozycja demokratyczna w PRL w latach 1976–1981*, eds. W. Polak, J. Kufel, P. Ruchlewski, Gdańsk 2012, pp. 328–348; K. Dworaczek, "Opozycja wobec wyborów do Sejmu PRL w 1980 r.," [in:] *Wybory i referenda w PRL*, pp. 665–683; K. Brzechczyn, "Wybory do Sejmu i rad narodowych w programie i myśli politycznej NSZZ 'Solidarność' w latach 1980–1981," [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 658–704; G. Waligóra, "Bojkot wyborów w latach 1984–1985," [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 705–719; W. Polak, "Rysunki antywyborcze jako narzędzie propagandy antywyborczej w latach osiemdziesiątych," [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 721–736; J. Wąsowicz, "Nie pójdziemy na wybory! Akcje bojkotu wyborów organizowane przez młodzieżowe organizacje niezależne w Gdańsku w latach 1984–1988," [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 737–762; W. Polak, "Bojkot wyborów do sejmu i rad narodowych w regionie toruńskim w latach 1984–1988," [in:] *O Polskę wolną! O Polskę solidarną! NSZZ Solidarność w latach 1980–1989*, eds. W. Polak, S. Galij-Skarbińska, V. Kmiecik, M. Białkowski, J. Kufel, P. Ruchlewski, Gdańsk 2011, pp. 193–207.

<sup>64</sup> J. Raciborski, *Rytuał, plebiscyt czy wybory? Socjologiczna analiza wyborów do rad narodowych w 1988 roku*, Warszawa 1989, p. 140.

## Conclusions

According to the British political scientist Alex Pravda, elections made the communist rule legitimate in at least two ways. Firstly, universal support of a single slate where communist candidates formed the majority was to express the society's trust in the communist party. Secondly, by going to the polls the majority of citizens showed their acceptance of the overall political system at the core of which stood the communist party.<sup>65</sup> Argumentation of this sort, even though applied by the authorities of the states within the Soviet Bloc, one of which was Poland, cannot be accepted as a comprehensive description of their reality,<sup>66</sup> for what is missing from it is a series of crucial elements, such as pressure exerted by the communist regime on its citizens or the lack of an alternative choice during the elections.

In the late 1970s, the sociologists Victor Zaslavsky and Robert J. Brym pointed to the fact that elections were becoming less and less effective at making the communist rule legitimate both in the Soviet Union and its satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe. In their opinion, reforms of the electoral codes in Poland and Hungary, by which election slates started to be composed of more candidates than the number of seats,<sup>67</sup> were introduced as an attempt to restore their legitimating quality to the elections. And yet, all they did was create an illusory choice, of which people who took part in this reformed version of socialist elections were well aware; so such reforms can hardly be considered successful. When the Polish communists were making new attempts at electoral reforms in the 1980s, the legitimating quality of such elections suffered more and more, until the total collapse of communism in the country, to which the partly free parliamentary election of 1989 materially contributed.

No doubt the intention of the communist authorities in both Poland and other states of the former Eastern Bloc was to guarantee the legitimating quality of the elections. Following the classical typology of Max Weber, the three types of legitimization are: traditional legitimization (which stems from time-honoured customs and values held high in a society, exemplified by hereditary monarchies), charismatic legitimization (which comes from a personal position and high evaluation of the leader's characteristics by the ruled population), and legal legitimization. Weber argued that the last type refers to a common belief in the superiority of a legal system with which both the ruled and the rulers must comply. The latter become accepted by the society and rule in a legal manner on condition that they are elected in accordance with the letter of the law and they follow the law throughout

<sup>65</sup> A. Pravda, "Elections in Communist Party states," p. 50.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. G. Brunner, "Legitimacy doctrines and legitimization procedures in East European systems," [in:] *Political Legitimation in Communist States*, eds. T.H. Rigby, F. Fehér, New York 1982, pp. 38–42.

<sup>67</sup> V. Zaslavsky, J. Brym, "The functions of elections in the USSR," pp. 366–367.

their rule.<sup>68</sup> Compared with the findings presented in this article, the observations above also raise some objections. Leaving aside the “illegal” genesis of the communist rule in both the People’s Republic of Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War, numerous objections must be raised in this respect, referring to the ruling communists treating the letter of the law instrumentally. As the PZPR organized and managed the voting process, it was informal practices not corresponding with the electoral code (e.g. the issue of registering a single slate in every election) that took priority.

Writing on political support as a method of making a rule legitimate in modern political systems, David Beetham distinguished two kinds of such support: electoral support and support of a mobilizing kind (i.e. the electoral and mobilizing legitimation). He stated that electoral support is based on two premises which are of key importance in liberal tradition: firstly, no one has the right to express their support in someone else’s stead (unless they were specifically authorized to do so); secondly, for such support to be granted with full awareness, it must come from a free choice between alternative states.<sup>69</sup> Taking Beetham’s concept into account, one can argue that the legitimating quality of elections held in both the People’s Republic of Poland and other states of the Soviet bloc was a comfortable façade similar to other components of the political system that was masking the omnipotent rule of the communist party.<sup>70</sup> Elections, lacking in their typical characteristics, were yet an element of the process of mobilizing legitimation, in which support was expressed through long-term mass activity of the citizens, who collaborated with the government in order to achieve certain objectives.<sup>71</sup>

To sum up, it can be assumed the most practical model of legitimating a rule, which can be connected with elections held in both the People’s Republic of Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War is mobilizing legitimation as discussed by Beetham.<sup>72</sup> It should be noted,

<sup>68</sup> M. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” [in:] M. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation; Politics as a Vocation*, transl. R. Livingstone, eds. D. Owen, T.B. Strong, Indianapolis–Cambridge 2004, p. 34.

<sup>69</sup> D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, 2nd ed., Basingstoke–New York 2013, pp. 151–152.

<sup>70</sup> In a similar fashion, the legitimizing quality of elections for the political system of the People’s Republic of Poland was regarded by Wojciech Sokół. “Legitimizing quality of elections — he wrote — made sense for the communist authorities on the brink of a new system. However, the ways in which both the 1946 referendum and the 1947 election were conducted, as well as the official results, made the effect of the legitimizing quality much weaker. Later on, as the system became more solid after 1947, the relevance of elections in terms of their legitimizing function decreased significantly. Even though lots of either organizational or propaganda efforts were made every time to provide extra impetus for an election campaign, it was fictitious character of such elections that limited their effectiveness as a legitimizing tool. After the 1947 election and breaking up the opposition, the communist authorities were less concerned about acting legally and more about the mobilizing quality of elections” (W. Sokół, *Legitymizacja systemów politycznych*, Lublin 1997, p. 176).

<sup>71</sup> D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, p. 152.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 179–190.

however, that citizens of those satellite states were separated from making any real political decisions and, at the same time, encouraged to take part in general elections through the use of varied methods, including repressive measures. On the one hand, it must be admitted that this policy was rather effective: massive participation was only slightly increased by different forms of electoral fraud. On the other hand, it can be stated that under such political circumstances the process of legitimating the communist rule through elections was as illusory as the choice faced by citizens going to the polls at that time.

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