

# FORMATION OF THE SUPREME SOVIET OF THE ESSR

## ELECTIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF ASSEMBLING

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### Introduction

In the Soviet Union, the Supreme Soviet was an immanent institution of the communist totalitarian state, and was supposed to represent the democratic basis of its political system. The fact that the name of the state was derived from the “soviets” rendered the formation of the soviets inevitable, although from the viewpoint of actual governance, there was no purpose for the Supreme Soviet as a quasi-parliament in the Soviet Union. According to the Constitution, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was the supreme authority of the state – the legislative body, with corresponding bodies in all Soviet Socialist Republics; in case of the Estonian SSR, it was respectively called the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR. The Supreme Soviet was portrayed as expressing the sovereign will of the people and representing the power belonging to the people.<sup>1</sup>

The Supreme Soviet had no actual power. Party organisations and the government informed it of the intentions of the communist party, which were to be cast in legal form by means of passing constitutional laws and normative acts. Despite the fact that the Supreme Soviet did not function as the highest authority of state, the “representative body of the people”, as the Supreme Soviet was often called in the USSR, was used to feign legitimacy of power, enforced by regularly held elections. With a functionally void representation of the people, this seemed an irrational practice, and yet the authorities were never tempted to abandon the elections even in the circumstances where all so-called representative bodies of the people, even those on the lowest rung in power hierarchy, the village soviets, were assembled in single-mandate electoral districts and the candidate had to be approved beforehand by the party organs of the respective level. Of course, this principle precluded any possibility of choice, and made the voters mere tools of the authorities with no say in the matter. Officially, it was possible to vote against the single candidate, to spoil the vote, or refrain from voting, but those alternatives were never quite realistic. It was a question of voting, not elections. In 1940, the ballot papers for the elections of the 2nd *Riigivolikogu* (a quasi-parliament formed by the occupying authorities of the Soviet Union in Estonia in July 1940) were officially called “voting papers”; according to the election regulations of the USSR, they were called “ballot papers” since 1941.<sup>2</sup> Proceeding from the documents that form the basis of the present paper, the term “elections” shall hereinafter be used.

The Communist Party did not just strive for holding elections, but also for a maximum attendance and ballot result. According to official statistics, the attendance of the Soviet elections, as well as the share of votes given in favour of the delegate, were very little under 100 per cent. It is hardly probable that such unrealistic results were found credible even in

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<sup>1</sup> The role of the Supreme Soviet in the political system of the USSR was stipulated in the Constitution. The jurisdiction and competence of the Supreme Soviets of the USSR republics was restated also in the constitutions of the respective union republics, as well as the USSR constitution.

<sup>2</sup> Ballot papers were used already in 1941, when elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR were organised in Estonia and some other SSRs. For more information, see: *NSVL Ülemnõukogu valimiste määrustik* (Regulations of the Elections of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR) (Tallinn: Poliitiline Kirjandus, 1940).

the USSR, but the Soviet elections were not a normal practice but a ritual act that was intended to demonstrate, both home and abroad, the unanimity of the Soviet people, their conscientious fulfilment of every citizen's duty and boundless trust in the authorities. Therefore, there was no need to bother about the originality of the election results, as according to the Jesuit principle, the end justified the means. In the eyes of the Soviet ideology, the elections in the Soviet Union were one of the crucial events, although meaningless, expensive, and inefficient.<sup>3</sup>

### General outline of the elections in the ESSR

In the Estonian ESSR, elections to 12 compositions of the Supreme Soviet were held in 1940–1990. Until 1978, elections were held with a four-year interval. The new Constitution of the ESSR, approved in 1978, prolonged the duration of the powers of the Supreme Soviet to 5 years, just as the new Constitution of the Soviet Union, adopted in 1977, had done with the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. In fact, there was a prolonged break between elections caused by the war in the 1940s, and there was an interval of more than six years between the elections of the first and the second Supreme Soviet (1940 and 1947 respectively).

Formally, the first elections of the Supreme Soviet were different from all subsequent ones, as they were organised by the occupying powers on 14–15 July 1940 under the pretext of the elections of the 2nd *Riigivolikogu* of the Republic of Estonia. On the same days, new representative bodies were formed also in Latvia and Lithuania, which had been occupied simultaneously with Estonia in June 1940. Nevertheless the elections held in July 1940 differed from the subsequent votings merely in form and not in content – even on the first occasion, the elections were organised according to the Soviet pattern. In Estonia a single bloc, Estonian Working People's Union (*Eesti Töötava Rahva Liit*, hereinafter the ETRL), formed by the occupying powers and presenting a platform approved by their representatives, was allowed to put forward candidates; the contesting candidacies were voided with one exception.<sup>4</sup> For reasons unknown, the farmer Jüri-Rajur Liivak was permitted to stand for elections. Still, not even he escaped harassment – on the eve of the elections, he was arrested on the pretext of forged bills of exchange and had to spend two weeks in prison. Indrek Paavle, who has written an exhaustive study on the 2nd *Riigivolikogu* elections of 1940, suggests that Liivak's candidacy was retained either in order to give the public an impression of actual elections taking place, or to demonstrate that the opposing candidate was a criminal.<sup>5</sup>

On all subsequent elections, putting up opposing candidates was out of the question. Also the name "Election Bloc of the ETRL" was abandoned for "the bloc of Communists and non-party candidates", which was used all over the Soviet Union. The content of the elections in ESSR started to change first at the end of the 1980s. On local level, as an experiment in 1987, the elections to the Regional Soviet of People's Deputies of Haapsalu were held in electoral

<sup>3</sup> Allan Puur ja Liivi Uuet, "Eesti NSV 1940.–1950. aastate valimiste materjalid rahvastikuloo allikana," (Materials of the 1940–1950 Elections of the Estonian SSR as Source of Historical Demography) *Tuna*, No 2 (2010): 61.

<sup>4</sup> Indrek Paavle, "Anneksioon," – Sõja ja rahu vahel, vol 2, Esimene punane aasta: okupeeritud Eesti julgeolekupoliitiline olukord sõja alguseni (Annexation – between War and Peace, vol II, The First Red Year: the Security Policy Situation in Occupied Estonia until the Outbreak of War), ed. by Meelis Maripuu and Enn Tarvel (Tallinn: S-Keskus, 2010), 132–137.

<sup>5</sup> Paavle, "Anneksioon," 136.

districts with several mandates – there were actually more candidates than mandates.<sup>6</sup> The first elections to the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR with several candidates per mandate were held in autumn 1988, when replacement elections for the mandates of drop-out delegates were declared.<sup>7</sup> The elections held in 1990 were different from all earlier elections. The electorate actually had a choice between several candidates and political platforms. In the new circumstances, the Communist Party was not successful, and many members decided to leave the party already before the restoration of Estonia's independence in August 1991.

**Table. Official results for the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR from 1940–1990<sup>8</sup>**

Composition	Duration of mandate	Time of elections	Election results (percentage)		Delegates elected
			Participation	Votes in favour	
1st	25 August 1940 – 16 February 1947	14.–15 July 1940 <sup>*</sup>	84.1	92.8%	80
2nd	16 February 1947 – 25 February 1951	16 February 1947	99.33	96.17	100
3rd	25 February 1951 – 27 February 1955	25 February 1951	99.89	99.85	115
4th	27 February 1955 – 15 March 1959	27 February 1955	99.81	99.82	125
5th	15 March 1959 – 17 March 1963	15 March 1959	99.59	99.53	125
6th	17 March 1963 – 19 March 1967	17 March 1963	99.55	99.53	178

<sup>6</sup> Decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR about holding the elections to the Soviets of the local delegates of the ESSR in several-mandate electoral districts by way of, 26 March 1987, ERA R-3.3.13360, 93–97.

<sup>7</sup> Decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR on the results of elections for the replacement of dropout delegates of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR, 15 November 1988, ERA R-3.3.14504, 1–3.

<sup>8</sup> Eerik-Juhan Truuväli, *Valimisõigus ja valimised Eestis 1917–1980*, 2. kd. *Nõukogude valimissüsteem ja rahvasaadikute koosseis 1940–1980* (Right to Vote and Elections in Estonia in 1917–1980; vol 2, the Soviet elections System and the Contingent of Delegates) (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1986), 120–121; *Rahva Hää*, 28. February 1985, No. 51.

<sup>\*</sup> Were organised as the elections of the 2nd *Riigivolikogu* of the Republic of Estonia. According to the Constitution of 1937/1938, the Estonian parliament (*Riigikogu*) consisted of two houses, the Council of State (*Riiginõukogu*) with 40 appointed members, and the lower house, *Riigivolikogu*, with 80 elected members. After the occupation of Estonia the *Riigikogu* was dissolved, and the occupying powers did not compose a new Council of State.

7th	19 March 1967 – 13 June 1971	19 March 1967	99.67	99.64	178
8th	13 June 1971 – 15 June 1975	13 June 1971	99.82	99.78	183
9th	15 June 1975 – 24 February 1980	15 June 1975	99.98	99.89	200
10th	24 February 1980 – 24 February 1985	24 February 1980	99.99	99.89	285
11th	24 February 1985 – 18 March 1990	24 February 1985	99.99	99.96	285
12th	18 March 1990 – 29 September 1992	18 March 1990	71	... <sup>9</sup>	105

In the USSR, the candidates were set up for elections in territorial electoral districts, proceeding from the number of inhabitants. The size of electoral districts, as well as the number of voters, varied considerably between the union republics. The electoral districts and electorates in the ESSR were among the smallest, and as the number of the Supreme Soviet delegates grew under the whole Soviet period, the representation figures were steadily declining. According to the Constitution of the ESSR, in 1940 one delegate was to be elected per 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> In reality, the representation figures differed from those fixed in the constitution, and the main problem was presented by the number of inhabitants who had right to vote. Owing to the distortions and inaccuracies of the Soviet statistics, the figures presented for population with the right to vote are not very reliable. In 1947, the Supreme Soviet formed after the elections had 100 members, and according to Erik-Juhan Truuväli, the number of voters was 804,172,<sup>11</sup> while the data published by Allan Puur and Liivi Uuet claims the figure to have been over 828 thousand. The latter includes about 100,000 soldiers who voted in closed polling stations.<sup>12</sup> In 1980, the number of voters according to Truuväli was 1,060,478 and 285 delegates were elected. Despite the ambivalence in the numbers on voter lists, the representation figures had declined from 8000 to 3720 between 1947 and 1980.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Elections with several candidates in several-mandate electoral districts.

<sup>10</sup> *Eesti Nõukogude Sotsialistliku Vabariigi Konstitutsioon (Põhiseadus)* (Constitution of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic) (Tallinn: Poliitiline Kirjandus, 1946), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Truuväli, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Puur and Uuet, 70.

<sup>13</sup> Truuväli, 120–121.

## Nomination and approval of candidates

In the USSR there were formal proceedings for nomination of candidates, not to be elaborated here. The allegations of Erik-Juhan Truuväli, expert on the Soviet electoral legislation, stating that “nomination of candidates and the discussion of their candidacy at electoral meetings was one of the central stages of the elections”<sup>14</sup> cannot be taken seriously. In fact, the nomination and approval of candidates was single-handedly decided by organs of the Communist Party. As well as the party nomenclatura, the delegates to the Supreme Soviet were approved in two stages: first on the level of the respective Soviet Republic and then on the USSR level. Documents related to the elections of the Supreme Soviet in 1963 testify to this kind of proceedings. From the letter to the Presidium<sup>15</sup> of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party (hereinafter the ECP CC) from the heads of two administrative departments of the ECP CC, addressing mistakes made in nominating the election candidates, it is evident that the city committees, as well as the party committees of the collective and state-owned farms,<sup>16</sup> proposed the Supreme Soviet candidates to the ECP CC, who in their turn sought the approval of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR (hereinafter the CPSU)<sup>17</sup>. Probably, it was only after Moscow’s approval that the ECP CC in turn approved the list of candidates by means of the ECP CC decision from 29 January 1963.<sup>18</sup> Only after those proceedings had been completed, the so-called nomination campaign addressed to the public was launched; although it was actually nothing but farce, as the delegates had been not only approved but also distributed between different electoral districts already. From the brief of Johannes Käbin, 1st Secretary of the ECP CC, to the CPSU CC from 14 February 1963, it appears that the nomination of candidates in Estonia was supposed to take place on 13–20 February.<sup>19</sup> The electors were to give their vote on 17 March.

That the approval of candidates actually followed the above procedure is also corroborated by an incident that occurred during the preparation for the elections of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR in 1955. On 25 January 1955, an appeal signed by Johannes Käbin, 1st Secretary of the ECP CC, was sent to the CPSU CC, asking for replacement of candidates in six electoral districts.<sup>20</sup> Most probably, compared to 1963, the ECP CC was under certain stress, as only a month was left before elections, and the registration of candidates was to be finished at least 20 days before.<sup>21</sup> Also an instruction course for party committees, arranged on 15 January 1955 and explaining where and how to nominate candidates for elections, indicates

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>15</sup> In 1952, the Politburo of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union was renamed to Presidium and respectively also the Bureaus of the Communist Party Central Committees of the union republics. In 1966 the old names were restored.

<sup>16</sup> In 1962, the district party committees were renamed to Collective and State Farm Production Administrations. The re-naming was revoked in the same year.

<sup>17</sup> “On Assumed Mistakes made in Selecting the Delegate Candidates to the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR,” Head of the Department of the Party Organisations of the Industry and Construction Enterprises of the ECP CC S. Tchernikov, and Head of the Department of the Party Organisations of the Agricultural Enterprises of the ECP CC V. Tint to the Presidium of the ECP CC on 16 February 1963, ERAF 1.4.2880, 11–14.

<sup>18</sup> “On the Composition of the Delegate Candidates to the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR,” Minutes of the Bureau of the ECP CC No. 8, 29 January 1963, 7, 24–44.

<sup>19</sup> Brief of the ECP CC to the Party Organisations Department of the CPSU CC on the progress of preparations for the elections of the local soviets and the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR, 14 February 1963, ERAF 1.280.21, 1–7.

<sup>20</sup> ECP CC appeal to CPSU CC, 25 January 1955, ERAF 1.159.251, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Reference to the election regulations valid from 1950, and their appendices. See Truuväli, 25–31.

that the question was not purely hypothetical. To be more specific, the USSR election regulations stipulated the final dates only for the registration, not for the nomination of candidates. From the information submitted by the ECP Tartu City Committee on 12 February 1955, referring to the instruction course that took place at the ECP CC, it is evident that meetings for the nomination of delegate candidates were held in Tartu from 18 to 20 January 1955.<sup>22</sup>

Proceeding from the Tartu example, we may assume that similar meetings were held all over Estonia. This indicates that by 25 January 1955, when the ECP CC presented an application for the replacement of six candidates, the party organisations, including the CPSU CC, must have had time to scrutinise the lists and approve them, in all probability the candidates had also been introduced to the public at election meetings. Despite shortage of time, the amendments requested from the CPSU CC proved not to be a mere formality. Moscow agreed that all six suggested candidates were to be replaced, but only five of the replacements were approved. The case shall be viewed in more detail below.

The approval of candidates by the party organisations can be documentally proved, but there is very little information about the procedure of selection that preceded the approval. To the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR, the candidates were selected on at least two levels: by the ECP CC and by the local party committees. In addition to the abovementioned brief from J. Käbin from 14 February 1963, and the letter dated 16 February of the same year, information about the selection of candidates can be found in the decision of the Presidium of the ECP CC from 19 February 1963, which was impelled by the letter of the heads of administrative departments of the ECP CC from 16 February 1963. This decision, criticising the local party committees for unwise choice of delegate candidates, reads: "The city, regional, as also the agricultural and industrial production committees did not recommend the best people – workers with exemplary production results, collective farmers, engineer-technicians, specialists of agriculture, researchers, representatives of art and culture – as candidates to the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR."<sup>23</sup> In the decision there is no reference to the political elite, the employees of the party organisations and the Soviets. Thus we can logically deduce that in the appointment of delegate candidates to the Supreme Soviet, the authority of the local party committees was limited. Probably, it was their task to find local candidates among workers, collective farmers and the intelligentsia, while it was the privilege of the ECP CC to find higher category candidates and distribute them to electoral district.

The appointment of candidates was directly preceded by background checks. The material composed during the preparatory stage of the elections of 1963 gives quite a comprehensive picture of the matter. From the ECP CC brief that has been mentioned several times above, it appears that 14 of the candidates proposed by the local party committees had to be replaced as a result of checks carried out by the ECP CC.<sup>24</sup> As an official decision was formulated on that issue, which was unprecedented in connection with the Supreme Soviet elections, it may be assumed that the mistakes and deficiencies were considered too gross to be hushed up.

<sup>22</sup> Brief from the ECP Tartu City Committee to the ECP CC, 12 February 1955, ERAF 1.159.232, 126–130.

<sup>23</sup> Decision of the ECP CC Presidium "Mistakes Made by Some Party Committees in Selection of Delegate Candidates to the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR," Minutes of the ECP CC Presidium No. 11, 19 February 1963, ERAF 1.4.2879, 45–46.

<sup>24</sup> Brief of the ECP CC to the Party Organisations Department of the CPSU CC, 14 February 1963, 2.

It is possible that the incident with the delegate candidates caused resonances powerful enough to reach the ears of Moscow. In the letter from the ECP CC departments of the party organisations from 16 February 1963 it stands that Richard-Paul Keer, the Secretary of the ECP Rakvere Regional Committee, had begun to doubt the suitability of several candidates first when the candidacies had already been sent for approval to the CPSU CC.<sup>25</sup> Even if the ECP CC denounced Keer's obstinacy towards the ECP leaders, no sanctions against him followed. Those would actually have been premature, as the final list of delegate candidates was approved, as mentioned above, first on 29 January 1963, and despite all the fuss, the deadline was met with sufficient time margin. It is possible that the ECP CC overstated the incident in order to gain the favour of the CPSU CC by emphasising the ideological alertness of the ESSR party leaders and their efficient supervision of the local party organisations.

Coming back to the candidates whom the ECP CC saw as unsuitable, it may be generally remarked that the CC mostly operated with political and moral arguments. Some facts compromising close relations of the candidates were unearthed: some had fought in the German army, some escaped to the West, or appropriated state property. In Tartu, a man by the name of F. Viikna was deleted from the candidate list because of a brother and a sister who had fled from Estonia in 1944. In the Kohtla-Järve elections district, Õie Reiska, pig-tender from Iisaku State Farm (sovkhoz), was considered unfit for candidate as a background check showed that her husband had been a forest brother. According to the Central Committee brief, Reiska's husband had until 1949 been "an active supporter of the bandits", and then "joined the gang" and been killed in 1953.<sup>26</sup> V. K., pig-tender from the Eduard Vilde Collective Farm (kolkhoz) of the Rakvere Region, was shown in a very unpleasant light and denounced for having promiscuous relationships with the opposite sex and keeping, despite her "good salary" as a pig-tender, up to three pigs at home and selling their meat in the market. Voldemar Leitna, tractor driver of the Vinni State Farm, was deleted for the reason that his mother and brother had been involved in stealing grain from the state farm. The case of electrician J. Rozov, who was intended for nomination in the Sillamäe electoral district, took quite a different turn. The Central Committee knew that both his grandfather and father had been priests, and that the father had been sentenced for appropriating church property. Rozov in his turn had made no secret of his father's sentence or his own background, and had doubted his suitability as a candidate in an interview with the representatives of the ECP CC. For those reasons, the ECP CC apparatus found all responsibility for Rozov's nomination to lie with the ECP Sillamäe City Committee.<sup>27</sup>

The incident in 1955, briefly mentioned above in connection with the replacement of six candidates, had quite a different outlook. In that case, personal characteristics and office violations were given as motives for the replacement of four candidates. In one case, also health reasons were mentioned.<sup>28</sup> Only in case of a single candidate, the replacement may be connected to political motives. More specifically, the leadership of the ESSR asked for the approval of the CPSU CC to replace J. Peets from the Antsla electoral district owing to discovery of compromising information; the agronomist I. Koovits was recommended as a

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<sup>25</sup> "On Assumed Mistakes in the Selection of Delegate Candidates to the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR," 12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 12, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11–14.

<sup>28</sup> Appeal of the ECP CC to the CPSU CC, 25 January 1955, 24.

replacement but for unknown reasons not appointed as a candidate to the Supreme Soviet.  
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In the light of the above two cases, it seems that replacements were made mostly among the candidates nominated by the local party committees. Looking at the reasons given for replacements, it is obvious that in the post-Stalin era, double standards strengthened in cadre policies. While at Jõgeva, cattle tender H.P., recommended by the local party committee, was removed from the list because his brother had served in the German army and his sister lived in West Germany,<sup>30</sup> Arnold Green, Deputy to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, who had kept silent of his Defence League membership before 1940 and been reprimanded for that by the party in 1954,<sup>31</sup> was free to run as candidate for elections and even to be at the top of the executive power of the ESSR. Arnold Green had indeed got away lightly, considering his past, but there were other similar cases among the top leadership.

This shows that the ECP CC checks did not affect the functionaries belonging to the ECP CC nomenclatura, whose biographical data were supposed to have undergone preliminary checks by the respective state security organs and party committees, but only the candidates proposed for nomination by the local party committees, workers and collective farmers who were unknown outside their neighbourhood. In other words, those who had made it to the ECP CC nomenclatura, had better chances of hanging on to the system than those coming upwards from the so-called productive professions, whose biographical data was subjected to more thorough scrutiny.

Above, the nomination of delegate candidates and circumstances prohibitive for candidacy for certain categories have been delineated. And still, what were the grounds for the composition of the Supreme Soviet? Probably, similar instructions for this purpose were distributed locally all over the USSR. In the composition of the people's representative body, several factors had to be taken into account: the proportion of candidates by trade, ethnicity and gender, as well as the age structure of the Soviet and the education of the candidates. In the Baltic countries, the first encounter with the Soviet principles for composing a representative body of the people occurred already in summer 1940. A week prior to the elections of the Lithuanian Seimas on 7 July 1940, the Moscow emissaries in Lithuania submitted quite a detailed report on the composition of the future Lithuanian parliament to Vyatcheslav Molotov, Chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars of the USSR, describing the proportion of delegates by nationality, party membership, and social status.<sup>32</sup> A similar proportional plan probably existed for Estonia's new body of representatives.

Usually, the statistical reports brought out the composition of the Soviets by gender, but also by social status, or the share of workers and collective farmers. Looking at the composition figures of the Supreme Soviets of the Baltic union republics, it is obvious that their similarity increased with each new Supreme Soviet. In the Supreme Soviet elected in 1959, the percentage of workers and collective farmers was 43% in Lithuania, 39% in Latvia, and 40.8% in Estonia; and in 1963 the respective figures were 54%, 48.7% and 47.2%.<sup>33</sup> Comparison of

<sup>29</sup> From the Antsla electoral district, it was the Minister of Culture Aleksander Ansberg who got into the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR instead.

<sup>30</sup> "On Assumed Mistakes in the Selection of Delegate Candidates to the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR," 13–14.

<sup>31</sup> Green's party reprimand was annulled in 1958. Arnold Green's party commission file, ERAF 1.7.1745.

<sup>32</sup> Paavle, "Anneksioon," 132–133.

<sup>33</sup> *Очерки развития государственности Советских Прибалтийских республик 1940–1965 годы* (Outline of the Development of the State Institutions of the Baltic Soviet Republics) (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1965), 175.

these figures indicates that increasing the number of delegates involved in the so-called productive work was prioritised. This is corroborated by the brief of Johannes Käbin, 1st Secretary of the ECP CC, submitted to the CPSU CC in 1963, where the leader of the ESSR emphasised that by increasing the number of delegates in the Supreme Soviet “it would be possible to increase the number of delegates “immediately involved in productive work””.<sup>34</sup> The ECP CC nominated 84 workers and collective farmers to the Supreme Soviet, which meant 30 more candidates than in 1959; according to the statistics on the Supreme Soviet, the named category was in fact enhanced by 33 people.<sup>35</sup> By early 1970s, the people’s representative bodies of the three union republics had become surprisingly alike in the share of workers and collective farmers nominated as delegates. According to the reference manual on the 15 union republics, the proportion of delegates of the worker-and-collective-farmer category in each Baltic SSR was as follows: 50.2% in the Estonian SSR, 50.3% in the Latvian SSR, and 50.3% in the Lithuanian SSR. If we compare with more distant Soviet Republics such as the Kazakh SSR or the Turkmen SSR, where those figures were 50% and 50.1% respectively, coincidence no longer seems an option.<sup>36</sup>

Similar tendencies can be observed in the gender composition of the Supreme Soviet. In early 1970s, also the proportion of women in the representations of different Soviet Republics was about equal. In the comparison of five union republics, the 1971 results ran as follows: 32.3% in the Lithuanian SSR, 33.3% in the Estonian SSR, 34.2% in the Latvian SSR; 35% in the Turkmen SSR, and 35.2% in the Kazakh SSR.<sup>37</sup>

Were there quota for assembling the Supreme Soviets? As long as no documentation establishing the quota has been found, we can simply state that the Supreme Soviets were assembled on the basis of fast principles, which allowed for certain deviations owing to regional differences.

## Elections

Summarising the above, we can state that in Soviet-style elections, all major decisions had been made already before the election day. The greatest challenge of the election day was getting the voters to vote. This was supposedly assured by election propaganda, which was used both before and on the election day with the purpose of taking the greatest possible amount of citizens to the polling stations. The propaganda and election committee workers were supposed to convince the doubtful, which in many cases must have been successful, as the reports mostly concentrate on cases when the propaganda work had proved fruitless. In 1955, Rudolf Meijel, Secretary of the ECP Tartu Regional Committee considered it necessary to inform his superiors in Tallinn of two “failures”. First, in the Võnnu Village Soviet, “in spite of instructions from the propaganda workers and the election committee members”, the timberman Eduard Korjus had refused to vote.

Meijel knew that the man had been hiding in the forests until 1953, and had given as a reason for his refusal that the Soviet court system had deprived his brother of the right to vote.<sup>38</sup> Second, in spite of several home visits from propaganda workers, also construction

<sup>34</sup> Brief of the ECP CC to the CPSU CC Party Organisations Department, 14 February 1963, 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Очерки развития*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> *NSV Liit. Teatmik* (Soviet Union: a Reference Book), compiled by V. Tarmisto a.o (Tallinn: Kommunist, 1973), 74, 95, 101, 135 145.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Brief of the Tartu District Committee of the ECP to the ECP CC, 28 February 1955, ERAF 1.159.232, 270.

worker Voldemar Piho had refrained from voting, although he had “promised to come and vote in late morning, but “disappeared” from home to unknown destination”.<sup>39</sup>

Those were far from isolated cases, although the number of refusers on the Soviet elections was relatively small, as we shall deliberate below.

Notwithstanding the efficiency of propaganda or other means of influencing the voters, the results of Soviet-style elections were always known beforehand and only had to be formally compiled and published. In the elections of the Supreme Soviets, not a single case is known of a delegate candidate failing to collect the absolute majority of votes<sup>40</sup> that the USSR election system required for a candidate to be elected. In the elections of local delegates, the candidates may have failed on rare occasions,<sup>41</sup> but that did not affect the general proportion of votes for the delegate candidates, which was close to 100% in any case.

Even a few dozen votes against called for a closer look at the situation and a local investigation. In case of more than 100 against-votes, more serious conclusions were to be drawn. In the elections of the Supreme Soviet in 1955, Nikolai Turkestanov, Secretary of the ECP Keila Regional Committee, gave insufficient propaganda work as the reason for the more than 100 votes against Leida Tammiss in the Klooga electoral district.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Tammiss was supported by 90% of the voters and elected to the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR as a matter of course.

At least one attempt has been made to check the accuracy of Soviet-style election results in retrospect. The opportunity to check the results of the 1940. elections of the 2nd *Riigivolikogu*, whose documentation, from minutes of the meetings to the ballot papers, had survived the shift from the Soviet to the German occupying powers, presented itself in 1942–1943 during the German occupation. What were the results of the check? Those responsible for the checking announced that the actual percentage of voters had been 80.1 instead of the reported 84.1, and that the candidates of the Estonian Working People’s Union had received 91.6% per cent of votes instead of the reported 92.8. The discrepancy between official statistics and actual results was explained as follows: first, the number of inhabitants with the right to vote had been reduced on paper; second, invalid ballots had been counted as valid, and third, the votes for the single contesting candidate Jüri-Rajur

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> More than half of all the given and valid votes of the electoral district was the required minimum. – Ilo Sildmäe, *Nõukogude riigiorganid* (Soviet State Organs) (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1973), 55.

<sup>41</sup> On the local elections of 1948, six local municipality Soviet and two village soviet delegate candidates failed to get elected. Indrek Paavle, *Kohaliku halduse sovetiseerimine Eestis 1940–1950* (Sovietisation of Local Governments in Estonia in 1940–1950) (PhD thesis, University of Tartu, 2009), 118; In 1963, two delegate candidates to village soviets failed to get elected. “A Summary of the Elections of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR and the Local Delegates of the Working People,” a brief submitted by Leonid Lentsman, Secretary of the ECP CC, to the department of Party Organisations of the CPSU CC, 19 March 1963, ERAF 1.280.21, 9. In 1975, two delegate candidates did not get the absolute majority in the regions of Hiiumaa and Kohtla-Järve respectively, and there is a similar example from 1985, when a village soviet delegate in one of the electoral districts of the Harju Region failed to collect more than half of the electorate’s votes. For this reason, he allegedly was not elected delegate. Minutes of the Meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR No. 49, 3 July 1975, ERA R-3.3.9772, 3, 4; Decision on the Elections of the 11th Composition of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR and the Local Soviets of People’s Delegates, 28 February 1985, ERA R-3.3.13633, 1–3.

<sup>42</sup> Brief from the Keila Regional Committee of the ECP to the ECP CC, 28 February 1955, ERAF 1.159.232, 370–375.

Liivak were counted as votes given for the ETRL.<sup>43</sup> What did the investigation carried out under the German occupation show?

First, that the results of the fraudulent 1940 elections were forged, and second, that the differences between actual results and the official statistics were relatively small. In this light, such results might be explained with the obvious frustration of the voters or the fear caused by the removal of opposition candidates, drastic social changes and pressure on the voters themselves.

Indrek Paavle doubts the conclusions based on the critical analysis of the participation figures and election results of the Soviet elections of 1940. He states that not even retrospective checks can establish the actual participation percentage or election results. Paavle brings out two major counter-arguments: first, it is impossible to establish how many ballot papers were added by the election committees, and second, in the ballot station, the voters were not required to present an ID, which gave them a chance to vote several times, also for those who abstained from voting.<sup>44</sup>

The methods cited by Indrek Paavle were characteristic not only of the 1940 elections, but a routine part of the Soviet system, although it is difficult to find incontestable proof of forgery. There is a single example, which is certainly not an isolated case but rather points to an unintentional blunder in the party committee information flow, which entitles us to more general conclusions. Namely, N. Vlasov, Secretary of the ECP Committee of the Valga State Farms and Collective Farms Administration, sent a following note to the ECP CC after the March elections of 1963: "A violation of the election regulations was committed in the electoral district No. 14 during the election of the Soviet of the Working People's delegates in Hummuli village, consisting of the fact that instead of the 29 ballot papers distributed to the voters, the ballot box after opening contained 31 votes, of which 16 were against."<sup>45</sup> This case found a curious solution. In spite of the obvious violation of election legislation, the election results were not annulled and Asta Veeperv, who had been nominated as a candidate for the village, was not elected to the village Soviet, as she had not received the required more than 50% of votes.

And still, the question whether it is possible to discover from the Soviet sources how large part of the inhabitants actually voted and how many votes against the candidates were given, should not remain unasked.

If reliable information can not be obtained even by retrospective checks of ballot papers, and forgeries are almost impossible to uncover afterwards, it is still possible to obtain from the documents related to the elections some knowledge about those who refused from and, in some cases, avoided voting. In the briefs of the local party committees from the 1950s and the 1960s, which were submitted to the ECP CC, those refusing to vote have usually been named. Alongside those who refused to vote, the briefs contain information on those who left home on the election day and thus avoided voting. The only clearly delineated contingent persistently refusing to participate in the Soviet elections were Jehovah's witnesses, whose religious principles do not allow participating in any elections despite of

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<sup>43</sup> Liivi Uuet, "1940. aasta Riigivolikogu valimiste dokumentide saatus ning arhivaaride missioon," (The Fate of the Documents Related to the Elections of the Riigivolikogu in 1940, and the Archivists' Mission) *Tuna*, No. 3 (2000): 76–81.

<sup>44</sup> Paavle, "Anneksioon," 140–144.

<sup>45</sup> Brief of the ECP Committee of Valga Collective and State Farms Administration to the ECP CC, undated, ERAF 1.272.2, 319.

the regime. The share of those refusing on religious grounds was considerable, although the figures remained small. In 1963, 56 of the 206 registered refusals were on account of religious principles.<sup>46</sup>

Poor living conditions were another frequent excuse, which the authorities obviously accepted as grounds for refusal, for otherwise the propaganda workers' efforts in persuading such voters would have been pointed out. Most often, such excuses were given in Kohtla-Järve, where the number of people refraining from voting was comparatively large when compared to other regions of Estonia. For example, in 1963, the Secretary of the Kohtla-Järve City Committee of the ECP listed 35 names of people who had refused to vote,<sup>47</sup> and in 1967, the Secretary of the City Committee J. Lüllemets in his turn listed 48 names. Half of the enlisted refusers brought out poor accommodation as their reason for refusal. In 1963, in total 66 people gave poor living conditions as the cause of their refusal.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, elections may have seemed an opportunity for demanding better living conditions.

Looking at the Soviet statistics on those who refrained from voting – both those who actually refused and the rest – we can see that the number is too small to be reliable, coming up to several thousand at the most. In 1963, a little less than 4000 citizens refrained from voting,<sup>49</sup> and that was one of the largest absolute numbers in the post-war elections in the ESSR, although it made up only 0.4% of the total number of voters. The proportion of votes against was, according to the official statistics, roughly on the same scale, usually changing synchronously with the participation percentage, which in turn adds further doubt in the reliability of the data. Ever since 1950s and up to 1990s, the greatest number of votes against ever counted was in 1963, when it reached 4070.<sup>50</sup>

On the basis of these examples, no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn about the actual number of voters or the actual number of votes in favour. In all probability, both figures were steadily growing, as the undemocratic elections became a routine and an inalienable part of the Soviet lifestyle. Furthermore, the obligation to vote was not onerous and in addition to pointless elections, there were many other impractical and absurd phenomena in the society.

To conclude the matter, let us turn to the election documents drawn up in late 1980s and take a look at a newspaper article published in 2003, under a title only too common until the end of 1980s: "99% Voted for the Bloc of Communists and Non-Party Candidates!". The journalist Allar Viivik based his story on interviews with former members of the Soviet elections committees. The latter assumed that participation could never have reached 99%, but had still come up to 85–90%.<sup>51</sup> This participation percentage is most certainly overrated and the remembrances of the election committee members fail to convince the opponents.

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<sup>46</sup> A summary of the elections of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR and the Local Soviets of Working People's Delegates sent to the CPSU CC, 19 March 1963, ERAF 1.280.21, 12.

<sup>47</sup> A list of citizens who refused to vote on 17 March 1963, drawn up by the Kohtla-Järve City Committee of the ECP, ERAF 1.272.2, 101–102.

<sup>48</sup> A summary of the elections of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR and the Local Soviets of Working People's Delegates sent to the CPSU CC, 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–13.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Allar Viivik, "Kommunistide ja parteitute bloki poolt hääletas 99% valijatest!" (99% Voted for the Bloc of Communists and Non-Party Candidates!), *Õhtuleht*, 1 March 2003.

Considering it probable that the estimated participation percentage published by Viivik concerned the later period of the ESSR, of which the interviewed had clearest memories, we may use the replacement elections to the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR in late 1980s as an indicator, as these elections took place already on the threshold of major social changes. These elections were held to replace delegates who had dropped out of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR.

Formally, the replacement elections to the Supreme Soviet until 1988 do not meet any criteria of democratic elections, as the voters still lacked the choice between two or more candidates. Nevertheless, the official results of the 1987 and 1988 elections look more reliable as they differ from earlier ones to some extent and no longer proclaim the uniform 99.8 or 99.9 per cent participation. The changes were probably an sign of the *glasnost* policies. On 21 June 1987, replacement elections to the Supreme Soviet were held in seven electoral districts. The participation remained in the range of 95.5 – 100%.<sup>52</sup> In the Narva and Avinurme electoral district, where the respective candidates were 1st Secretary of Narva City Committee of the CP Vladimir Malkovski and 1st Secretary of the Kohtla-Järve Regional Committee of the CP Nina Mikheyeva, 100% participation was registered, while in Pärnu, where a non-party candidate, locksmith Amatoli Timoshchenko was nominated, the registered participation rate was 95.5%.

By 1988, the situation had changed somewhat. On 23 October, elections were held in the electoral districts of Vinni, Tamsalu, and Rakvere Lauristini. Only in Vinni, the participation rate surpassed 90 per cent, reaching 91.95%. In Tamsalu, the participation rate was 84.6% and in the Rakvere Lauristini district the participation was only 78.5%.<sup>53</sup> Thus, election activity had not yet reached bottom in 1988. Three weeks later, replacement elections held in Haljala (North Estonia) and in the Nooruse electoral district in Tallinn, both with two nominated candidates, the participation in Tallinn was a mere 74%, while coming up to 91.4% in Haljala.<sup>54</sup> When making use of the examples of different electoral districts, the 1988 election results can be interpreted in several ways. First, they speak of sprouting changes in the society, which certainly had some effect on the voters' behaviour. A passive electorate, who for different reasons refrains from voting in the circumstances of democracy, was born. Nevertheless, the election activity was unusually high, considering that these were merely replacement elections and that in most electoral districts still a single candidate had been nominated.

The election results from the same period are somewhat more eloquent. According to official data, Vladimir Malkovski and Nina Mikheyeva got the votes of 99.83% and 99.46% of voters respectively,<sup>55</sup> while in the Vinni electoral district, 99.83% of the voters gave their vote to highly popular Edgar Savisaar, and 1st Secretary of the ECP CC Vaino Väljas received 99.75% of the votes in the Rakvere electoral district.<sup>56</sup> On both occasions, although with one year's interval, the voters had only a single candidate to vote for. Therefore it may be assumed that the social changes were not the single factors influencing election results due

<sup>52</sup> Decision on the results of the elections for replacement of dropout delegates of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR, 25 June 1987, ERA R-3.3.14174, 2–4.

<sup>53</sup> Decision on the results of the elections for replacement of dropout delegates of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR, 4 November 1988, ERA R-3.3.14502, 1–3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Decision on the results of the elections for replacement of dropout delegates of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR, 25 June 1987, 2–4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

to lack of alternatives, notwithstanding that Vaino Väljas and Edgar Savisaar were both highly popular at the time. Still, it seems probable that everyone who took the trouble to go and vote usually voted in favour of the candidate as there was no point in voting against. The candidate would have ended up elected anyway.

## **Conclusion**

The Soviet-style elections had no effect on the governing of the totalitarian state or the Soviet society. They were not a means of expressing the voters' will, but a ritual act and a manifestation of the Soviet "democracy". Nevertheless, quite a lot of money and time was invested in the pointless election charades. Preparations for elections involved a succession of bureaucratic and more or less routine proceedings, which were followed partly in accordance with election legislations, while the choice and nomination of the candidates was subordinated to the party's control, unknown to the public. As a single candidate selected by the communist party organisations was set up in each electoral district in the Soviet elections, the nominees could be sure of their election already before the election day. Notwithstanding the actual participation rate or election results, of which there are no traces in the Soviet sources, the participation rate as well as the proportion of votes in favour of the candidate, officially reached almost 100%. And yet, there are sources containing valuable information about the Soviet election process. These mostly deal with unusual occurrences or organisational blunders in the course of the elections, but these isolated cases enable us to establish connections and find parallels, which in totality help us to get an adequate picture of the proceedings and results of the elections.