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Author(s): Ronald J. Hill

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THE CPSU IN A SOVIET ELECTION CAMPAIGN

By RONALD J. HILL

THE Soviet electoral system has generally been accorded relatively minor significance by Western scholars, and ridiculed by hostile critics. Yet a great deal of effort goes into electioneering activity, and, with an election campaign of up to two months in three years out of four, the Soviet voter is experiencing state elections for one-eighth of his existence. For the Communist Party, election campaigns are important events in the country's political life, in which the apparatus and membership are fully involved at every stage.

The role of the party as such in elections has not generally been studied, by either Western or Soviet scholars: by the former for want of information; by the latter (presumably) for reasons of security, however defined. Thus, the most detailed descriptive account of a Soviet election campaign by a Western scholar (Max E. Mote) barely touches on the role of the party, concentrating on the 'visible' aspects of the campaign, and those reported in the press.¹ A recent Soviet monograph on the electoral system, based largely on Belorussian data, likewise fails to uncover the dimension of party leadership in the conduct of elections.² Nevertheless, some sources do acknowledge the key role played by the party: as a recent writer on the Soviet political system stated,

It is a secret to no one that our communist party really accomplishes political leadership of campaigns for elections to the soviets, defines their tasks, takes trouble over the election to the organs of popular power of worthy representatives of the working class, the peasantry, and the intelligentsia. [The party] sees this as its obligation, and the concrete expression and manifestation of its leading and directing role in the system of socialist democracy.³

In the course of a recent visit to Moscow, specifically to study the electoral system,⁴ the author came across what is, to his knowledge, the frankest, fullest, and most detailed account of party-state relations, including a chapter

¹ Max E. Mote, *Soviet Local and Republic Elections* (Stanford, 1965).

² A. T. Leizeraw (Leizerov), *Savetskaya vybarchaya sistema* (Minsk, 1974); the author does deal, however, with a number of interesting political problems arising from the electoral system.

³ A. Lashin, 'Demokratizm politicheskoi sistemy razvitogo sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva', *Kommunist*, 1975, no. 2, pp. 32-42 (p. 34).

⁴ This visit, in May-July 1975, was made under the auspices of the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Exchange Agreement; I am grateful to the British Council for their sponsorship, and to the Graduate Studies Committee of Trinity College, Dublin, for financial support. A wider study of Soviet elections is in preparation.

on the party's role in the election campaign.⁵ This chapter—indeed the whole book, by Yu. V. Shabanov—is vitally illuminating, and forms the basis of the present article. In it, the detailed supervision by the party over every aspect of the campaign, and over the work of all institutions and organizations involved in the conduct of elections, becomes plain. The role of the party raikomy is seen to be paramount, and light is shed on points raised by Western scholars, but not satisfactorily answered, concerning the deputy selection process. The specific examples contained in the book are taken mainly from the experience of the Belorussian republic, but there is every reason to believe that the same principles apply elsewhere.⁶

Preparatory Work

Even before the election date is officially announced, preparatory work has already been undertaken by the party, and this 'political campaign of enormous importance' is given the go-ahead by leading party organs (Shabanov, p. 26). Thus, the term of office of the Belorussian Supreme Soviet was due to expire on 1 March 1963, and that of the republic's local soviets on 19 March. As early as 10 September 1962—six months in advance—the republic's party Central Committee Bureau discussed the question of the election date, and the formal announcement of elections was issued by the Supreme Soviet Presidium on 5 January 1963, almost four months later, but in conformity with the electoral laws (p. 28). Presumably, the party was able to make good use of the interval. On the same date, the Supreme Soviet Presidium also adopted decrees containing amendments to the republic's electoral law; these amendments had been discussed at the end of 1962 by the party Central Committee (pp. 28–29).

Furthermore, the principle of democratic centralism requires that the lower party committees seek the permission of higher committees before commissioning the local soviets to conduct the election campaign, and this applies to both general elections and by-elections. Thus, in the first half of 1962, the Brest-Litovsk obkom approached the republican Central Committee for permission to hold a by-election in a republican Supreme Soviet constituency where a deputy had left; the Central Committee discussed and approved the proposal, which was then formally adopted by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet; P. M. Masherov was duly elected on 10 June 1962 (pp. 29–30).

It is thus clear that the fundamental decision to hold elections is the prerogative of the party. Shabanov assures us (p. 25) that the party has always, apart from the war years, strictly adhered to the constitutional

⁵ Yu. Shabanov, *Partiinoe rukovodstvo Sovetami deputatov trudyashchikhsya* (Minsk, 1969); the relevant chapter is Ch. 2 (pp. 25–53). Shabanov's frankness about party-state relations is also evident in his book *Problemy sovetskoï sotsialisticheskoi demokratiï v period stroitel'stva kommunizma* (Minsk, 1969), especially Ch. 1.

⁶ Ch. 3 of Shabanov's short (about 80 pp.) book is equally enlightening about the role of the party in the process of government, including examples of legislative time-tables incorporating the stages at which party organs reviewed the questions under discussion (pp. 61–62, 65–66).

demands concerning term of office and re-election dates, and so procedures at least for a general election are set in motion within the party apparatus long before the state apparatus begins to make formal decisions.⁷ It is also clear from Shabanov's account that the party committees at all levels are involved in close scrutiny of the complete proceedings, from drawing the constituency boundaries to counting the votes and announcing the results of the poll. Indeed, it would appear that no single aspect of the election campaign stands outside the purview of the party.

The Election Plan of Action

Within a few days of the announcement of the election date, according to Shabanov, each party committee works out a plan of action for the campaign. At the republican level, the Central Committee 'as the organ of political leadership in the republic' adopts a detailed plan of work, consisting of two sections: the first covers organizational work, the second political (agitation and propaganda) work. Guided by the appropriate electoral law, in the 1962 USSR Supreme Soviet elections in Belorussia, the Central Committee 'defined the concrete organizational tasks of party organs in the formation of constituency electoral commissions and polling precincts, in the compilation of electoral rolls [voters' lists], and also in the selection and presentation of candidates for deputy' (pp. 31-32). Local party committees devise similar plans, within the parameters of the Central Committee's plan of action.

In the whole campaign a key position is occupied by the raikom, since 'all the threads of party leadership in election campaigns . . . come together in the raion'. Hence, the most specific and detailed plans of action are those adopted at the raikom level (p. 32). In pp. 33-37 Shabanov reproduces one such detailed plan, consisting of 48 items, taken from the election campaign to local soviets and the Belorussian SSR Supreme Soviet of 1967 (elections were held on 12 March). In Table 1 are included a number of examples of items from this plan, which reveal the immense care and attention to detail—down to arrangements for fire protection for the polling stations—which this party document reveals. Shabanov adds the reassurance that 'such a specific plan of organizational work for a party organ is aimed at providing for the precise fulfilment of all the demands of the electoral statutes—those most important state documents defining the basic elements and stages in the preparation and conduct of elections' (p. 37). As my examples show, the raikom's plan covers the duties not only of its own departments and other party organizations, but also of state institutions and others who have a constitutional or political role to play in the campaign.

The Party's Role in Candidate Selection

The major political aspect of the election lies in the selection of candidates,

⁷ Despite Shabanov's assurance, in 1971 the date of local and republican Supreme Soviet elections was altered from the customary March to June, where they have become established along with elections to the USSR Supreme Soviet. Presumably, this decision was taken by the party.

TABLE I

ITEMS FROM RAIKOM ELECTION CAMPAIGN PLAN, 1967

No.	List of Measures	Period of Completion	By Whom Fulfilled
<i>Organizational Work</i>			
1	Select candidatures and provide for formation of raion electoral commission	Up to 16 January	Raikom bureau and raiispolkom
9	Form election constituencies	Up to 20 January	Raiispolkom
17	Arrange compilation of voters' lists in three copies; display them in each <i>agitpunkt</i>	Up to 15 February	Raiispolkom, village and settlement ispolkomy
19	Meetings for nomination of candidates to oblast and raion soviets	1-18 February	Raikom
20	Registration of candidates by constituency electoral commissions	Up to 21 February	Raikom
25	Organize candidates' meetings with voters	15 February-10 March	Raikom, primary party organizations, soviet ispolkomy
31	Arrange telephone connections for polling stations	By 20 February	Department of Communications
33	Work out and make provision for fire protection at polling stations; organize duty roster and protection of polling stations	Whole period of election campaign	Head of raion fire protection service
34	Make general check on preparedness of polling stations for balloting	10 March	Raikom organizational department
<i>Mass-Political Work</i>			
4	Hold seminars for agitators on preparations for holding elections	Up to 25 January	Primary party organizations, leaders of agitation teams
8	Place in raion newspaper and broadcast by radio materials on preparations for the elections	January, February, March	Raikom agitprop department
12	Organize performances by amateur cultural groups, in brigades, on farms, at <i>agitpunkty</i>	February, March	Raiispolkom culture department, club managers

Source: Shabanov, pp. 33-37; election day was 12 March 1967.

whose names appear on the ballot papers for endorsement by the electorate. In his 1961 article on Soviet local elections, Howard R. Swearer noted that Soviet sources had begun to concede the party's key role in the nomination process, but he added that 'nowhere is this role explained and defined', and 'the precise nature of party participation . . . is deliberately obscured'.⁸ An article in *Partiinaya zhizn'* in 1957 indicated that 'the party as it were comes to an agreement with public organizations, with the workers themselves, on the promotion of a common candidate for deputy' from among the various names which might be proposed; the article did not, however, go into further

⁸ Howard R. Swearer, 'The Functions of Soviet Local Elections', *The Midwest Journal of Political Science*, vol. V, no. 2 (May 1961), pp. 129-49 (pp. 136-7).

details as to how the agreement is reached.⁹ Most Soviet sources, until recently, have tended to go no further.

The question of how future deputies are chosen has been a matter of study by at least two Western scholars, Everett Jacobs and the present author.¹⁰ Through analysis of the social composition of the newly-elected deputies, it became clear that the party or government goes to great pains to achieve what Jacobs termed 'the proper "mix" of candidates'.¹¹ Moreover, by analysing trends across time and in different geographical areas, it was evident that there was a system of 'norms' in operation, which established the desired strength of various sociological characteristics among the deputies. Jacobs's assumption—in which the present writer broadly concurred—was that 'General guidelines are worked out by central party organizations, and it is left to more local party bodies (e.g. raion and city party committees and even party groups) to take more specific decisions on whom to nominate for specific electorates'; however, such definitions of what constitutes the 'correct' social balance never appear in print, but have to be deduced.¹²

Soviet works containing statements which support this interpretation have been published in recent years. Thus, in their 1967 article on the CPSU and the soviets, regarded by Soviet political scientists as a seminal work of scholarship, G. V. Barabashev and K. F. Sheremet state that 'in elections to the soviets, the party works out and puts into effect general directions on such cardinal questions as basic ratios in the social composition of deputies, the problem of continuity and renewal, and so forth'.¹³ The same authors repeat the identical phrase in their textbook on the Soviet state structure.¹⁴ Shabanov goes somewhat further in explaining how the selection process—'the most responsible side and stage of the election campaign' (p. 41)—operates.

In the first place, primary party organizations constantly keep potential deputies under observation at their place of work, a task which increases in intensity as the formal campaign starts. Then,

⁹ A Gorkin, 'O sovetskoi demokratii', *Partiinaya zhizn'*, 1957, no. 2, pp. 10–19 (p. 14). Another writer speaks of a single candidature 'crystallizing out'—again without explaining the party's role in the process: see A. I. Kim, *Sovetskoe izbiratel'noe pravo* (M., 1965), p. 185.

¹⁰ See Everett M. Jacobs, 'Soviet Local Elections: What They Are, and What They Are Not', *Soviet Studies*, vol. XXII, no. 1 (July 1970), pp. 61–76, and 'The Composition of Local Soviets, 1959–69', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Autumn 1972), pp. 503–19; Ronald J. Hill, 'Patterns of Deputy Selection to Local Soviets', *Soviet Studies*, vol. XXV, no. 2 (October 1973), pp. 196–212. Also to be noted is Roger A. Clarke's pioneering analysis, 'The Composition of the Supreme Soviet, 1958–66', *ibid.*, vol. XIX, no. 1 (July 1967), pp. 53–65.

¹¹ Jacobs, 'Soviet Local Elections . . .', p. 66. Mote also reports a conversation with a Soviet official to the effect that the party is responsible for selecting the appropriate number of candidates, but does not go into details about the precise mechanism: see Mote, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹² Jacobs, 'The Composition of Local Soviets . . .', pp. 503–4; Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 60; Hill, *op. cit.*, particularly pp. 207–12.

¹³ G. V. Barabashev and K. F. Sheremet, 'KPSS i Sovety', *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo*, 1967, no. 11, pp. 31–41 (p. 36).

¹⁴ G. V. Barabashev and K. F. Sheremet, *Sovetskoe stroitel'stvo*, 2nd edn. (M., 1974), p. 106.

Party organs [i.e. committees] also give recommendations on defined proportions of representation in the soviets of various groups in the population. In giving these recommendations, they in no way tie the hands of collectives and organizations in the matter of nominating persons as deputies. They merely take care that the general principles of proportionality of representation of the various population groups in the soviets are not infringed (p. 41).

In other words, as Shabanov goes on to describe, formal nomination takes place at meetings of workers' collectives, where those present are encouraged to speak frankly about the personal qualities of the proposed candidates; but the identity of the various candidates being nominated is carefully monitored by party committees—specifically the raikomy—who give their endorsement to those of whom they approve, in numbers commensurate with the various defined norms of representation. For Shabanov, this custom of endorsement of every candidate by the party committee 'not only does not contradict democracy but, on the contrary, is an example of the development of democracy, because the ruling party takes upon itself an additional moral responsibility before the electors for the qualitative composition of the candidates recommended and supported by it'; and in a very revealing phrase, 'Party study of the working and political qualities of candidates is a specific guarantee against any kind of accidents (*sluchainosti*) which might take place were the candidates to be nominated spontaneously' (pp. 42–43).

The preliminary sifting takes place in the party committee of the same level as the soviet to which elections are being held, with the exception of village and settlement soviets, where this important role is fulfilled by the rural raikomy. Since the majority of soviets are in fact at those levels,¹⁵ the crucial importance of the raikom is obvious; moreover, as Shabanov makes clear, even selection for the higher soviets by the obkomy, kraikomy and republican Central Committees is performed in consultation with the lower party organs and public organizations, 'right down to the primary party organizations and the collectives of public organizations' (p. 43).

A further related question is how leading public figures are allocated to their constituencies, particularly at the level of the USSR or the republican Supreme Soviet. In Belorussia in 1959, according to Shabanov, this question was discussed on 21 January by the Central Committee Bureau, which issued its recommendation. This was taken up by the oblast, city and raion party committees, who set about arranging for specific workers' collectives to nominate identified public figures as candidates to stand in certain constituencies. The CC Bureau's recommendation thus served as a coordinating document throughout the campaign, which ended with elections on 5 March 1959. Specific instructions were likewise sent out by the Vitebsk obkom in 1965: adopted on 6 February, the decision (*reshenie*) as to which candidates

¹⁵ In 1975, for example, elections were held to 50,437 local soviets; of these, 3,003 were to rural raions, 41,128 to villages, and 3,598 to settlement soviets—a total of 47,729 or 94.6%—which came under the control of rural raikomy; a further 558 (1.1%) were to urban district soviets, controlled by urban raikomy (figures from *Izvestiya*, 21 June 1975).

were to stand where, represented a 'directive for party raion and town committees in organizing work on nominating candidates' (p. 44). Additionally, the local committees are given a chance to state their own preferences: thus, in January and February 1967 the Minsk raikom

reviewed the personal composition of the raion soviet and the proposals on candidatures for nominations to the B[elorussian] SSR Supreme Soviet and the Minsk oblast soviet. *The proposals of the party raikom on candidates for the oblast soviet were reviewed* by the obkom and the Central Committee of the CPB [Communist Party of Belorussia]. The party organizations of the raion adopted for unswerving implementation all the recommendations confirmed by party committees. In so far as all the candidates selected beforehand really were the best representatives of the workers, the primary organizations gave them their support and nomination as candidates (pp. 44-45; *emphasis added*).

The Party and Election Propaganda

A major part of the election campaign is the massive propaganda effort which is mounted by 'a whole army of authorized representatives of the party among the masses—the agitators' (p. 45). These perform important work in compiling the lists of electors; educating the voters about the logistics of the elections—when, where and how to cast their votes; and engaging in political agitation on behalf of the candidates of the 'indivisible bloc of communists and non-party candidates'. In each constituency, these agitators are attached to an *agitpunkt*, which operates under the guidance of a primary party organization (p. 46).

After the Poll

The votes are counted in the individual wards by the electoral commissions, which normally contain at least one official representative of a party organization; if not, party members will be present as representatives of other public organizations. 'It is practically impossible to find a single ward electoral commission where there was not one communist' (p. 51). Moreover, party organizations send their representatives to observe the count in the various polling stations and check the accuracy of the results. For instance, the bureau of the Korbinsky raikom decided on 9 June 1966 to send one representative to each of the 59 polling stations associated with the USSR Supreme Soviet election in the raion. The raikom formally appointed individuals to specific polling stations and issued the appropriate documents (p. 51).

Once the results are known, the whole campaign is carefully analysed by the party committees, to ensure that positive features are reinforced in future campaigns and negative aspects not repeated. As an example, Shabanov quotes the joint plenum of July 1926 between the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the party, which 'in particular . . . pointed out that some party organizations acted incorrectly in declining party leadership

of the elections. The plenum condemned "attempts to 'hide the face' of the party organization, not to speak out in their own name in defence of party policy, and the refusal openly to nominate and defend their own candidates". Shabanov adds that these strictures have not lost their force or significance in present-day conditions: the party does not (Shabanov may be implying 'should not') hide its direct interest in the progress and results of election campaigns (pp. 51-52).

The results too are scrutinized by party committees and discussed in primary organizations, including the comments written on the ballot papers by voters. Shabanov points out that this side of the electoral system is completely unregulated by the law; but as a means of gauging public opinion it has its uses for the party. On 15 June 1966, the Minsk obkom bureau discussed the various critical remarks and requests which the electors had raised at the different stages of the USSR Supreme Soviet election campaign, and instructed raikomy and gorkomy, and the Soviet executive committees, to review all critical remarks, suggestions and requests expressed by voters at meetings or in letters or by other means. "The party obkom acquainted itself with all the remarks, proposals and requests of the electors, written by them on the ballot papers on election day. The oblispolkom was detailed to study them closely and take steps in response to them" (pp. 52-53).

It is a moot point whether this analysis of the contents of used ballot papers constitutes an infringement of the legal guarantee of a secret ballot. The ballots are not numbered or named, and hence in principle unidentifiable,¹⁶ and the electoral statute merely states that the ballot papers are to be preserved by the town or raion Soviet executive committee until instructions for disposing of them are received from the republican Supreme Soviet.¹⁷ The standard interpretation of secrecy of the ballot refers simply to the presence of outsiders in the polling booths or denying a voter access to a booth;¹⁸ but since there is no apparent limit to the range of bodies, including the press,¹⁹ which might be given access to ballots *after* the count, there is clearly room (as Shabanov implies) for some regulation of the situation.

* * *

From this brief account, it is clear how important the party considers elections to the soviets to be. It is an occasion for propaganda, which both informs the public about the achievements of the regime, and also serves to train and retrain the army of propagandists; all this is done under the direct supervision of party committees. The vital stage of candidate selection seems

¹⁶ However, in his novel *The First Circle*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn recounts a case where several detectives spent a month examining the handwriting of every voter in a district, before eventually apprehending one who had written on the ballot paper 'an obscene epithet to the Genius of Geniuses himself'; see *The First Circle*, Fontana edn. (London, 1970), pp. 72-73.

¹⁷ See *Polozhenie o vyborakh v kraevye, oblastnye, okruzhnye, raionnye, gorodskie, sel'skie i poselkovye Sovety deputatov trudyashchikhsya RSFSR*, amended to 1966 (M., 1975), Arts. 114 and 115.

¹⁸ See, for example, *V pomoshch' izbiratel'nykh komissiyam* (M., 1975), p. 88.

¹⁹ For example, *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 16 June 1975, published examples of patriotic comments written on ballot papers by Muscovites on the previous day.

to be minutely controlled by party committees at various levels, operating in consultation with each other and with the state executive committees. The key role here lies with the raikomy, whose organizational departments have the responsibility of coordinating the selection of individuals to conform to a desired balance of membership, as expressed in directives from the central party authorities: Shabanov's account leaves a relatively small area for the electoral commissions, although we can probably safely assume that there is close contact between the raikom and the various commissions. The raikom also plays an active part in organizing individual candidates' campaigns, and the counting of votes is also supervised by the party. The results of the campaign as a whole are carefully studied by party committees at all levels.

The sheer effort of all this, taking place so frequently, must make a state election campaign a major undertaking for the party apparatus and general membership, particularly the local committees. According to Shabanov, 'For the communist party, there are no petty and uninteresting matters in the period of election campaigns. The communist party, as the political chief and leader of the people, makes use of election campaigns for strengthening its influence on the masses, for raising the political activity of the workers, for providing such a selection of soviets as would subsequently bear witness to the fact that the soviets are honourably coming to grips with the complex tasks before them, as organs of state power and public self-administration' (p. 53). According to this view, the party feels its own position to be judged by the effectiveness of the soviets and their deputies, institutions and individuals which it sponsors. Therein may be an explanation of the tremendous interest which the CPSU pays to the election campaign.

However, there is a further important point which may explain the scope of the party's involvement in electoral activity: this is precisely the kind of operation with which the party is geared to deal, virtually as a matter of routine (and its frequency ensures that procedures can indeed be routinized to some extent). The raikom organizational department is constantly engaged, together with the primary organizations, in reviewing personnel questions, and can doubtless switch relatively easily to emphasize selection for the soviets. Similarly, the agitprop department can modify the content of its propaganda campaigns to include electoral themes, and make use of the election period as a training-ground for new agitators and propagandists. Hence, quite apart from other functions which may be identified in relation to Soviet elections,²⁰ this regular activity is also functional to the promotion of the party's role, and largely involves those kinds of work with which the raikom apparatus and general membership are already familiar. The level of party involvement is impressive, but we could hardly expect otherwise: as Shabanov indicates, running the elections is a central part of its job as the directing force in Soviet society.

Trinity College, Dublin

²⁰ See Swearer, *op. cit.*