

# Stalin era voting in Hrodna Region. Sapotskina Case, 1948<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

The year of 1948. Western Belarus. Local elections are taking place. Some undesirables became witnesses of falsification in one of polling places. As a result of their complaint, the Communist party's institutions became interested in the case. The article is dedicated to an analysis of one case from the election practice in Belarus in the late 1940's.

*Key words:* elections, local elections, Western Belarus, Joseph Stalin, falsification, Ministry of State Security, All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, Sapotskina.

*“A drunken officer together with a secretary are opening the ballot box and throwing there a heap of voting bulletins. The “Stalin result” – 99,9% of support to the Communist Party – is guaranteed...”*

The year of 1948 in Hrodna (Grodno) Region became the year of the beginning of massive collectivization. However the Communist authorities did not consider the situation to be propitious. There were strong anti-Soviet guerrilla squadrons who did not allow the Communists to feel at ease. Comrade Fralou (Frolov)<sup>2</sup>, the Head of Hrodna KGB Department, said, “there are a lot of open and hidden enemies of the collective farms’ way of life, and these enemies use every opportunity to harm

the young collective farmers.” (State Archive... Fund 1, Volume 1, Case 174).

The people in the country were watching closely the agricultural initiatives of the authorities. Therefore the communists tried to divide villagers into groups and to make them quarrel. However they did not quite succeed in this. An important function of the local state organs was to create regional structures from the Party's activists and with their assistance it was possible to break the negative attitude of the villagers of Hrodna Region. In these circumstances the elections to local councils (soviets), which were planned for January 11th, had a big political importance. They were to demonstrate the massive

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<sup>1</sup> The source for translation is: Андрэй Пачобут Сталінскія выбары на Гарадзеншчыне (Сапоцкінскі выпадак, год 1948) // “Палітычная сфера” №9, 2007 с.69-72.

<sup>2</sup> The 1940's Soviet tradition of records management did not require full names in many official documents. People were usually named “comrades” without their first names.

support of the local population to the new initiatives of the Communist authorities and to foster the creation of a union of villages' active functionaries who were thought to establish the "collective farms' way of life".

*"On January 11th, the workers of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, based on the most democratic in the world electoral rights, will elect their best sons and daughters to the local bodies of the Soviet power. The election to local Soviets of Workers is the most important event in the life of the Belarusian nation. It is a step forward towards further strengthening of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, part of the great Socialist Fatherland. On 11 January 1948, the Belarusian nation will demonstrate its own unity and orderliness, as well as its unity with the Bolshevik Party and with the spirit and teachings of Comrade Stalin",* wrote *The Hrodzienskaja Prauda* newspaper on 4 October 1947.

At that time, all elections' results used to prove society's 99 percent support to the Communist authorities. Such consent in a democratic country seems to be not credible however a totalitarian system has its own political laws and does not approve of any other electoral process. The elections results had to prove expressly that there was no one who would be against the Communist authorities' monopoly. A question raises, "Is it true that citizens, especially in the West Belarus, used to go docilely to the ballot boxes and voted for Communists? Or perhaps the "Stalin result" was nothing but the result of manipulations with the ballot boxes?"

*"In our Soviet country it makes no sense to talk about falsifications of elec-*

*tions because our country carries out elections in accordance with the most democratic electoral rights, because the whole nation participates in them and has its representatives in the electoral commissions, thus organizing them,"* wrote *The Hrodzienskaja Prauda* newspaper on 31 October 1947.

Even today it is still possible to find traces of the Stalin era "elections miracles" at the Hrodna Archive of Social Organizations (former Archive of the Hrodna Regional Executive Commission of the Belarusian Communist Party). One of such documents is a report written on 13 January 1948, two days after the elections, by Captain Ilyin, the Head of the Operation Branch of Hrodna Department of the Police of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to the Head of Regional Department of Internal Affairs [1]. This report became the reason for a follow-up scrutiny. The Hrodna Regional Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party took charge of this case. No wonder, as the police Captain Ilyin reported that the elections were falsified by the members of the local Electoral Commission in Sapotskina (Sopotskino) Electoral District No 53.

## I. The vote fraud in Noviki

Sapotskina District was situated in the North-West part of the Hrodna Region in 1944-1959; in March 1959 its territory became a part of the Hrodna District. After the Soviet authorities came here, it wrecked a lot of Communists nerves. The majority of the population was Polish and watched closely the initiatives of the local authorities. On 31 December 1947 comrade Fralou,

the Head of the Hrodna KGB Department, informed Peter Kalinin, the First Secretary of the Hrodna Regional Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party, about the moods of the local population in his special report, "In this District, the anti-Soviet elements spread provocative rumours that the war between America and the USSR is inevitable."

*"For example, an inhabitant of the village Praleiki, Sapotskina District, Maria Pianouska, born in 1883 a Polish national, said to her neighbors, "Soon, there will be a war between England and America on the one side and the Soviet Union on the other. The Bolsheviks will be running from here, just like they were in 1941. Poland will restore its borders as they were in 1939."*

These moods were wide-spread there and the authorities knew about it quite well. Still, due to Communist traditions, such moods could not influence the official voting results. The elections results in Sapotskina District did not differ from the results in the other regions of the USSR. It was always the same 99% of voters who voted for the Bolsheviks. Local activists were used to such "results". However, on January 11th, two Hrodna policemen Chuprynousky (Chuprinovsky) and Chechka (Chechko) were sent to guard the electoral commissions in Sapotskina District. They were sent to the village Noviki, the center of a local Soviet situated to the North-West of Sapotskina, where the policemen became eyewitnesses of open falsifications. It seems they saw the "electoral kitchen" for the first time in their lives, and that was the reason why after returning back to Hrodna

they decided to inform their commanders about the facts of falsifications.

Comrades Chuprynousky and Chechka reported that at the polling station in the Noviki local Soviet most people decided not to go voting and simply ignored the elections. By 3 p.m. only 40% of the voters had taken part in the election.

The unpleasant for Communists situation could be saved by mobile ballot boxes. The members of the Commission took ballot boxes and started visiting local villages, therefore forcing the villagers to "carry out their obligations". Nevertheless the people opposed it, when the electioneers and the Commission members were entering a village all the inhabitants were running away from their houses. Ada Germanok, a Secretary of the Noviki local Soviet said later, "In all the houses we were visiting there were children only. That was the way the people expressed their attitude with regard to the new authorities."

*"When I came back to the local Soviet, I saw a terrible mess there, there were no members of the Commission, except Comrade Kurylovich who was lying on the seats where the Commission was meant to be seated, he was asleep... During the elections there were situations when Kurylovich would give four bulletins to one voter. When the voter asked why four, Kurylovich answered, "Just throw 'em 'ere and shut up", wrote in her report Ada Germanok (State Archive... Fund 1, Volume 1, Case 174).*

Still, regardless of all these manipulations the required percentage could not be achieved. When Karmanau (Karmanov), the Head of the Commission, understood that the result pre-planned

by the Hrodna Regional Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party would not be reached, he decided to take it into his own hands.

*“Comrade Karmanau ordered everybody except the Secretary to leave the building of the local Soviet. Then Karmanau threw all ballot bulletins into the ballot box and reported that all 100% of voters had participated in the election,”* reported Captain Ilyin.

However it was not yet the end of the people’s plebiscite in Sapotskina Electoral District No 53 under the guidance of Comrade Karmanau. At 4 p.m. three voters unexpectedly did come to the local Soviet. Comrade Karmanau, who was terribly drunk as a celebration of the successful end of the elections was already taking place, ordered Dubovik, a Secretary of the Electoral Commission, to open the ballot box and to provide the late-coming voters with bulletins.

*“In front of the three voters, Checkka, Chuprynousky and other citizens, the Secretary opened the box and gave bulletins to the voters,”* reported Ilyin. The voters looked at the bulletins and noticed that they were from another election district.

*“We are not from Balinenty,”* said one of the voters. *“Don’t be so smart, throw ‘em ‘ere!”*, was the answer,” reported Ada Germanok.

The policemen Chuprynousky and Checkka proved to the Regional Committee that the election security plenipotentiary representatives of the Hrodna Regional Committee and the Sapotskina District Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party were eye-witnesses of the falsifications. However

the latter did not react to the electoral law infringement. Today we understand that it was a normal practice and that they did know about such “electoral incidents” as they were rather widespread and common everywhere.

According to the Article 120 of the Law on Elections to Regional, Districts, Cities and Local Soviets of Workers of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, members of the Electoral Commissions who falsified or purposefully counted votes in the inappropriate way, must be punished with three years of imprisonment. However this legal norm had never been used in the USSR.

## II. The inquiry at the Party’s Regional Committee

Harachau (Goryachev), the Head of the Hrodna Police, who was a member of the Party’s Regional Committee, immediately sent the Captain Ilyin’s report to the Party review. All the participants of the “Noviki Case” had to explain their behavior. The case was really important as Captain Ilyin’s report gave grounds to initiate a criminal case based on the fact of falsifications. However at those times none of the policemen could dare to initiate such a case without the Party’s consent. Besides, it is necessary to remember about the political context of such criminal case as it could mean that the whole Electoral District, even though it was the only one in the entire Soviet Union, did not support Comrade Stalin and the Communist Party. Indeed, the Heads of the Hrodna Regional Committee were not interested in it.

During the Regional Committee meeting, the Secretary Dubovik (who

opened the box) and Ivan Ramanau (Romanov), a plenipotentiary representative of the Sapotskina District Committee, affirmed that there were no infringements of the Electoral Law in Noviki. The policemen report was confirmed by Ada Germanok, a Secretary of the Noviki local Electoral District, only. The other members of the Electoral Commission said, they knew nothing or heard about it from Germanok. The falsifications case was soon closed. None of its participants were punished. The Hrodna Communist Party report concerning the results of the local elections drafted for the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party was quite colourful.

*“The elections to the local Soviets of workers in the Hrodna Region have been carried out under the conditions of a high moral rise. In all 5,574 Electoral Districts 318,419 voters have participated in the elections, while the total population is 318,824. Therefore it constituted 99.9% of the voters and 99.5% voted for Stalin’s Communist candidates. It showed that the voters have revealed their trust, unlimited love and devotion to the Communist ideals, the Soviet nation and the Great Teacher of the Nations – Comrade Stalin. The election day has become a real national holiday,”* wrote Kulinkovich, the Head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Hrodna Regional Committee, to the Party Central Committee (State Archive... Fund 1, Volume 1, Case 174).

The reasons why Police Captain Il-yin, a Communist and a high-ranking Soviet official, decided to report about the falsifications in Sapotskina Election District No 53, are not known. Was it a

sign of idealism, inadmissible for such a high rank? Or was it a desire to start repressions against the disobedient population of Sapotskina District? Or was it just an internal Party strife?.. Unfortunately, today these questions cannot be answered. The Archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and KGB, where perhaps there is more information about the reasons and outcomes of the “electoral scandal in Noviki”, are still closed. Nevertheless one fact is certain – writing such report on the day when all the USSR newspapers had already announced the resounding victory of the Stalin Communists was an unprecedented move.

Today, the “Noviki Case”, which has survived as several sheets of yellowed paper in the former archive of the Party’s Hrodna Regional Committee, allows us to understand the real mechanism of the formation of the totalitarian system in the Western regions of the BSSR and the real level of the political support to the Communist authorities in the Hrodna Region in 1948.

## Literature

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