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POPULAR REPRESENTATION IN THE SOVIET POLITICAL TRADITION (EXPERIENCE OF THE BSSR)

Abstract: The author elaborates on the tradition to convoke various public assemblies practiced in the Soviet period during the turning historic moments focusing on the National Belarusian Assembly of 1917 and the West Belarusian People's Assembly of 1939. The agenda of the first rally was to proclaim the Belarusian Soviet Republic. This agenda, however, was not implemented due to grave political conflict. At the second rally representatives of West Belarus voted to become part of the BSSR and, correspondingly, the USSR. The author examines different points of view on the mentioned events.

The development of the people's rule and self-government took most conspicuous tracks during the age of revolution. To a certain extent, both the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets serve as samples of this development. The Soviets took a vigorous part in summoning up the people's militia, factory committees, workers' trade unions, soldiers' committees across the military sector and peasant's committees in the rural areas.

As Y.I.Treshchenok observed "breaking up with the pre-revolutionary past, the Soviet age was, at the same time, sustaining it, tied to the past by the indissoluble bonds of continuity" [1, p. 5].

The Soviet rule was legally adopted in Belarus by the decision of the following three public councils – the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of the Western region (November 19-21, 1917); the Third Assembly of Peasants' Deputies of Minsk and Vilna counties (November 18-20, 1917); and the Second Assembly of Front Committees of the West Front (November 20-25, 1917). Bolsheviks received an overwhelming majority of the votes at all the mentioned people's assemblies, and with the joining party of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries they were able to create a united Regional (Oblast) Executive Committee of the West Region and Front ("Obliskomzap") on November 26, 1917. However, as all the three assemblies were closely tied to the priorities of the then domineering revolutionary agenda, their scope of competence and representation quota were not, therefore, above reproach.

The revolutionary process had its peculiar features in Belarus stemming from the intertwining socio-economic and political factors, cross-cutting for all the Russian areas, and the process of the national state building. The All-Belarusian Assembly of 1917 most vividly epitomized the principle of people's representation during the revolutionary age. The assembly was initiated by a number of public and political institutions, and, first and foremost, by the Belarusian Regional Committee under the All-Russian Soviet of Peasant Deputies in Petrograd and the Great Belarusian Rada in Minsk. Despite the resistance of the Soviet and party leadership in Minsk, the idea of organizing an assembly was upheld by the Council of People's Commissars in Petrograd and personally endorsed by V.I. Lenin and J.V. Stalin. The first delegates arrived in Minsk on December 5, 1917, and two days later the assembly was declared open. The sources give different data on the number of delegates. However, according to certain evidence, the number was impressive – 1167 delegates with the deciding vote and 705 delegates with the consultative vote [2, p. 3]. The delegates worked in utterly complicated political environment and were engaged in an incessant debate. The future of the Belarusian statehood – and in particular, the level of the nation's autonomy and the state's relations with the Russian Federative Democratic Republic – was the key issue discussed along with some other. The rhetoric of the debate was reasonable and non-radical, though most of the delegates confessed revolutionary-democratic and socialist beliefs. Thus, while the assembly participants called for the all-permeating development of the Belarusian language, promotion of the language's status and its penetration in all the spheres of life, they, at the same time, recognized the official status of the Russian language and its major role in the social life of the region. It was decided to introduce universal free-of-charge schooling, establish the Belarusian University and expand the network of other educational institutions. The delegates also

voted in the agricultural reform to be implemented through the non-repayable transfer of the land to the laboring peasants. The delegates also recommended to introduce an 8-hour working day both for factory workers and peasants, called for creating “the people’s watch” and actively opted for the Belarusian national military units.

The final resolution of the Assembly was elaborated in the result of the consensus reached between the delegates disagreeing about the future of the Belarusian statehood: “Declaring its right for self-identification secured by the Russian Revolution, proclaiming democratic republican regime within the Belarusian land, aiming to save the homeland and protect it from the division and separation from the Russian Democratic Federative Republic, the First All-Belarusian Assembly decrees the following: out of the number of the present delegates, to immediately set up the All-Belarusian Soviet of Peasants’, Soldiers’ and Workers’ Deputies acting as the ruling body in the region and cooperating with the central authorities accountable to the Soviet of the Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies” [3, p. 57]. For all intents and purposes, it was ultimately all about the creation of the Belarusian Soviet Republic functioning in close union with the Russian Federation. The All-Belarusian Soviet of the Peasants’, Soldiers’ and Workers’ Deputies was to shortly secure the Belarusian Constituent Assembly, the latter expected to anchor Belarus’ choice for self-identification and establish permanent public authorities. However, the above mentioned plans were not in line with the policies of Obliskomzap – the Executive Committee of the Western Oblast and Front, established by the Bolsheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in Minsk under the leadership of A.F. Myasnikov, V.G. Knorin and K.I. Lander who passed the resolution to dismiss the All-Belarusian Assembly enacted on the night of December 17-18.

This act of violence didn’t gain support either in Belarus or Petrograd. Pressured by the Sovnarkom and, most particularly, by the People’s Commissar for Nationalities J.V. Stalin, Minsk Bolsheviks were forced to convene a second All-Belarusian Assembly tentatively scheduled for February 1918. The Belarusian National Commissariat (Belnatcom), established in Petrograd on January 31, 1918, was tasked, inter alia, with the organization of the mentioned forum. However, the advancement of the German troops halted the process and up until the end of 1918 Belarus was under the occupation of the German Crown.

The attempt to establish the nation’s autonomy within the foreign occupation by declaring the Belarusian People’s Republic, undertaken by a number of delegates of the All-Belarusian Assembly, had failed, and while outlined on paper, the BPR didn’t bear a shape fit for a state. The

Belarusian scholar N.S. Stashkevich, who had conducted vast research on this particular issue, made a fair observation: “The Belarusian national statehood emerged amongst harsh social clashes and turmoil caused by the Russian revolution. That’s why the events, that accompanied the birth of the Belarusian statehood, today do not match with the sham, lop-sided narratives” [4, p. 141].

Despite the adopted decisions aimed to strengthen the role of public councils, the latter didn’t always effectively participate in the decision- and policy-making processes of the state. By the 1920-s the Soviets (public councils) became accountable to the party structures and the communist factions took over the control of the councils’ activities. Bolshevik deputies had a similar organization pattern – alas, by that time there were no representatives of other parties at the Belarusian assemblies. Since the Third All-Belarusian Assembly, the public councils had had a similar paradigm at all levels – “the bloc of communists and nonpartisans”. De jure, the overarching role of the Soviets was secured by the BSSR Constitutions of 1919, 1927 and 1937. Quite surprisingly, there was no sole head of state either in the republic or the USSR as a whole. In its stead, there was a collective body – first, the Central Executive Committee and its Presidium, and since 1937 – the Supreme Soviet.

The Soviets became the key public representative institution in the BSSR, meaning the revocation of the citizens’ right for direct, secret and general democratic elections. This, undoubtedly, was one of the major preconditions for the establishment of the one-party system in the country. During the post-revolution period the Soviets served as an effective lever to manipulate the vote of the toiling masses and catered for Bolsheviks, as the ruling party, in their want either to cooperate or do away with the competing political groups, allowing them, in the long run, to legally anchor their regime in the country and set up a legislative framework for it.

It’s not surprising, therefore, that other authentic forms of vast people’s representation, that hadn’t been written down in the Constitution, emerged during another turning point in our country’s history. On September 17, 1939, after the Polish state was victimized by the German fascist outrage and collapsed, the Red Army waged the Liberation Campaign across the West Belarus and the Western Ukraine, ending the 20-year period of the Polish occupation with the ensuing colonial exploitation and national oppression.

Legitimizing the reunification of the West Belarus with the BSSR and their integration into the USSR was on the Politburo’s agenda. With regards to this, the Central Committee of the Communist Party adopted on October 1, 1939, Decree “On Issues of the Western Ukraine and the West Belarus”,

the 33 articles of which stipulated the objectives, timeframe and procedure of the election to the People's Assembly, and highlighted main issues to be considered in the assembly's framework. A regulation on political and organizational activities to be held across the West Belarus within the preparations to the elections to the People's Assembly, was adopted on the coming day by the Central Party Committee [5, p. 1-3]. It was an unconventional decision as the mentioned representative institution hadn't been yet laid down either in the USSR Constitution of 1936 or the BSSR Constitution of 1937. On the other hand, however, the new territories hadn't become an official part of the Soviet Belarus and permanent public authorities hadn't been established yet.

The right to nominate candidates was delegated to the peasants' committees, temporary city governments, workers' assemblies at factories, militants of the workers' guard (created to maintain order and for self-protection) and talent teams. All citizens aged 18+ (including women – incidentally, a fact not so common across Europe at those times) were granted the right to vote irrespectively of their social background, property status, nationality or political standpoints. The elections to the People's Assembly were held by universal, equal and direct vote expressed by means of the secret ballot. The representation ratio was 1 deputy per 5 thousand constituents. All in all, 2,763,191 electors were registered, 96,71% of whom cast their vote. The elections resulted with 927 deputies elected, 804 of which were men and 123 – women [6, p. 495-497]. The elections were democratic to a high extent, what is proven by the official data claiming the share of the negative vote to be 9,3% – the figure quite unheard of within the Soviet mono-party system. Moreover, in two of the constituencies the candidates didn't get the majority of vote and there was a rerun of elections. For comparison: in 1935 only 45,9% of the constituents took part in the elections to the Polish Seim [7, p. 22].

The People's Assembly was officially opened on October 28, 1939, in Belostok. The event was attended by the national poets of Belarus Yanka Kupala and Yakub Kolas. S.O. Pritytskiy spoke with a report on the state power. In conclusion of the discussion, that took place during the event, the delegates adopted the following resolution: "A motion should be submitted to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR with a plea for the accession of the West Belarus to the USSR and the BSSR and reunification of the Belarusian people within one state to bring an end to the separation of the Belarusian people" [8, p. 1-2]. The delegates considered a number of key issues – such as the powers of the government, accession of the West Belarus to the BSSR, expropriation of the landowners' properties, and nationalization of banks and large-scale industries. The people's assembly adopted 4 constitutional acts and set up

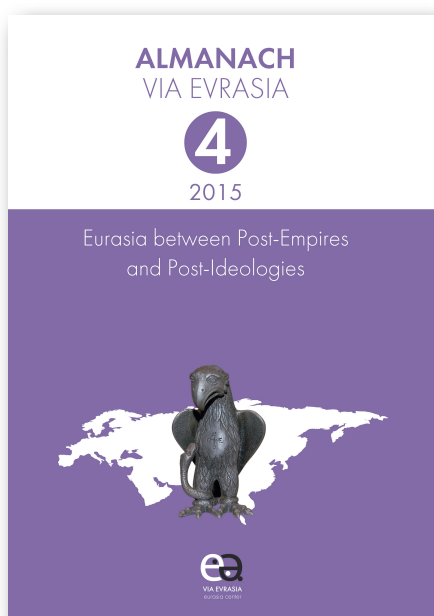
a plenipotentiary commission with 66 members, who were then delegated to Moscow to submit the decision on the accession of the West Belarus to the USSR. The elected deputies agreed to proclaim the 17th of September as the Liberation Day of the Workers of the West Belarus.

It should be noted that the People's Assembly of the West Belarus is sometimes criticized by the contemporary Polish and some Belarusian historiographers [9; 10]. Now and then, they try to present the assembly as a sham event fully played out by the ruling party with its repressive gears. This is not to be taken at face value. Despite all the rigidity and officialdom of the Soviet political system and the party's fine-tuned mechanism for society control, the events that took place in the West Belarus in the autumn of 1939 should be viewed from a separate slant as they unfolded in accordance with their own logic. There is evidence on the increased public engagement during that period when people themselves determined the future of their Motherland.

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