

**MSC 2020****International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.  
COMMUNICATION»****NORTH KOREAN POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION AND  
EASTERN EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE: 1945-1950**

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**Abstract**

The article is a contribution to the problem of some political reforms in Northern Korea in five-years long period between the WWII and Korean War (1945–1950) in comparison with some similar events taking place in Eastern Europe. The main focus is on the first North Korea elections in the November 1946 as well as on the monetary reform a year later which shaped the unique face of North Korea political system and finally made impossible the integration with the South which followed another path. These reforms under Soviet military administration were often considered a kind of Korean Revolution in the previous historiography. The article's main aim is to point out that the reforms at least partly were copied out from the Soviet previous experience in already occupied Eastern Europe, i.e. one cannot perceive them as an independent transformation made on its own. Moreover, the main decisions regarding these reforms were taken by the Soviet military Administration while the Korean communists (including Kim Il Sung himself) performed just a secondary role in these transformations.

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*Keywords:* 'Electoral Law' redactions, Northern Korea, soviet administration, the elections, the project of first Constitution



## 1. Introduction

We will contribute to the problem providing proofs that such borrowing was actually possible. The paper will focus on not the land reform problematics but on the other political transformation which regards the first elections in the North Korea and the project of first Constitution. The elections occurred on Sunday, November 3, 1946, becoming an important tool for legitimizing the new government. According to official reports, 99% of the country's population took part in them, almost unanimously (98%) casting their votes for candidates nominated by the United National Front of North Korea. Such a result is unlikely to surprise anyone who is familiar with the Soviet electoral system: similar numbers were regularly reached in the elections, both in the USSR itself and in the territory of the states of the Soviet bloc controlled by it. Apparently, that caused the fact that in the existing historiography, almost no attention was paid to the first elections in North Korea.

## 2. Problem Statement

Marginal in the previous research tradition the theme of East European influence had its own historiography as well. Thus, Hyun Soo Jeon in his PhD thesis, "Social-economic reforms in North Korea in the first years after liberation (1945-1948)," (Jeon, 1997) defended at the Institute of Asian and African Countries of Moscow State University in 1997, argues that North Korean land reform of 1946 was based on the experience of similar transformations in Poland and Hungary. Meanwhile, it remained unclear how that institutional transfer occurred, who was in charge for applying the East European experience to the North Korean reforms, etc. Moreover, the Jeon (1997) idea does not seem to be well proved in his text. There is nothing but the statement about similarities between these two land reforms. Most researchers devoted only a few lines to these elections, confining themselves to stating a result indecently close to one hundred percent. The work of Lankov (2002) "From Stalin to Kim Il Sung. Formation of North Korea 1945–1960" (Lankov, 2002) which gives a brief, but generally fairly accurate description of the election: no alternative, two ballot boxes of different colors (white and black) for voting 'for' and 'against' the candidate from the Popular Front, respectively. One can only object that formally the elections cannot be called completely non-alternative since the second candidate was nominated in 60 constituencies, which, however, did not prevent the almost absolute victory of the first one, so this objection can be considered insignificant. Another thing is that the procedure for voting is not completely described by Lankov (2002). According to him, the color differentiation of ballot boxes allowed the authorities to easily determine which of the voters approached the black ballot box (against the candidate) and, accordingly, take him under observation.

## 3. Research Questions

**3.1.** Were the political changes in North Korea produced by North Korea Communist Party itself or it was the Soviet Military Administration who did it?

**3.2.** How the East-European experience was used in the political transformation in North Korea?

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The article focuses on some political reforms in Northern Korea in five-years long period between the WWII and Korean Wars (1945–1950). These reforms under Soviet military administration were often considered a kind of Korean Revolution in the previous historiography (Armstrong, 2011; Kim, 2007; Kim, 2010; Kim, 2012; Matray, 2011; Yang, 2008). The article’s main aim is to point out that the reforms at least partly were copied out from the Soviet previous experience in already occupied Eastern Europe, i.e. one cannot perceive them as an independent transformation made on its own.

#### 5. Research Methods

The main method of investigations of the problem is a comparative studying. A document of Soviet Administration North Korea from the Archive of Russian Ministry of Defense can clarify the problem. There is one item intitled ‘The materials characterizing the elections and democratic changes in South-Eastern Europe in 1946’ (TsAMO, n.d. a). Hundred seventy-seven pages long document consist of the text of Yugoslavian Electoral Law, the project of Yugoslavian Constitution and also some pre-electoral programs of United Fronts of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. The document was received on July 15 1946 from Moscow by general T. Shtykov who was the head of the Soviet Civil Administration of North Korea (that is the document that demonstrates the latter role in the North Korea political life: “Report on the results of the work of the Office of the Soviet Civil Administration in North Korea for three years (August 1945–November 1948)” – AVPRF (AVPRF, n.d.) and so in fact the ruler of the peninsula to the North of 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

#### 6. Findings

At first glance, there are no clear evidences that these documents were directly used by Soviet Administration in preparing the elections but an accurate analysis shows a different picture. Studying the documents of Soviet Administration in North Korea we found out that the electoral law was modified in the autumn 1946 just a couple of months before the elections themselves. Fortunately, we discovered also a document in which both redactions are reflected, the main difference between them regards the voting procedure:

**Table 1.** Comparison of two ‘Electoral Law’ redactions.

1 <sup>st</sup> Redaction [hereafter – R1]	2 <sup>nd</sup> Redaction [hereafter – R2]
Статья 39 ... Для голосования избирателей на избирательном участке выделяется отдельная комната, в которой должно находиться несколько избирательных кабин, в зависимости от количества избирателей... [избиратель] получает от председателя или от члена избирательной комиссии бюллетень установленного образца и переходит в	Отменить статьи 39, 40, 45 «Положения о выборах...» и заменить их статьями в следующей редакции: Статья 39. Голосование производится путем опускания избирательных билетов в избирательные ящики... Избирательных ящиков должно быть по два на каждого баллотирующегося кандидата. Первый ящик – белого цвета при голосовании за

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комнату для голосования, где опускает его в избирательную урну. В комнате для голосования, а также в кабине для заполнения избирательного бюллетеня никто не должен присутствовать, кроме голосующего. Избиратель ... оставляет в каждом избирательном бюллетене фамилию того кандидата, за которого он голосует, вычеркивая фамилии остальных (TsAMO, n.d. b, p. 113).

(Article 39

There should be a separate voting room at the polling station, in which several polling booths should be located, depending on the number of voters ... [the voter] receives a standard-form voting paper from the chairman or member of the election commission and goes to the voting room, where he drops it in ballot box. No one shall be present in the voting room, as well as in the booth for filling out the voting paper, except for the voter. The voter ... leaves in each voting paper the name of the candidate for whom he votes, crossing out the other names) (TsAMO, n.d. b, p. 113).

кандидата и второй ящик черного цвета против кандидата...

Статья 40 Голосование производится следующим порядком

... Получив избирательный билет, избиратель берет в руку его и сжатой рукой подходит к избирательным ящикам для голосования в члены провинциального комитета, просовывает руку с избирательным билетом по очереди в каждый ящик, опуская избирательный билет в ящик того кандидата, за которого он голосует, при чем если избиратель голосует за этого кандидата, он опускает избирательный билет в белый ящик, если против – то в черный ящик (TsAMO, n.d. b, p. 92–93).

(Repeal articles 39, 40, 45 of the ‘Electoral Law’ and replace them with the articles as follows:

Article 39. Voting is carried out by dropping the voting tickets [sic!] in the ballot suit-cases<sup>1</sup> [sic!] ...

There must be two ballot suit-cases for each running candidate. The first suit-case is white when voting for the candidate and the second box is black against the candidate ...

Article 40 Voting shall be carried out as follows ... Having received a ticket, the voter takes it in his hand and with a clenched hand approaches the suit-case, puts his hand with the ticket in turn into each suit-case, dropping the ticket into the suit-case of the candidate for whom he votes, and if the voter votes for this candidate, he drops the ticket in a white suit-case, if against, then in a black suit-case) (TsAMO, n.d. b, p. 92–93)

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Comparing the R1 and R2, the first difference you see is the alternative (two or more running candidates) election in R1 (a voting paper in which you need to leave only one name, crossing out the rest) and, accordingly, the non-alternative (just one candidate) in R2 (two suit-cases for the voting “for” and “against”). However, this difference is an illusion. On the one hand, R1 cites almost literally the Soviet election law of 1938 according to which elections in the USSR were often held on no alternative basis, and the R1 itself does not require the presence of several names on the list, but only allows that possibility. On the other hand, one can hardly consider that R2 was shaped only for non-alternative voting. It’s text is generally contradictory: on the one hand, there are voting suit-cases “for” and “against,” giving an idea of one running candidate, and on the other, an opportunity to vote for different candidates is also implicitly mentioned (‘dropping the ticket into the box of the candidate for whom he votes’). Taking into consideration that two candidates were really nominated in 60 districts, it turns out that theoretically there could be

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<sup>1</sup> In Russian here is used a word ‘jashik’ (literally box or suit-case) that is unusual for a description of voting procedure where the word ‘urna’ is basically used.

simultaneously four ballot suit-cases in the polling station, two for each of the running candidates. Summing up the above, the changes in the ‘Electoral Law’ cannot be explained by the preference of a non-alternative model over a competitive one. Both R1 and R2 could be used to organize any electoral procedure.

Another striking difference between R1 and R2 is how they managed the principle of ‘secrecy of voting’. P1 requires a separate voting room and a booth for filling out the voting paper, where no one but the voter should be present. At the same time P2 makes a voter to put a clenched hand with a ticket into each of the suit-cases. In that case, the commission members who are in the same room could not see exactly where the voter put his ticket. So, the ‘secrecy of the voting’ was ensured in both R1 and R2, and that was especially emphasized in negotiations with the American side. So, Kim Il Sung told the US representative Bans at a meeting on 10/06/46: “The election of the People’s Committees will be held on the basis of universal suffrage by secret voting. The right to elect and be elected is granted to all citizens of North Korea regardless their gender, educational and property status. The elections will be held on the basis of a bloc of all democratic parties and organizations that are members of the North Korean United People’s Democratic Party. This event ... is supported by all sectors of North Korea as workers, peasants and intelligentsia, as well as handicraftsmen, traders and manufacturers, since with a secret voting they have the opportunity to fully express their will" (TsAMO, n.d. c, p. 52–59).

The third and key difference between the two editions was the mechanism of the voting. In P1 there is a *voting paper* to be filled in and dropped into just one *ballot box*, while P2 mentions a *ticket*, that simply should be put into one of two (four) suit-cases. The terminology changes here seem to matter, because they concern the procedure subject. The voting in R2 has a very archaic character. A similar principle dates back to the medieval practice of voting with balls (from where the terms ‘ballot’, ‘ballotin’ come from, in fact), The tickets of R2 (which were, apparently, pieces of paper) played role of balls because they were used in the same mode as medieval balls were. However, it is not clear how the Soviet political officers, who controlled the elections at all levels, could have known about this thoroughly forgotten form of voting. Moreover, it seems difficult to imagine that one of them would dare to undertake such experiment in the second half of the 1940s risking their lives or freedom under Stalin. That means R2 had its own sources which are found easily once we compare it to the aforementioned Yugoslavian Electoral Law [hereafter – YEL].

**Table 2.** R2 and YEL in comparison

R2	YEL
Голосование производится следующим порядком Получив избирательный билет, избиратель берет в руку его и сжатой рукой подходит к избирательным ящикам для голосования в члены провинциального комитета, просовывает руку с избирательным билетом по очереди в каждый ящик, опуская избирательный билет в ящик того кандидата, за которого он голосует, при чем если избиратель голосует за этого кандидата, он опускает избирательный билет в белый ящик, если против – то в черный ящик (TsAMO, n.d. b, p. 92-93).	Голосование производится следующим образом: Когда избиратель получает шар, он берет его в правую руку, а если не имеет правой руки, то в левую сжимает руку и с сжатой рукой подходит к каждому ящику по очереди и в каждый ящик просовывает сжатую руку. Шар он опускает в тот ящик, который принадлежит кандидатскому списку или кандидату, за которого данный избиратель хочет голосовать. Вынув руку из последнего ящика, избиратель при всех разжимает ее, чтобы каждый мог видеть, что в ней больше нет шара (TsAMO, n.d. a, p. 30).
(Article 40 Voting shall be carried out as follows	

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... Having received a ticket, the voter takes it in his hand and with a clenched hand approaches the suit-case, puts his hand with the ticket in turn into each suit-case, dropping the ticket into the suit-case of the candidate for whom he votes, and if the voter votes for this candidate, he drops the ticket in a white suit-case, if against, then in a black suit-case) (TsAMO, n.d. b, p. 113).

(Voting shall be carried out as follows  
When the voter receives the ball, he takes it in his right hand, and if he does not have a right hand, he takes it in the left one, then he clenches his hand and with a clenched hand approaches each box in turn and puts a clenched hand in each box. He drops the ball into the box that belongs to the candidate list or to the candidate for whom the given voter wants to vote. Having taken his hand out of the last box, the voter unclenches it at all so that everyone can see that there is no longer a ball) (TsAMO, n.d. a, p. 30).

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The literal textual coincidences in YEL and R2 are quite obvious. Moreover, the latter seems a short-cut version of the former. The main difference between YEL and R2 is that the former is designed for an alternative voting with many candidates involved in, while R2, not excluding that completely, is made primarily for no-alternative voting with just one candidate. In the YEL, different boxes secure the voting for different candidates, while in R2 they ensure the choice between “for” and “against” just one person. However, even this difference paradoxically proves the similarity between the documents. Retelling or copying the text of the YEL up to the words “the given voter wants to vote”, R2 then adds the original passage about white and black boxes. Thus, the text of R2 becomes contradictory, because without this original passage, it would remain designed just for an alternative voting due to the phrase (“dropping the ticket into the box of the candidate for whom he votes” in R2) which were copied out from YEL altogether with all text before. At the same time, the second candidate makes useless the boxes “for” and “against”. So, that is the way how the contradiction appeared in the R2 text when its author simply used scissors and paste method gluing together YEL short-cut version and his own original passage.

That case of coping out from YEL can still be explained by some rational reason. As Vovin (2020) argued in his article, the archaic ‘ball’ voting system could be used to facilitate the falsification of electoral results because it was easier to relocate the empty ‘tickets’ from ‘against’ suit-case (open upper part where a voter should be able to insert his hand) to the ‘for’ one than to deal with the notes in the voting papers placed in a ballot box (closed upper part with a thin hole for voting papers) (Vovin, 2020). But the scissors and paste method which was applied in a blunt manner makes us assume that sometimes the soviet authors of first North Korean documents did not really think a lot about the texts they copied out from. That idea can be easily proved if we continue to revise other documents from ‘The materials characterizing the elections and democratic changes in South-Eastern Europe in 1946’ (TsAMO, n.d. a). Besides YEL there is also a text of Yugoslavian Constitution as it was already aforementioned.

Unfortunately, since no early project of North Korean Constitution in Russian preserved in archives, we have no text to compare it directly to Yugoslavian Constitution (the modern translation in Russian of North Korean Constitution cannot be used for such a purpose due to the ‘lost in translation’ effect). However, we were lucky to find another document which at least implicitly can show us some details of such early project. That is a review by L. Baranov (an official of Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party (b) in Moscow) on the project of North Korean constitution (RGASPI, n.d.). The review was signed in April 1948, i.e. near two years later than the ‘The materials characterizing the elections and democratic changes in South-Eastern Europe in 1946’ were received by T. Shtykov. The review is a five

pages long document full of criticism on the project. That critics were often the latter citations are provided are priceless for our research since we have no Project text itself.

One of the points criticized by L. Baranov is that the main liberties (freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, are directly mentioned) are described like in a ‘bourgeois’ Constitutions without any explanation how these liberties are defended (‘formal declaration’ in Stalin’s words) (RGASPI, n.d., p. 50). That is exactly how the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly are proclaimed in the Article 27 of the Yugoslavian Constitution [hereafter – YC] where one can find just a short list of the liberties and no special mechanism for their defense. (TsAMO, n.d. a). L. Baranov also criticized the Article 30 of the project where was said ‘all citizens must work’ (RGASPI, n.d., p. 50) (in his eyes such formula could be understood as state’s obligation to provide a job to each citizen, while it was in fact impossible due to North Korean economy conditions). Again, we find very similar if not identical formula in YC Article 32: ‘Each citizen must work according to his abilities’ (TsAMO, n.d. a, p. 57). If the similarities above could still be considered just coincidences, the Baranov’s criticism toward the term ‘private property’ (especially land private property) in the project seems more significant. He points out that according to the land reform there was no private property for the land in North Korea, the peasants were not owners but holders, they had no right to sell, buy and inherit it. (RGASPI, n.d.). The YC shared the criticized norms of the project, it was written directly in its Article 19 : ‘The land belongs to who work on it’. (TsAMO, n.d. a, p. 53). That article concludes with a state obligation to help poor and ‘middle’ peasants. No other profession is emphasized in that way through the document. An analogous provision in the project was seriously criticized by L. Baranov who pointed out that besides the peasants there were another professional social group in North Korea that should be especially protected by the state like peasants were (RGASPI, n.d.).

Finally, L. Baranov criticized the project provision prohibiting to the religious organizations ‘to exploit the church and religion for the politics’ (Злоупотреблять церковью и религией в политических целях). He argued that one of three legal North Korean political parties ‘Chondoist Chongu Party’, a member of United Front, was in fact a religious organization, therefore such kind of prohibition could ‘cause some negative effects’. How could it happen that such politically inaccurate provision was included in the project? In that case answering that question we have no doubt. It was copied out from YC, which contains a literally identical prescription of Article 25 not ‘to exploit the church and religion for the politics’ (Злоупотребление церковью и религией в политических целях). It was, of course, essential for Yugoslavia with its people divided first of all on religious base, while it was unacceptable, as L. Baranov pointed out, for North Korea with its different social and political conditions. At the same time, one should add that L. Baranov never criticized the practice itself to borrow the provisions from East European documents, moreover his review concludes with an advise to elaborate the project ‘taking into consideration the political and economical situation inside the country and using the experience of Constitution creation in the East European countries (for contemporary view on Eastern European Sovietization See: Dimić, 2008) with people democracy’ (RGASPI, n.d., p. 51). It means that the borrowing from Eastern European experience was semi-official blessed by Moscow. Just some unacceptable points could be defeated on the higher level while the majority of such borrowings could remain for a while like R2 which is still in use in North Korea.

## 7. Conclusion

So, that was probably, we will state that carefully, one of the possible ways how sovietisation was spreading across the Soviet zone: the ready models were sent from Moscow to the local authorities, which (sometimes with minimal initiative and without taking into consideration the local realities) used the scissors and paste method for their documents to be approved or rejected later in Moscow. That was not a specific case of North Korea: the monetary reform there (Dec. 6-12. 1947) and that one in East Germany (June 22, 1948) shared their features and consequences. They both came to the moment when the Soviet administrations (in both occupation zones) had to find a way to bring back «foreign» money from south of Korean peninsula and from western zones in Germany consequently. Moreover, the separate monetary reforms in both divided countries (Korea and Germany) led to the weakening economic ties between the industrial north and agrarian south of Korea, as well as between industrial west and industrial-agrarian East of Germany creating an insurmountable split between different parts of a divided country. Thus, we dare to assume, the reforms of the second half of the 1940s both in Europe and northeast Asia stimulated the onset of the Cold War.

## Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the professor Kyoung-Hyoun Min at Korea University for the opportunity to use copies of documents from the archives of TsAMO and RGASPI.

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