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Political Communications in the USSR: Letters to Party, State and Press

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The letters sent by Soviet citizens to party and state bodies and to the press have been relatively little studied in the West, although the Soviet authorities themselves have been devoting increasing attention to this 'link with the masses' since at least the late 1960s. An examination of the extent and nature of such communications shows that their total number has increased significantly since the 1950s, and that more constructive and general proposals have been increasing at the expense of particular individual grievances, although this change is less apparent at the local level. Critics are sometimes victimized and frequently ignored, but the evidence suggests that a considerable groundswell of opinion as reflected in letters can have some influence upon public policy and that particular cases of maladministration or abuse of position can be relatively readily corrected in this way.

The various ways in which the Soviet public can attempt to influence the government that rules in their name have attracted a good deal of attention in the academic literature in recent years. The role of elections and of deputies to the soviets in communicating popular preferences, for instance, has been documented in several studies,¹ as has participation through the framework of the Communist Party and the Komsomol,² and through voluntary bodies such as the people's control committees and the police auxiliaries (*druzhinniki*).³ So far, however, little attention has been paid to a form of political involvement whose importance has been increasing steadily in recent years and to which the party authorities themselves have been devoting a good deal of attention, the letters addressed by citizens to institutions such as the party, the soviets and the press.⁴

It is to this subject that the present article is devoted. I shall look first of all at the increasing emphasis that the party-state authorities have been giving to 'work with letters' since about the 1960s, then at the various forms that political communications of this kind have assumed over the same period, and then finally at some of the functions that citizens' letters perform within the Soviet political system more generally. This article is intended as a preliminary and largely descriptive study of the evidence, which has not previously been collected and examined in this way. But it will, I hope, also help to throw some light on the nature of the

¹ See for instance Victor Zaslavsky and Robert J. Brym, 'The Functions of Elections in the USSR', *Soviet Studies*, 30 (1978), 362-71; Theodore H. Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1979); and Ronald J. Hill, *Soviet Politics, Political Science and Reform* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1980).

² See Aryeh L. Unger, 'Images of the CPSU', *Survey*, 23 (1977-8), 23-34, and Friedgut, 'Political Participation in the USSR: YCL and CPSU', *Soviet Studies*, 33 (1981), 107-24.

³ See Jerry F. Hough, 'Political Participation in the USSR', *Soviet Studies*, 28 (1976), 3-20, and Jan S. Adams, *Citizen Inspectors in the Soviet Union* (New York, Praeger, 1977).

⁴ For a helpful recent study of published letters in the Soviet press, see Jan S. Adams, 'Critical Letters to the Soviet Press: An Increasingly Important Public Forum', in Donald E. Schulz and Jan S. Adams (eds), *Political Participation in Communist Systems* (New York, Pergamon, 1981). The fullest available bibliography on this subject is T. O. Ostroumova (comp.), *Rabota s pis'mami i organizatsiya priema trudyachshikh v partiinykh organakh, gosudarstvennykh uchrezhdeniyakh i obshchestvennykh organizatsiyakh. Bibliograficheskiy spisok* (Moscow, Lenin Library, 1981, mimeo.); a valuable collection of documentary sources is N. N. Kazakevich and A. V. Kalitievskaya (comps.), *O rabote s pis'mami trudyashchikh. Sbornik dokumental'nykh materialov* (Moscow, Yuridicheskaya literatura, 1980).

relationship between rulers and ruled in the USSR, and thereby make some contribution to the study of Soviet politics more generally.

Letters in Soviet Politics: From the Revolution to the 1980s

Although the present official emphasis upon 'work with letters' dates back no further than the 1960s, the attempts made by Soviet writers to establish its Leninist origins are not entirely without foundation. Even before the revolution, it appears, the Bolshevik journal *Vpered* (Forward), published in Geneva, received about 300 letters a month, an unusually large postbag for the time.⁵ After the revolution such popular contacts developed further. Leading political figures such as President Kalinin travelled widely about the country, giving speeches and receiving the comments and complaints of citizens (the train in which Kalinin undertook these journeys, the 'October Revolution', was called 'Soviet power on wheels'). The written and oral complaints which were gathered on such journeys were generally examined on the train itself by officials from the various commissariats involved.⁶ Popular complaints and queries could also be addressed to the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), the legislative body elected by the Congress of Soviets, and many of them reached the notice of Lenin, the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars or government, which was itself responsible to VTsIK. The central office of the Council of People's Commissars received about 10,000 letters of this kind a year, many of which are reported to have been taken into account in the elaboration of government decrees and instructions, and many citizens were also received directly by the CPC's reception office (*priemnaya*).⁷

During the later 1920s and 1930s, as the emphasis of party and state policy shifted from discovering what popular preferences might be towards mobilizing the masses towards the achievement of objectives which had already been determined centrally, 'work with letters' began to receive rather less attention. The soviets lost most of whatever democratic content they had once possessed; newspapers devoted more space to record-breaking economic achievements than to the legitimate complaints of citizens; and the style of party leadership became more remote and hierarchical at all levels of the system. There were a number of exceptions to this general rule: the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate (*Rabkrin*), for instance, was given the authority to investigate public associations as well as state bodies in 1933,⁸ and Lenin's widow, Krupskaya, is reported to have played a role of some importance as an unofficial court of appeal against repressive sentences during the later 1930s, intervening on behalf of victimized citizens who wrote to her.⁹ A serious degree of attention to the oral and written communications of the Soviet public, however, is for the most part a development of rather later years, of the post-Stalin and even the post-Khrushchev period. The first clear sign of a change in official policy was a Central Committee decree of 29 August 1967, 'On the improvement of work on the consideration of letters and the organisation of the reception of the toilers', and it is from the adoption of this resolution that the present emphasis upon communications from the Soviet public may be said to date.

Letters, the resolution pointed out, were 'one of the main forms of strengthening and broadening the link between party and people, of the participation of the population in the conduct of state affairs, a means for the expression of public opinion, [and] a source of information on the life of the country'. Party, state and public bodies were urged to analyse and discuss such communications more frequently, newspapers were urged to publish them more often, and in all cases the matters raised, 'as a rule', were to be dealt with not later than

⁵ V. D. Pel't (ed.), *Teoriya i praktika sovetskoi periodicheskoi pechati* (Moscow, Vysshaya shkola, 1980), p. 141.

⁶ Kazakevich and Kalitievskaya (eds), *O rabote*, pp. 4-6.

⁷ E. N. Roshchepkina, 'O rabote s pis'mami grazhdan v pervye gody Sovetskoi vlasti (1917-1924gg.)' *Sovetskie arkhivy*, 6 (1979), 23.

⁸ Kazakevich and Kalitievskaya (eds), *O rabote*, p. 17.

⁹ See Robert H. McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp.286-8 and 321 n. 50.

a month after the receipt of the communication concerned.¹⁰ The following year the first comprehensive all-Union legal provision for these activities was made in a decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, 'On the procedure for the consideration of proposals, declarations and complaints of citizens', which was adopted on 12 April 1968. The decree laid down a standard procedure for dealing with the oral and written communications of citizens, establishing in every case which body should deal with the communication in question and within what period of time, and including a right of appeal to a higher instance if necessary.¹¹ A decree was adopted on the same date establishing procedures for the consideration of letters by deputies to the USSR Supreme Soviet.¹²

Somewhat later, on 28 April 1976, the Central Committee adopted an additional resolution on the subject, 'On the further improvement of work with letters of the toilers in the light of the decisions of the 25th Congress of the CPSU'.¹³ There were still occasions when an 'inattentive, indifferent attitude' was taken towards the proposals, requests and complaints of the public, the resolution noted. It urged party, state and public bodies to take communications of this kind into consideration more frequently in their day-to-day activity, checking that they were being dealt with properly and discussing them at party bureau and ministerial collegium meetings, and dealing severely with those who were guilty of excessive delay or negligence in this connection. These points were re-emphasized in a Central Committee resolution adopted after the 26th Party Congress in 1981.¹⁴ The new Soviet Constitution, adopted in 1977 after an extensive public debate in which (Brezhnev reported) no fewer than four-fifths of the adult population had been involved, gave additional backing to these principles. Article 49, in particular, established the right of all citizens to submit proposals and criticisms to state and public bodies, which were obliged to respond to them within specified time limits, and Article 58 gave citizens the right to lodge complaints against the actions and prescribed how they were to be dealt with. Both of these provisions had previously been incorporated in legislative acts, but neither had previously been included in the Constitution, the 'fundamental law' of the Soviet state.¹⁵

Finally, in 1980, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet adopted revised and expanded versions of its decrees of 1968, strengthening both of them, at least in wording. The decree on the consideration of the proposals, declarations and complaints of citizens now refers specifically to the right of citizens to 'criticize shortcomings' in the work of state and public bodies and to 'lodge complaints against the actions of officials, state and public bodies', and the decree on the consideration of letters by Supreme Soviet deputies now makes reference *inter alia* to the right of the deputies to participate themselves in the resolution of the matters at issue.¹⁶ Speaking at the Presidium session at which the first of these two decrees was adopted, Brezhnev emphasized the importance of ensuring that every Soviet citizen felt certain that any well-founded proposal, declaration or complaint he might make would be carefully examined and that the appropriate course of action would be adopted. 'The maximum of sensitivity, the maximum of attention, the maximum of concern for people that is what the party demands from our institutions and officials', the Soviet President told the meeting.¹⁷ There have, of course, been appeals of this kind before in Soviet politics, and no doubt they will occur again. Having established at least the party's greater ostensible concern with such matters in recent years, it is now time to consider the changes that have actually

¹⁰ KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK, (8th edition), 12 vols. (Moscow, Politizdat, 1970-73), vol.6, pp.323-3

¹¹ *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, vyp. 9 (1969). pp. 398-404.

¹² *Spravochnik*. pp. 404-5.

¹³ *KPSS v rez.*, vol. 12, pp. 269-72.

¹⁴ *Partiinaya zhizn'*, 8 (1981), 9-11.

¹⁵ See Aryeh L. Unger, *Constitutional Development in the USSR* (London, Methuen, 1981). pp. 197-9, and Robert Sharlet, *The New Soviet Constitution of 1977* (Brunswick, Ohio, King's Court Communications, 1978), pp. 53-4.

¹⁶ *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, vyp. 21 (1981). pp. 355-60, 361-2.

¹⁷ "L.I.Brezhnev, *Leninskim kursom*, vol. 8 (Moscow, Politizdat. 1981). p. 293.

taken place in the role of oral and written communications from citizens over the same period. I shall look first of all at the letters from the public that have been received by Soviet party and state bodies, and then turn to the letters that have been addressed to the Soviet press.

Citizens' Letters to Party and State Bodies

The receipt and consideration of letters from the public takes place at all levels of the party and state hierarchy, from local areas to the central institutions in Moscow. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is about the central party and state institutions that most information is presently available. The general dimensions of the flow of oral and written communications to both central and local levels of the party organization are set out in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Citizens' Communications to Party Bodies, 1971-1980

(A) Oral and Written Communications to Central and Local Party Bodies			
	No. of letters	No. of oral communications	
Received by the Central Committee between the 24th and 25th Party Congresses (1971-5)	2,008,000	78,000	
Received by the Central Committee between the 25th and 26th Party Congresses (1976-80)	3,152,000	9 1,700	
Received by the Central Committee in 1975 (before the 25th Party Congress)	430,000	16,000	
Received by the Central Committee in 1980 (before the 26th Party Congress)	67 1,600	18,200	
Received by republican, territorial, regional, okrug, town and district party committees between the 25th and 26th Party Congresses (1976-80)	9,000,000	6,000,000	
Received by republican, etc. party committees in 1980 (before the 26th Party Congress)	1,800,000	1,300,000	
(B) Letters to the CPSU Central Committee			
1971	482,100	1976	693,260
1972	352,500	1977	657,360
1973	368,680	1978	558,740
1974	375,060	1979	570,880
1975	429,960	1980	671,600

Source: Spravochnik parrinogo rabornika, vyp. 21 (Moscow, 1981). pp. 503-4.

They show a sharp increase in both kinds of communication, particularly in the years (such as 1971 and 1976) in which party congresses have taken place, and with the rate of increase in written communications considerably exceeding that of oral communications. Between the last two party congresses, G. F. Sizov, chairman of the party's Central Auditing Commission, told the 26th Party Congress in 1981, more than three million letters had been received, and almost 100,000 citizens had been received directly by the Central Committee offices in Moscow.¹⁸ The Central Committee postbag, it appears, varies between about 1,500 and 2,000 letters a day, rising to much higher levels in years in which party congresses are held.¹⁹ According to Sizov, many of the letters received between the last two congresses were considered by Central Committee Secretaries themselves, and many others were considered by members of the Central Committee apparatus. The remainder were sent on to other institutions to whose sphere of competence they more properly related. With 'rare exceptions', Sizov told the congress, the letters received by the Central Committee had been considered within the appointed period and their authors had received 'substantial, considered replies'.²⁰

Sizov also informed the congress that the Central Committee had recently established a special Correspondence Department as part of its central apparatus, to which responsibility for overseeing this work was now entrusted.²¹ The Correspondence Department, set up in 1978, is presently headed by B. P. Yakovlev, who was elected a member of the Central Auditing Commission in

1981. In an article in a central party journal, 'An important form of linkage with the masses', published in 1979, he has given some indication of the kind of work in which the Correspondence Department is engaged. Many of the letters it receives evidently require no reply. A sea captain, I. Mukhin from Vladivostok, for instance, wrote in to Brezhnev to report to 'You, our leader and wise mentor, that the crew of the ship "Captain Lyutikov" of the Far Eastern Order of Lenin marine fleet has fulfilled the ninth five year plan with honour'. Party member I. Il'in from Arkhangel wrote to say, 'Dear Leonid Il'ich! Very many thanks for such necessary, simply essential books, as *Little Land, Rebirth, Virgin Lands* [Brezhnev's recent memoirs]. They inculcate firmness, bravery, belief in oneself, love for one's motherland, one's people, the ability to work and defend one's native land. Very many thanks for your measureless contribution to the cause of world peace!'²² So far as more general areas of policy are concerned, it has been reported that letters to the Central Committee dealing with pensions, labour legislation and housing have been decreasing in number, and that the character of such letters has also been changing: fewer letters about housing, for instance, are concerned with resettlement from huts or old buildings, and many more are concerned with obtaining separate flats with modern conveniences, nearer to the centre of town and to people's places of employment. There have also been more letters containing greetings, thanks, and constructive suggestions.²³

It seems clear, however, that it is complaints of various kinds which generally predominate in the party postbag, at least at lower levels. Sizov, in an article in the party press, quoted an example of a case with which the Central Committee had had to deal, but which should, like most of these matters, have been resolved locally: a country teacher from Krasnodar territory, who had lived there 35 years but who had been unable to obtain the improvement in housing to which she was entitled, who had had to take her case to the party's central institutions in

¹⁸ XXVI s"ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza, 23 fevralya -3 marta 1981g. Stenograficheskiy otchet, 3 vols. (Moscow, Politizdat, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 105-7.

¹⁹ XXVI s"ezd, vol. 1, p. 93; K. U. Chernenko, *Nekotorye voprosy tvorcheskogo razvitiya stilya partiinoy i gosudarstvennoy raboty*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, Politizdat, 1978). p. 156.

²⁰ XXVI s"ezd, vol. 1, p. 106.

²¹ XXVI s"ezd, vol. I, p. 106.

²² *Partiinaya zhizn'*, 17 (1979), pp. 26-7.

²³ K. U. Chernenko, *Voprosy raboty partiinogo i gosudarstvennogo apparata* (Moscow, Politizdat, 1980), pp. 302-3.

Moscow before obtaining satisfaction.²⁴ Housing, in fact, appears to be the matter raised most frequently in letters to the party, at least from the republican level downwards. In Estonia, for instance, citizens complained to the republican Central Committee that repairs were being neglected and that houses were being left in a dangerous condition; other complaints concerned retail trade and services, pensions, and public utilities.²⁵ In Kazakhstan, similarly, housing, the telephone service, and retail trade were the issues raised most frequently by citizens with the republican party authorities.²⁶ In the Moscow area, again, it was housing that accounted for most of the grievances raised by citizens with the city party committee. The supply of gas and water and the heating of residential buildings figured prominently among the matters that were raised; other complaints concerned public catering, violations of labour law and retail trade.²⁷

The kinds of problems raised in letters of this kind are reviewed from time to time by party officials, and summaries or digests are sent to members of executive committees and bureaux at the appropriate level. The Central Committee apparatus in Moscow, for instance, sends informational reviews of the letters it receives on a regular basis to the Politburo and Secretariat (93 such reviews were circulated between 1971 and 1976), as well as to individual Central Committee Secretaries (43 over the same period).²⁸ A 'significant number' of communications from the public are reported to have been considered at meetings of the Secretariat during the 1970s, of which 'many' are reported to have found practical embodiment in resolutions of the Central Committee, or the decisions of other bodies over the same period.²⁹ The practice of discussing the problems or proposals raised in citizens' letters is followed by other party bodies as well.³⁰ Lower party bodies also examine and classify the letters they receive for the benefit of their executive committees and for other bodies in their area. The Moscow city party organization, for instance, prepared more than 40 informational dossiers based upon citizens' letters during 1978, which were passed on to the relevant authorities and also considered by the city party committee,³¹ and the Tallin city party committee in Estonia is reported to provide weekly and monthly as well as annual analyses of communications from the public which are circulated on the same basis.³²

A largely analogous procedure with citizens' letters is followed by state and public bodies such as the local soviets, the trade unions, the courts and the people's control committees. On particular occasions the flow of letters to bodies of this kind can assume very considerable proportions. During the discussion of the new Soviet Constitution in 1977, for instance, over 180,000 letters were addressed to the Constitutional Commission, to local state bodies and to the press, and over 20,000 letters were sent directly to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet.³³ Similar processes of consultation occur when documents such as five year plans, or draft legislation more generally, are published in the press and comments from the public are specifically invited. The kind of letters received by the soviets at all levels appears to correspond fairly closely to the areas of policy for which they are directly responsible. A detailed study in Taganrog, for instance, found that housing and public order between them accounted for more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of the letters received by the local soviet; the remaining 31 per cent of letters touched on nineteen different subjects. The letters that the local soviet received were for the most part individual complaints of various kinds; 77 per cent of the letters concerned purely personal or family matters, and no fewer than 96 per cent

²⁴ *Partiinaya zhizn'*, 15 (1981), pp. 22-3.

²⁵ *Kommunist Estonii*, 12 (1980), pp. 17-18.

²⁶ *Partiinaya zhizn'* Kazakhstana, 5 (1981), p. 38.

²⁷ V. Remnev, "*Vashe pis'mo rassmotreno . . .*" (Moscow, Moskovskii rabochii, 1981), pp. 79-80.

²⁸ *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, 11 (1977), p. 37.

²⁹ Chernenko, *Voprosy rabotv*, pp. 302, 303, 306.

³⁰ *Partiinaya zhizn'*, 17 (1979), p. 27.

³¹ Remnev, "*Vashe pis'mo*", p. 79.

³² *Kommunist Estonii*, 5 (1980), p. 40.

³³ Kazakevich and Kalitievskaya (eds), *O rabote*, p. 4.

contained 'almost wholly negative' assessments of various aspects of local life.³⁴ Reports from other localities suggest that some kinds of complaints, such as those concerning pensions or social security, have become less common in recent years, but the main problems reflected in letters to the local soviet in Taganrog appear to be widely encountered elsewhere.³⁵

State bodies, like party committees and other institutions, also receive members of the public directly at their offices. The chairman of the executive committee of a district soviet in the Kaliningrad region, for instance, has been reported to receive about 40 or 50 visitors on the first and third Monday of every month between 11 a.m. and 8 p.m.³⁶ According to the Presidium decree on the consideration of the proposals, declarations and complaints of citizens, leading officials of all state and public bodies are required to receive citizens in this way, at times which are convenient for citizens and which have been announced in advance.³⁷ Visits to the chairman of the local soviet, however, appear to be increasingly popular at the expense of visits to the heads of departments of the soviet which are directly concerned, and there have been complaints that leading officials of this kind are in any case frequently absent on business or that they fail to give visitors the degree of attention they expect.³⁸ The accommodation for visits from citizens is often inadequate, and formal reception hours are not always observed. Nor are 'group' receptions, which are sometimes practised, likely to encourage a frank discussion of personal problems.³⁹ Elsewhere bodies such as ministries may fail to display their reception hours, and officials may fail to give even the appearance of taking adequate notes of the case being presented.⁴⁰ And very little may result from these encounters despite extravagant promises (not, of course, a problem unique to the USSR).⁴¹

Not all the letters received by party or state bodies are found to contain justified complaints, and quite a few appear to come from Soviet 'well-wishers' of various kinds. A collective farm worker in one of the southern regions of the RSFSR, for instance, a certain Gutsa, on being released from prison at the end of a sentence for the theft of state property, decided to revenge himself on the chairman and deputy chairman of the collective farm who had been responsible for his arrest. He wrote more than 80 poison pen letters towards this end, the investigation of which required the establishment of no less than 20 commissions, all of which found the accusations to be groundless. Not content with this, Gutsa wrote a letter to a state body containing the false charge that the deputy chairman of the collective farm had betrayed his country during the Second World War. The court proceedings which followed established the baselessness of this charge and sentenced Gutsa to 5 years in prison for his pains.⁴² In another case, reported in *Pravda*, the head of a regional social security office, one Izmailova, sent letters to various bodies accusing the district procuracy of taking bribes and claiming that they had demanded 1,000 roubles from her personally. It later emerged that she had herself systematically misappropriated money intended for invalids, pensioners and others, and had decided to defend herself by attempting to blacken the reputation of those who were investigating her illegal activities.⁴³ Leading party spokesmen do not fail to point out that only 'healthy', 'constructive' communications are to be encouraged, and the Criminal

³⁴ B. A. Grushin and L. A. Onikov (eds), *Massovaya informatsiya v sovetskom promyshlennom gorode* (Moscow, Politizdat, 1980). pp. 404-5.

³⁵ K. S. Sladkov and M. F. Strepukhov (comps), *Sovershenstvovat' rabotu sovetov* (Moscow, *Izvestiya*, 1978), p. 337; V. I. Rernnev, *Predlozheniya, zayavleniya i zhaloby grazhdan* (Moscow, Yuridicheskaya literatura, 1972). p. 15; *Pravda*, 2 February 1982, p. 3.

³⁶ N. A. Gorsheneva, *O rabote s pis'mami trudyashchikhsya* (Moscow, *Znanie*, 1979). p. 25.

³⁷ Kazakevich and Kalitievskaya (eds), *O rabote*, p. 90.

³⁸ Gorsheneva, *O rabote*, p. 25; Remnev, *Predlozheniya*, p. 39.

³⁹ Remnev, "Vashe pis'mo", p. 59; Remnev, *Predlozheniya*, pp. 38-9, 41.

⁴⁰ *Kommunist Estonii*, 7 (1981). pp. 35-6.

⁴¹ Remnev, "Vashe pis'mo", p. 60; *Sovety narodnykh deputatov*, 12 (1980). p. 70.

⁴² Remnev, *Predlozheniya*. p. 63.

⁴³ Remnev, *Predlozheniya*, p. 63.

Code provides a variety of penalties for those who fail to respect such warnings and engage instead in libel or slander.⁴⁴

Letter-writers may also get into trouble if they take it upon themselves to raise matters with higher levels of state or legal authority which embarrass their immediate superiors. In a cautionary story of this kind reported in the Soviet press, a carpenter in the building and repair section of an oil processing factory, a certain Dolgov, wrote to the authorities about the abuse of their administrative position by several executives at the factory, who had paid salaries to nonexistent workers and had improperly exaggerated the factory's earnings. The primary party organization at the factory promptly expelled Dolgov from its ranks as a trouble-maker, although the charges he had made were subsequently confirmed by the people's control committee and the district procuracy. The directors of the factory then began to accuse Dolgov of violations of labour discipline and to persecute him in various ways, and he was dismissed from the post of chairman of his workshop committee although he had up to this point been a model worker and had frequently figured on the factory's 'Board of Honour'. Justice was eventually restored only after the trade union paper *Trud* had intervened on his behalf.⁴⁵ Cases of this kind ('suppression of criticism' or victimization) are of course supposed not to occur; the Presidium decree on the consideration of the proposals, declarations and complaints of citizens lays down that complaints must not be sent to the persons or bodies against whom the complaint is directed,⁴⁶ and Article 49 of the Constitution specifically provides that persecution for criticism shall be prohibited and that those who engage in it shall be called to account. Letters can also be sent anonymously, or by such a large group of signatories that all of them can hardly be expected to suffer reprisals. Victimization none the less occurs so frequently, and the restoration of critics to their previous positions is often so difficult to achieve and so tardy, that the flow of well-grounded criticisms from the lowest levels of society is hardly likely to be encouraged.

Citizens' Letters to the Press

Substantial though the numbers are of letters that are sent to party and state bodies, they are far exceeded by the numbers addressed to the Soviet press.⁴⁷ The number of letters that now reaches each of the major Soviet daily papers, such as *Pravda* and *Trud*, is around half a million a year (see Table 2), and the total number of letters that reach all Soviet national papers taken together is estimated to amount to between 60 and 70 million a year.⁴⁸ This total has been increasing steadily over the years, though the rate of growth has tended to taper off somewhat during the 1970s. Taken in conjunction with the letters sent to Soviet radio and television stations—the central television offices in Moscow, for instance, receive more than two million letters a year, many of them admittedly non-political⁴⁹—this is a flow of political communications of considerable proportions; the postbag of the major Soviet national daily papers, indeed, may often comfortably exceed that of their most obvious Western equivalents.⁵⁰ What are these letters about, how are they dealt with and what impact do they have?

⁴⁴ *Ugolovnyi kodeks RSFSR* (Moscow, Yuridicheskaya literatura, 1979), art. 130, p. 46.

⁴⁵ V. I. Rernnev, *Vy obratilis' v uchrezhdenie* (Moscow, Moskovskii rabochii, 1977), p. 83.

⁴⁶ *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, vyp. 21 (1981), p. 357.

⁴⁷ On letters to the press and the Soviet media generally, see Adams, 'Critical Letters', and Ellen Propper Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public* (New York, Praeger, 1981).

⁴⁸ V. S. Korobeinikov (ed.), *Sotsiologicheskie problemy obshchestvennoqo mneniya i deyatel'nosti sredstv massovoi informatsii* (Moscow, ISI, 1979), p. 13

⁴⁹ A. G. Mendelev, *Chto za gazetnym slovom?* (Moscow, Mysl'. 1979), p. 115.

⁵⁰ *Pravda*, 21 March 1978, p. 3; Mickiewicz, *Media*, p. 68.

Table 2. Letters to Soviet Newspapers, 1952-81

Year	Pravda	Izvestiya	Trud
1952	n.a.	37.301	n.a.
1955	250.000 ^a	46.974	n.a.
1960	299.000 ^b	211.000	209.160
1965	300.000 ^c	500.000	338.500
1970	382.000 ^d	493.000	373.800
1975	456.000 ^e	467.858	548.174
1981	514.000	520.000 ^f	415.417

^a Largest annual total, 1955-7

^b Average for 1958-9

^c 1967

^d 1971

^e 1974

^f 1977

Sources: for *Pravda*, V. N. Alferov, *Vozniknovenie i razvitie rabsel'korovskogo dvizheniya v SSSR* (Moscow, Mysl', 1970), p. 272; V. D. Pel't (ed.), *Teoriya i praktika sovetskoj periodicheskoj pechati* (Moscow, Vysshaya shkola, 1980), p. 146; *Pravda*, 17 January 1982, p. 6; for *Izvestiya*, *'Izvestiyam' 50 let* (Moscow, Izvestiya, 1967), no pagination; D. Georgiev, *Rezhissura gazety* (Moscow, Mysl', 1979), p. 243; I. A. Fedyukin (ed.), *Sredstva massovoi informatsii ipropagandy* (Moscow, INION, 1981), p. 60; Letters department, *Izvestiya*, personal communication; for *Trud*, *Gazeta, avtor i chitatel'* (2nd edition) (Moscow, Politizdat, 1975), p. 30; *Trud*, 1 January 1966, p. 4.1 January 1976, p. 3, and 1 January 1982. p. 2.

Like letters to party and state bodies, it appears, a considerable proportion of letters to the Soviet press contain complaints of various kinds. Complaints are in fact reported to account, on average, for at least half of the total number of letters received by most Soviet newspapers.⁵¹ A detailed study of the postbag of the Soviet government daily, *Izvestiya*, found that 19 per cent of the letters received concerned housing, 13 per cent were about social security, 12 per cent were on legal questions, 9 per cent were concerned with industrial production, 6.5 per cent dealt with transport, and between 4 and 5 per cent concerned family matters, health or leisure, respectively. The Leningrad evening paper, *Vechernii Leningrad*, appears to receive a postbag of a largely similar nature.⁵² The editor of the Moscow evening paper, in contrast, has reported that the letters his paper receives are more preoccupied with national or global questions, and that they increasingly contain proposals and advice rather than complaints. The complaints, moreover, are less often concerned than they were with matters such as housing, services and street cleaning, and frequently raise more general issues such as planning, the need for green spaces in the city, or the quality of building work.⁵³ *Pravda* has reported similarly that its postbag increasingly contains letters responding to party and state decisions, or to the paper's own articles, and letters containing advice and recommendations on various matters of public concern; and that fewer letters in recent years have contained complaints about factory or labour conflicts, housing, or the quality of goods in the shops.⁵⁴

Other papers, however, report a less satisfactory picture. The Moscow regional paper *Moskovskaya Pravda*, for instance, has indicated that some 20 per cent of the letters it received in 1978 referred to the unsatisfactory organization of production in factories, the low

⁵¹ G. S. Vychub, *Pis'ma trudyashchikhsya v sisteme massovoi raboty gazety* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo MGU, 1980), p. 8.

⁵² Vychub, *Pis'ma*, p. 9.

⁵³ S. D. Indrusky, *Gazeta vykhodit vecherom* (Moscow, Mysl', 1979), pp. 117, 121.

⁵⁴ B. M. Morozov, *et al.*, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya kak sredstvo povysheniya effektivnosti partiinogo rukovodstva pressoi* (Moscow, AON, 1980), pp. 29-30.

quality of output, shortcomings in the execution of state plans and *so* forth. Other letters raised matters such as the noninstallation of equipment in an oil processing factory, delays in the postal service and shortages of medicine.⁵⁵ A more detailed study of the letters received by the daily paper in Taganrog, *Taganrogskaya Pravda*, found that public services and industry (15 and 14 per cent of the total respectively) were the subjects most commonly referred to, although retail trade (9 per cent), transport and public order (both 8 per cent) were also common preoccupations.⁵⁶ The letters received by Soviet newspapers seem very largely to mirror the concerns of their respective readerships. The central dailies, addressing matters of party and state policy, receive more letters on national issues and with proposals and recommendations, while local papers receive relatively more letters which reflect the practical problems of the area concerned. The main theme of the letters received by a local paper in the Ryazan' region, for instance, concerned the agriculture of the area: 34 per cent of all the letters received dealt with this; 11 per cent were about the local medical service; 7 per cent were concerned with education; and 4 per cent dealt with the work of local party, Komsomol or state bodies.⁵⁷

The proportion of letters that can be printed depends to a large extent on the newspaper's size, frequency and area of circulation. In the larger central newspapers between 1 and 5 per cent of all letters received can be printed; in territorial and regional papers about 30 per cent of the letters received are likely to be published; and in district papers almost all letters of public interest are normally printed.⁵⁸ This can sometimes lead to a substantial number of readers' letters being published; in the case of the Young Communist paper *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, for instance, between 2,100 and 2,600 letters are printed every year, or between 7 and 9 an issue.⁵⁹ The letters that are selected for publication are by no means necessarily a representative sample of the letters that a newspaper has received. In Taganrog, for instance, 26 per cent of all the letters that were printed in the local paper dealt with industry and construction, although these accounted for only 14 per cent of all the letters the newspaper had received. In contrast, only 3 per cent of the letters that were printed dealt with transport and communications, although these accounted for 10 per cent of the letters the paper had received, and retail trade and catering (4 and 12 per cent respectively), public services and town planning (5 and 20 per cent respectively) and housing (1 and 5 per cent respectively) were similarly under-represented. More generally, some 69 per cent of the letters the paper printed were mainly or entirely favourable in character, although these accounted for only 25 per cent of the letters the paper had received, while negative or hostile letters accounted for 67 per cent of the letters the paper had received, but for only 8 per cent of the letters it had published.⁶⁰

Publication, however, is only one part of the political communication function that a Soviet newspaper performs. Another, perhaps more important contribution is made by the reports on letters received which are compiled by the newspaper's own staff and then sent on to the party, state or other bodies most immediately concerned. Virtually all Soviet national and local papers prepare regular surveys of this kind, which 'as a rule' are then examined and discussed by the executives of the institutions to which they have been sent.⁶¹ *Pravda's* procedures in this connection have been held up as a model for other Soviet newspapers to emulate. The letters department in *Pravda*, 70 strong, is apparently the paper's largest.⁶² Every letter the paper receives is first of all given a control card, on which are entered the sex,

⁵⁵ Remnev, ''*Vashe pis'mo*'', pp. 16-20.

⁵⁶ Grushin and Onikov (eds), *Massovaya informatsiya*, p. 411.

⁵⁷ A.I. Verkhovskaya and E. P. Prokhorov (eds), *Raionnaya gazeta v sisteme zhurnalistiki* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo MGU, 1977), p. 206

⁵⁸ Pel't (ed.), *Teoriya i praktika*, pp. 150, 151.

⁵⁹ D. Georgiev, *Rezhissura ,gazety* (Moscow, Mysl', 1979), p. 243.

⁶⁰ Grushin and Onikov (eds), *Massovaya informatsiya*, pp. 410,414.

⁶¹ Pel't (ed.), *Teoriya i praktika*, p. 147.

⁶² *Guardian* (London), 29 July 1980, p. 6.

apparent age and occupation of the writer and a brief summary of the contents. A computer is then used to calculate a breakdown of the themes dealt with in the letters and the parts of the country from which they come, and every month a printout of this information is made available to the deputy head of the department.⁶³ Regular thematic reviews of letters received are also prepared, classified by the part of the country and the institution concerned, and then passed on to the appropriate authorities. Between 7 and 10 of these reviews are prepared every month.⁶⁴ Letters containing criticisms of particular individuals are first of all checked locally before they are sent on; many letters are also investigated by the newspaper's own staff. Extra staff are taken on for particular occasions, such as during the discussion of the new Soviet Constitution in 1977.⁶⁵

Other Soviet papers follow roughly similar procedures. The letters department in *Izvestiya*, for instance, which is also the paper's largest, has a special machine which opens all the letters that the paper has received. Each letter is then given a control card containing the name and address of the sender and a short summary of its contents. Some of the letters, a small minority, are selected for publication and sent elsewhere to be edited; the others are dealt with by the appropriate section of the letters department, where journalists specializing in the area concerned take responsibility for them. Digests of letters are also forwarded to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, to the Central Committee of the CPSU and to other bodies.⁶⁶ The results of particular investigations are communicated in the same way. The weekly paper *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, for instance, published a series of readers' articles on the subject 'If I were director'. Some 8,000 submissions containing 17,000 separate proposals were received, of which the 800 most promising were sent to the USSR Council of Ministers for their consideration.⁶⁷ The major newspapers also provide facilities for the direct reception of citizens in various cities throughout the USSR. *Izvestiya*, for instance, has reception offices of this kind in 24 Soviet cities; the Moscow office, with a staff of three, receives about 30 visitors a day.⁶⁸

Those who write to Soviet newspapers, as in the West, are not generally a representative sample of either the population within the paper's circulation area or of its readers in particular. In a detailed study of the authors of letters to the youth paper *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, it was found that men outnumbered women by 67.4 to 32.6 per cent, although women were slightly better represented (37.8 per cent of the total) when it came to letters containing complaints rather than responses, queries or information. Industrial workers accounted for no more than 26.2 per cent of all the paper's letter-writers, though they were again somewhat better represented (33.1 per cent of the total) among those making complaints rather than more general comments. Those with a complete or incomplete higher education accounted for 35 per cent of the paper's letter-writers, and were more likely than others to respond to the paper's own articles or to raise more general issues (accounting for 42.8 and 45.7 per cent of all letters received in these two categories).⁶⁹ Some other studies, such as an investigation of the letters received by *Izvestiya*, have found workers and peasants to be more active correspondents than scientists and scholars (ITR): workers, in this study, accounted for 20 per cent of *Izvestiya's* readers but for 30 per cent of its letter-writers, while scientists and scholars made up 24 per cent of the paper's readers but accounted for no more than 8-10 per cent of those who sent it letters.⁷⁰ Other studies, however, have produced rather different findings, and in general it is pensioners, rather than members of the employed population, who are most active in relation to their numbers.⁷¹

⁶³ *Guardian*, 29 July 1980, p. 6; Pel't (ed.), *Teoriya i praktika*, pp. 151-2.

⁶⁴ Georgiev, *Rezhissura*, p. 249.

⁶⁵ Georgiev, *Rezhissura*, p. 250; Vychub, *Pis'ma*, p. 30; A. A. Grabel'nikov, *Otdel redaktsii sovetskoi gazetii* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo MGU, 1981), p. 12.

⁶⁶ P.P. Demidov, *Izvestiya* (Moscow, 1975), pp. 51-2; Adams, 'Critical Letters', p. 133.

⁶⁷ Mendeleev, *Chto za gazetnym*, p. 67.

⁶⁸ Vychub, *Pis'ma*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ A.I. Verkhovskaya, *Pis'mo v redaktsiyu i chitatel* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo MGU, 1972), pp. 90, 96, 100.

⁷⁰ Mickiewicz, *Media*, p. 68.

⁷¹ Vychub, *Pis'ma*, p. 12; *Guardian*, 29 July 1980, p. 6.

Letters to the Soviet papers, according to a former employee of the journalists' magazine *Zhurnalists*, may contain the most naive questions imaginable, and often quite independently of the correspondent's age, education or sex. For instance, newspapers may be asked 'How many eggs does a tortoise lay?', 'How many satellites has Mercury?', or 'What would happen if the Greenland ice cap melted-would it become very cold at the Equator?' Correspondents of this kind, it was suggested, should be redirected to the local library. The Soviet medical paper *Zdorov'e* was similarly plagued with readers' enquiries about their own health problems until it told them to desist, since the paper could in no way substitute for the expert opinion of a doctor.⁷² Letters to Soviet newspapers, like letters to party and state bodies, may also be malicious, self-serving or inaccurate. A beet-growing brigade on a collective farm in Kirgizia, for instance, wrote in to *Pravda* to complain that they were being paid less than the rate they should have received for the work they were performing. The paper's investigators subsequently found that the brigade was in fact working badly; its members regularly failed to turn up or else left their work early, and some of the more complicated tasks had to be performed by staff brought in from elsewhere, although the brigade was still paid for the work. The republican party organization thought the matter sufficiently important to adopt a special resolution on the subject, and it was discussed by party meetings in the republic attended by nearly 10,000 people.⁷³

Letters to the newspapers may also bring unfortunate consequences upon the heads of those who write them, although victimization of this kind, as in the case of letters to party and state bodies, is specifically prohibited by law. The author of a letter to *Pravda* reporting irregularities in the construction of a hydroelectric station in Turkmenistan, for instance, was dismissed 'at his own request' shortly after officials from the republican party organization had begun an investigation of the matter. He spent the following four months without work, and was reinstated to his previous position only after *Pravda* had taken up his case. The parties responsible for his improper dismissal, however, escaped without punishment.⁷⁴ A champion worker at a Moscow enterprise was similarly dismissed 'at her own request' shortly after she had sent a critical letter to *Pravda*, having previously attempted without success to have the issue taken up by the head of her department within the factory.⁷⁵ Some administrators, it appears, try to put critics of this kind 'in their place' even when they have quite properly called attention to violations of the law, and then revert to their previous practices at the earliest opportunity.⁷⁶ Those who have been victimized, on the other hand, return to their jobs in a tired and dispirited condition, and make no complaints thereafter. Other people at their place of work naturally draw the conclusion that it would probably be better to keep silent on such occasions.⁷⁷

The view that the Soviet public appear to take of the efficacy of such interventions is accordingly a fairly mixed one. In a study of the writers of letters to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, for instance, only 28.4 per cent were fully satisfied by the newspaper's response or by the action which had subsequently been taken; 22.2 per cent were partially satisfied, and 43.7 per cent were completely dissatisfied. There was most dissatisfaction among those who had sent letters containing complaints or seeking practical assistance; of these only 13.4 per cent were fully satisfied, compared with 62.6 per cent who were wholly dissatisfied. Even among those who had addressed a query to the paper or had commented on an article it had contained, more than a third of those polled were not satisfied with the newspaper's responses.⁷⁸ So far as the reliability of the paper is concerned, similarly, a detailed study of the main Lithuanian daily paper, *Tiesa*, found that 80 per cent of those polled put the paper's trustworthiness and objectivity at between 75 and 100 per cent, and that 'a small number' had put the paper's trustworthiness at about 50 per cent. 'A few people', however, had complained that they did

⁷² V. P. Zhidkov, *V otvete za kazhdoe slovo* (Moscow, Mysl', 1979), pp. 61, 63.

⁷³ Morozov et al., *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, pp. 28-9.

⁷⁴ Remnev, *Predlozheniya*, p. 61.

⁷⁵ Remnev, "*Vashe pis'mo*", p. 10.

⁷⁶ Remnev, "*Vashe pis'mo*", p. 11.

⁷⁷ Remnev, *Predlozheniya*, p. 68.

⁷⁸ Verkhovskaya, *Pis'mo v redaktsiyu*, p. 142.

not believe a word of what the paper said about the economic achievements of the USSR, and added that there was a 'lot of boasting in the paper but that real life was full of shortcomings and cases of inefficiency'.⁷⁹

At the same time 88.3 per cent of those polled reported that they regularly discussed articles in the paper with their family and friends, 37.3 per cent normally cut out and kept articles of particular interest to them, and 28.6 per cent did so on a less frequent basis. About 25 per cent of those polled could remember an occasion when they or one of their acquaintances had approached the paper about a personal problem, and 18.7 per cent said that the paper had been able to help them in such matters. On social questions, such as housing and public services, 11.3 per cent of respondents had approached the paper, and 7.4 per cent said that it had helped them to deal with the problem concerned.⁸⁰ Surveys of this kind suggest that Soviet citizens in fact regard the press as perhaps the most effective means they have available of promoting their interests and resolving their particular problems. The newspaper was placed first, in one such poll, as a means of influencing the local organs of administration, because of its role in the 'publications of the requests, remarks, suggestions and demands of the population'. Writing to the local party organization, in contrast, was regarded as one of the forms of action least likely to yield satisfactory results.⁸¹ Another study conducted in the Kalinin region found that the press was again regarded as the means by which the local organs of administration were most likely to be influenced: 23.2 per cent of those polled placed the newspaper first in this connection, followed by 17.9 per cent who thought it would be best to raise the matter with a local deputy, as compared with only 4.9 per cent who thought the most effective course of action would be to send a letter to a higher-level party or state body.⁸² In general it seems reasonable to conclude that the newspaper, in the eyes of the Soviet public, is the 'best they have of all official or legal channels for the expression of their opinions and demands'.⁸³

Conclusion: The 'Ombudsman' Role of Letters in Soviet Politics

Probably no single conclusion can adequately encompass the variety of forms of political communication considered in this article. Both the nature of the actions engaged in and their perceived effectiveness vary widely depending upon which body or institution is being approached, which period of time is considered, which area of the country is involved, and what kinds of issues are at stake. It has also been necessary to rely for the most part upon the published studies of Soviet social scientists, the contents of which must satisfy the censorship authorities and the results contained in which cannot normally be verified by the outsider. In some cases, it appears, letters printed in the Soviet newspapers, ostensibly from readers, may in fact have been written by the newspaper's own correspondents, and it is certainly more generally the practice to edit stylistically, and perhaps modify the contents of, the letters that are selected for publication.⁸⁴ It is also hardly necessary to add that there are many issues of an anti-system character which are most unlikely to be raised in letters to party, state or press, and which will certainly stand no chance of publication in the official press if that is where they have been directed (a number of letters in support of Stalin, for instance, have been reported to fall into this category).⁸⁵ If a single generalization could be offered, however, it would probably be that letters to party, state and press play an 'ombudsman' role of some significance in

⁷⁹ *Sotsiologicheskie problemy vzvaimodeistviya lichnosti i sotsial'nykh grupp v usloviyakh razvitogo sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva. Materialy k nauchnoi konferentsii* (Vil'nius, PO SSA and AN LitvSSR, 1977). sbornik 4, p. 93.

⁸⁰ *Sotsiologicheskie problemy*, p. 94.

⁸¹ "Mickiewicz, *Media*, p. 69

⁸² R. A. Safarov, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie i gosudarstvennoe upravlenie* (Moscow, Yuridicheskaya literatura, 1975), p. 172.

⁸³ Mickiewicz, *Media*, p. 69.

⁸⁴ Mickiewicz, *Media*, p. 67; *Guardian* (London), 29 July 1980, p. 6.

⁸⁵ *Guardian*, 29 July 1980, p. 6.

Soviet politics in dealing with the wide variety of individual problems and grievances which occur throughout the USSR and which are capable, at least in principle, of resolution within the existing political framework.

Letters play this role in a variety of ways. In the first place, in the absence of any less constrained opportunities for the expression of popular wishes, they serve as a means by which public opinion can be assessed, not only by citizens themselves but more particularly by the governing authorities. Various other sources of information of this kind exist, of which the reports presented to the leadership by the KGB, dealing with transgressions of the law at all levels of society, are perhaps among the most important.⁸⁶ The letters that are received from citizens, however, deal with preferences and proposals as well as with opposition to the status quo, and they probably encompass a wider section of the society and a far larger total of individual cases than the illegalities and grumblings reported by the KGB and the police. Virtually all the larger bodies and institutions in the USSR, as we have seen, as well as dealing with citizens' letters themselves, record and classify them and send breakdowns and digests of the letters to the party and state authorities, who also receive a substantial postbag of their own. The party leaderships at all levels of the system, it appears, have been making increasing use of this information for discussions at their plenary meetings, and the fulltime apparatus has reportedly been making greater use of it in its day-to-day decision-making. Nor is there good reason to assume that this greater degree of apparent attention to popular communications has been purely formal. The party, after all, has established new institutions at the Central Committee level and elsewhere in order to deal with the letters it has received, hardly sensible unless it was proposed to make some practical use of the information thus obtained. And in many of the matters raised by letters there is no obvious 'party' interest to defend-in housing, for instance, in transport, in education policy or in conditions of employment; these are all matters on which the official ideology prescribes no obvious course of action, and party dominance must surely be strengthened, not weakened, by taking popular wishes more fully into account when decisions are made upon such issues.

A greater degree of at least ostensible attention to citizens' letters, in the second place, may play a legitimizing role of some importance in helping to create the impression that the wishes of the public are being properly considered in the making of what are nowadays increasingly difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions, and thereby help to make those decisions acceptable to those who may not immediately benefit from them. Again, it is possible to create an impression of this kind by other means. There has, for instance, been more open discussion of policy alternatives in the specialist press and at professional gatherings in recent years, bodies such as the trade unions have been encouraged to deal more energetically with the complaints of individual members of the workforce, and the soviets within which the people's wishes are supposedly reflected can be encouraged to meet more often, to consult their electorate more frequently and to make greater apparent concessions to public preferences in matters such as their budgetary allocations.⁸⁷ The writing of letters to party, state and press, however, has several advantages from the party's point of view over these other forms of linkage. It engages the widest possible spectrum of the Soviet public, irrespective of age, employment status, location, associational membership and so forth; it is continuous, rather than confined to the periodic occasions when elections are held, conferences are convened, or soviets or trade unions have their meetings; and it is direct or unmediated in character, linking the public directly with the central authorities and the national media in a manner which may give the individual citizen at least the impression that his preferences have been registered at the highest levels of state authority and not pigeonholed or misreported by local officials or public representatives. The leadership's awareness of the importance of such linkages is apparent in the stress they have placed upon the need for citizens' letters to be answered promptly and for constructive proposals to be adopted, so

⁸⁶ See Harry Rositzke, *The KGB: Eyes of Russia* (New York, Doubleday, 1981), pp. 63-5, 79-80 and elsewhere.

⁸⁷ See Stephen White, 'The Supreme Soviet and Budgetary Politics in the USSR', *British Journal of Political Science*, 12 (1982), 55-74.

that 'every Soviet citizen can feel his involvement in state affairs, be sure that his opinion [and] his voice will be heard and taken into account in the making of large and small decisions', as Brezhnev put it in a meeting with electors in 1979.⁸⁸

And finally, it appears that in some areas at least citizens' letters may yield not just the impression but also the reality of change, particularly when the irregularities or abuses of local-level officials or institutions are concerned. We learn, for instance, that regulations on the admission of collective farmers into the preparatory departments of higher educational institutions were changed as a result of the intervention of the press on its readers' behalf.⁸⁹ More typical, perhaps, is the case of comrade K. from the village of Artem in the Donetsk region, who complained to his local soviet about shortcomings in the organization of retail trade in his village; he received no satisfactory response and thereupon approached *Izvestiya*, which was able to extract an assurance from the regional soviet that the necessary measures would be taken. The paper was similarly able to secure a resumption of the water supply in a district of the Ternopol' region in the Ukraine.⁹⁰ Letters can also lead to reprimands, expulsions from the party and even prison sentences for those responsible if the facts quoted are confirmed by subsequent investigation. The trade union paper *Trud* appears to be particularly effective in this connection in securing the sanctioning and in some cases the dismissal of factory executives who have been guilty of infractions of the labour code.⁹¹ More generally, a groundswell of opinion as reflected in a large number of letters on a single issue may help to persuade the party leadership to undertake some action in the area of policy in question. The adoption of a far-reaching 'food programme' in May 1982, for instance, designed to bring about a radical improvement in agricultural production, is not unlikely to have been influenced, at least in part, by the fact that the Central Committee has been 'deluged' with letters about the subject, many of them in blunt terms and about half of them unsigned, complaining of the discrepancy between promises of a better diet and the steadily deteriorating reality.⁹² Recent measures against corruption, ostensibly prompted by citizens' letters to the Central Committee and to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, may fall into the same category.⁹³

It is impossible in present circumstances to establish how frequently citizens' letters give rise to changes in personnel or policies of this kind, how frequently they are ignored, and how often they result in unpleasant consequences for the letter-writer himself. There is also little evidence that leading figures at the national or republican level, or that policy decisions in areas of particular importance to the leadership such as defence or foreign affairs, have been seriously affected by such communications. At the local level, however, where matters such as the maladministration of an official or the abuse of his position by a factory director are concerned, the evidence suggests that a well-directed letter may have some chance of achieving its objective, and in more general matters of social and economic policy a substantial expression of popular sentiment in the form of letters may help to prompt at least a reconsideration of existing policies in the area in question. The Soviet political system has sometimes been described as 'authoritarian but consultative'. Its authoritarian features have been frequently described in the literature and are reasonably well known; the consultative aspects of the system, however, perhaps because they often differ widely from those available in a Western liberal democracy, have generally received rather less attention. The evidence considered in this article does not permit a general conclusion as to where the weight of emphasis should be placed between these two. It does, however, at least suggest that letters to the party, state and press may be among the more important of the mechanisms of

⁸⁸ L. I. Brezhnev, *Leninskim kursom*, vol. 7 (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1979), p. 616.

⁸⁹ *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo*, 7 (1981), p. 21.

⁹⁰ Remnev, *Predlozheniya*, p. 15.

⁹¹ V.I. Vlasov *et al.*, *Gazeta, avtor i chitatel* (2nd edition), (Moscow, Politizdat, 1975), p. 33 and elsewhere.

⁹² *Guardian*, 21 June 1982, p. 6.

⁹³ 'V Politbyuro TsK KPSS', *Pravda*, 11 December 1982, p. 1.

consultation presently available to citizens within the Soviet political system, and that they are regarded as such by Soviet citizens themselves.