

December 9, 2021

Dear colleagues in NTSh-A,

As an administrative associate at the Shevchenko Scientific Society since June, I have been given an opportunity rare for an Associate member: insight into how NTSh-A works, especially into how elevations and changes in membership status are handled. As a member since 2018, that is, for the greater part of four years, I knew remarkably little about how elevations work. Surely many Associate members can relate. Since June, however, I have had cause to read the *Statut* closely and observe the activities of the current Board as regards the governing documents of NTSh-A. I have also been closely following the correspondence associated with this upcoming election.

The current politicized atmosphere and the accusations being leveled at the current Board are deeply troubling. The legitimacy of the elevation process—something that is crucial to the functioning of NTSh-A—has been undermined by the hue and cry made over it in the course of the election campaign. If NTSh-A is to mean anything, it must be an organization characterized by scholarly integrity. For this reason, I am heartened by the recent transition to a merit-based system for promotions within the Sections, in contrast to the system of cronyism or the deep doldrums that have characterized their work for various reasons in the last couple of decades (see prior [Triennial Reports](#) ).

Elevation is supposed to be a meaningful milestone in a member's journey within NTSh-A. It means having your work evaluated by your peers and then learning that they hold you and your work in high esteem. This is a central consideration in any scholar's career—it is the coin of the realm, all the more so in a *Tovarystvo* such as ours. The *Statut* is intentionally vague on the requirements for elevation. It says that Associate members must have “higher education,” Corresponding members must be “engaged in scholarship,” and Full members’ work must have “a significant meaning for Ukrainian scholarship” (my translation of points 7–10 of the [Ukrainian edition of the Statut](#)). These definitions are broad enough to encompass the wide variety of professional activities that NTSh-A members are engaged in, from literary scholarship, to historical preservation, to music performance, to surgery, to working in research labs, or in any genre of scholarly writing, to name a few examples. At issue here is not the language of the *Statut*; it is a matter of *practice*, i.e. how the Sections approach the issue of elevation. Having different ranks may be somewhat archaic, but being promoted is nevertheless a meaningful accomplishment for most people.

Scholarship is a creative endeavor and as such, it is stimulated by the addition of new colleagues and new ideas. This is why promotion within Sections is crucial—because it leads to the development of scholarly knowledge. If Sections are to have any hope of producing scholarship or at least facilitating their members' pursuit of knowledge, then they must have a stream of new people and new ideas. Moreover, the benefits of networking obviously expand with the size of the network.

One factor that somewhat cuts against the authority claims of scholarly elevations is the fact that membership status is currently tied to voting rights in elections by the *Statut*. Only Corresponding and Full members are eligible to vote for a new Board at triennial General Meetings. Ordinarily, this is not much of a concern, as the Society has regularly transitioned seamlessly from one administration to the next. However, in contested election years, such as in 2000 and 2021, the political importance of elevations threatens to work at cross-purposes with their scholarly and professional significance. Clearly, the alarm raised by Society members over elevations within sections threatens to undermine the authority of the entire elevation system, because such concerns eat away at the esteem that accrues to those who have become Corresponding or Full members. Public letters calling for newly elevated members to refrain from exercising their voting rights is another way of delegitimizing them as professionals and, sadly, as Full or Corresponding members of NTSh-A. No one should be asked to voluntarily give up their rights.

At the same time, elevations have often been used as an instrument of control over "admission" to NTSh-A, in the sense that certain Section heads have refused to elevate anyone, no matter how deserving. This situation cries out for redress, not only because the Sections all need revitalization (as has been repeatedly noted in Board reports for many years), but because it discourages and alienates people who are eminently deserving of their colleagues' esteem. When Full members of Sections repeatedly propose the same candidates for elevation yet are rebuffed by Section heads with no justification, without even holding a vote, it hurts the candidate. Apart from personal offense, it can create reputational damage within the Section as well. They remain members in name only and their way is blocked by unknowable forces beyond their control. Distrust and resentment can develop in such situations.

For example, I have been a member of NTSh-A for almost four years and not until this summer did I understand the first thing about Sections, elevations, and how they affect my status in the Society. No one is given the *Statut* alongside their welcome letter and few would bother to read it anyway. This is where Sections should come in—Section heads ought to be on the lookout for promising members of their Sections among newly accepted members. In fact, Section heads oriented toward the future *must* pay close attention to who joins the Society and reach out to them. The way to create a welcoming atmosphere inside the Society is simply to be welcoming toward newcomers.

Finally, and this may be something for the Bylaws Committee to consider eventually, it may be advisable to decouple voting rights from elevations entirely. The best way to do this might be to simply allow Associate members to vote for the new Board and Audit Committee. No one enjoys feeling disenfranchised. In fact, I suspect that not allowing new members to vote is probably as good a mechanism for disillusioning those new members as might be conceived. Other rights and privileges, including voting on elevations within Sections and running for the highest offices, can of course still be reserved for Corresponding and Full members. But if even basic aspects of Society life, such as belonging to a Section or voting, must be put off until you impress the right person, what is even the point of joining? Paying dues all those years until a senior

colleague reaches out? Membership must have a meaning and the best way to endow it with such is to give new members a voice in their Society.

Perhaps we can dare to hope that some good can come out of this election season. It would certainly be preferable to seeing the Society emerge from it with its reputation in tatters. My best wishes to whichever Slate is elected at the General Meeting and best of luck working for the benefit of NTSh-A!

Sincerely,

Markian Dobczansky, Associate Member of NTSh-A