

Chapter 8

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Political Space: Its Unity and Complexity*

Satoshi Koyama

Introduction

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*) was one of the largest states in early modern Europe. In the second half of the sixteenth century, after the union of Lublin (1569), the Polish-Lithuanian state covered an area of 815,000 square kilometres. It attained its greatest extent (990,000 square kilometres) in the first half of the seventeenth century. On the European continent there were only two larger countries than Poland-Lithuania: the Grand Duchy of Moscow (*c.* 5,400,000 square kilometres) and the European territories of the Ottoman Empire (840,000 square kilometres). Therefore the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the largest country in Latin-Christian Europe in the early modern period (Wyczański 1973: 17–8).

In this paper I discuss the internal diversity of the Commonwealth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and consider how such a huge territorial complex was politically organised and integrated.

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1. The Internal Diversity of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Poland-Lithuania before the union of Lublin was a typical example of a composite monarchy in early modern Europe. 'Composite state' is the term used by H. G. Koenigsberger, who argued that most states in early modern Europe had been 'composite states, including more than one country under the sovereignty of one ruler' (Koenigsberger, 1978: 202). Later J. H. Elliot developed this concept and described early modern Europe as 'a Europe of composite monarchies' (Elliot, 1992). The territories of composite monarchies were united by feudal or dynastic relationships. Rulers of composite monarchies did not completely remove the local institutions and customs of their component territories and often allowed local elites to govern their own subjects, provided that they accepted the superior authority of the monarch.

The Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were united by the Jagiellonian dynasty according to the Union of Krewo (1386). From then both countries were ruled by the same dynasty, but each country maintained its own legal system and local customs. Before the union of Lublin the nobility of Poland and Lithuania organised their Diet separately.

In the Baltic region, the Duchy of Prussia was subjugated to the Polish king as a feudal vassal in 1525 after the secularisation of the Teutonic Order. Feudal subordination of the Duke of Prussia to the Polish monarch continued to 1657. In Livonia, the Order of Sword was secularised in 1561. The southern part of its territory became the vassalage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as the Duchy of Courland and Semigalia, and the northern part of Livonia became the condominium of the Commonwealth in 1569.

In the same year, the dynastic bond between Poland and Lithuania was transformed into a constitutional relationship by the Acts of the Lublin Diet, which described the Polish-Lithuanian state as a 'Commonwealth of Both Nations' (*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*). After this new union, the nobility of Poland and Lithuania elected their monarchs by common royal election and convened the Diet together. The noblemen of each country could acquire landed properties in the other part of the Commonwealth. From the constitutional point of view the

relationship between both countries was strengthened. Though the Jagiellonian dynasty ended in 1572, the Commonwealth of Both Nations continued to the end of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the union of Lublin did not abolish the institutional individuality of each part of the Commonwealth completely. Each country kept its own treasury and armed forces. The hierarchy of public offices was organised in Poland and Lithuania separately (Dembkowski 1982: 175–94). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after the union of Lublin became a polity, which might be called a ‘composite republic of the nobles’ rather than a ‘composite monarchy’, because the throne was elective and the royal prerogative was restricted to a large extent by the privileges of the nobles.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was also a country inhabited by various ethnic groups, speaking different languages and having diverse creeds. There were at least three official languages in this Commonwealth: Latin, Polish and Ruthenian (proto-Ukrainian and Byelorussian). Poland-Lithuania was the eastern periphery of the ‘Republic of Letters’, in which Latin was a common language of the intellectuals. Knowledge of this classical language was necessary for the *szlachta* to take an active part in the parliament, the judicial court or the royal secretariat. In the sixteenth century, Latin language education was popular among the townspeople as well. Even women learned reading and writing in Latin. In his book *Polonia* (1578), Marcin Kromer, the bishop of Warmia and a humanist, wrote:

All people, both the poor and the rich, both the noblemen and the plebeians, above all the townsmen, make efforts to send their children to schools, to give them an education, and to accustom them to Latin from early childhood. . . . Even in Italy, it would be difficult to find so many and various people, who can communicate in Latin. Also girls of the nobility and the townspeople learn to read and write in Polish and even in Latin, both in their home and in the monasteries (Kromer 1901: 49).

The eastern border of the Commonwealth was also the eastern limit of the ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’, where type-printing technology came into wide use (Tazbir 1989: 23–5). Only after the annexation of the left bank of the Dnieper and Kiev in 1667 was Russia affected by some elements of Latin-Christian culture through the Ukrainian elite, who had been

educated in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Western Europe (Raeff 1982: 32–3; Aleksium et al. 2004: 230–1).

The Polish language had two functions in the multi-ethnic Commonwealth (Litwin 1993: 184–5). For Poles, Polish was their mother tongue. In the central part of the Kingdom of Poland (Little Poland, Great Poland and Mazovia), where not only the *szlachta* but also the peasantry and many of the townspeople spoke Polish, it functioned as a common language integrating local society vertically. Another function of the Polish language was to integrate the upper strata of the whole Commonwealth horizontally. From the sixteenth century onwards, Polish was used as the official language of the Commonwealth, and it became a lingua franca for almost all noblemen from the Baltic coast to the step frontier north of the Black Sea during the next century.

Ruthenian, the third official language of the Commonwealth, was used only in the eastern territories of the Commonwealth (Volhynia, Ukraine, part of Red Ruthenia, Podolia and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania). In these regions the peasantry and the townspeople spoke Ruthenian, while the nobles were often bilingual (Ruthenian and Polish) or polonised linguistically. At the end of the seventeenth century, the official use of the Ruthenian language came to an end and all judicial acts began to be written in Polish.

German was also used commonly, above all in the region near the Baltic shore and the western regions of the Polish Kingdom. In the book above-mentioned text Marcin Kromer pointed out:

Today not only merchants and craftsmen from Germany live in many towns, but there are also towns and villages where almost all inhabitants speak German. . . . Poles also willingly learn German, taking into consideration the wide use of this language and the close contacts with Germans (Kromer 1901: 39).

Ethnic minorities living in the Commonwealth also had their own languages. Peasants in the north-western part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania spoke Lithuanian. Jews spoke Yiddish and used Hebrew in religious ceremonies. Jewish and Armenian merchants were often multilingual.

As for religion, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a multi-confessional state. Roman Catholics accounted for less than half of

the population of the Commonwealth in the second half of the sixteenth century. Its territory was crossed by the line dividing the churches of Rome and Byzantium. In the south-eastern part of the Polish Kingdom and the eastern part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the population of Orthodox faith was dominant. Armenians also had their separate dioceses and enjoyed wide freedom of worship. In the sixteenth century the influence of the Reformation reached Poland and Lithuania. Lutheranism was accepted mainly in the cities with German populations in the northern and western part of the Polish Kingdom, whereas Calvinism spread among the nobility of Little Poland and Lithuania. The Czech Brethren and the antitrinitarians, who had been persecuted in their mother countries, also took refuge in Poland and Lithuania. The Confederation of Warsaw (1573) guaranteed peaceful coexistence among Christian denominations including the Roman Catholics, the Greek Orthodox and various Protestant churches. In the seventeenth century the Commonwealth was called an 'asylum of heretics' for its wide-ranging religious tolerance (Tazbir 1973: 29, 90–7). The Commonwealth also had many non-Christian inhabitants. Jews made up about 10 per cent of the population in the eighteenth century. There were also some Moslems (Tartars) who had established mosques in Lithuania.

We can distinguish two strata in the social structure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The ruling estates, which include the nobility, the Catholic hierarchy and wealthy townsmen, form the upper stratum. The members of this stratum enjoyed various privileges and could communicate with each other in their common languages (Latin and Polish, sometimes Ruthenian). Below the horizontally united upper stratum, there was another world of the lower estates (the townsmen and the peasants). This lower stratum consisted of small local communities with diverse languages and faiths. It was difficult for these subject communities to communicate laterally, because they lacked common languages and did not share the same cultural codes. This two-layer structure of the Polish-Lithuanian society corresponds to the general form of the social structure of agrarian societies presented by Ernest Gellner in his *Nations and Nationalism* (Gellner 1983: 9–11; Maćzak et al. 1996: 87–8).

2. The Integrity of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eyes of the Contemporaries

How did the contemporaries of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian state understand the integrity of their Commonwealth? The intellectuals of the sixteenth century had a geographical awareness of the unity of the Polish-Lithuanian state. Marcin Kromer described his country as follows:

Poland reminds us of a bent bow, the string of which is slightly drawn back and stretched to the south and to the northwest to some degree. The frame of the bow makes a curve toward the north and the southeast.

If one includes new acquisitions such as Polesia, neighbouring Ruthenia, Volhynia, Podolia, Livonia, the Duchy of Prussia, Lithuania including Samogitia, and Byelorussia which borders on Russia or Muscovy (and all these territories already compose one kingdom), Poland reaches much further to the east and the north (Kromer 1901: 15).

Kromer recognised the geographical location of the Commonwealth and was conscious of its territorial shape. R. T. Marchwiński points out that when writing his book *Polonia* Kromer used maps made by Polish cartographers, Waclaw Grodecki and Bernard Wapowski (Marchwiński 1997: 21–9).

In the next century, in a book also entitled *Polonia* (1632), Szymon Starowolski explained the integrity of the Commonwealth by the common laws and privileges:

Poland, which was called European Sarmatia by the ancients and is now under the rule of the most prudent king Zygmunt III, comprises eight provinces,¹ which are partly different from each other in customs, laws and language. On the other hand, all provinces without exception are equal in their way of life, the privileges of liberty, and the attainment of honor in the Commonwealth. They are tied by laws of relationship with each other (Starowolski 1976: 59).

‘Liberty’ (*libertas; wolność*) is an essential concept which unites the regions with different customs and faiths. In the preface to the code of

¹ Great and Little Poland, Lithuania, Ruthenia, Prussia, Mazovia, Samogitia, Pomerania and Livonia.

laws edited by Jakub Przyłuski (1553), Stanisław Orzechowski, a sixteenth century humanist, stated:

Liberty, which is the highest of all goods, is the property of your clan and your family. It is so vast and so great that in comparison, the liberty of other nations would be unbearable servitude for us. Admiring the sweetness of this liberty many provinces joined you and submitted to your rule, not but due to your military strength, but due to the greatness of your liberty . . .

. . . Though customs, laws and even the God of these people are not the same, your glorious liberty caused all people in the Kingdom to accept the same law (Orzechowski 1972: 99–100).

This ‘glorious liberty’ means the privileges of the Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian nobility (*szlachta*). They regarded themselves as ‘free citizens’ (*liberi cives*) in a ‘free Commonwealth’ (*libera Respublica*) (Opaliński 2005: 233). As ‘free citizens’, the *szlachta* had the right to elect their monarch, to participate in the local diet (*sejmik*), to send deputies to the Diet (*sejm*) and to express their opinions on public matters freely. If the monarch violated the laws of the ‘free Commonwealth’ and the privileges of ‘free citizens’, the nobility could protest against it and even refuse to obey the royal authority.

The Polish-Lithuanian concept of ‘Commonwealth’ (*Respublica; Rzeczpospolita*) was based on the ancient Greek and Roman republic model. Political authors in the sixteenth and seventeenth century often quoted or paraphrased the definitions of *respublica* in Aristotle’s *Politica* and Cicero’s *De Re Publica*. The Polish-Lithuanian nobility regarded ‘mixed monarchy’ (*monarchia mixta*), which combined monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements in one polity, as an ideal form of government. An anonymous author of a political pamphlet at the beginning of the seventeenth century said:

What is the free Commonwealth (*libera respublica*)? That is a Commonwealth in which not one, but three estates always govern and rule together, no estate stands higher than another one, and these estates govern by common law. . . . In this free Commonwealth, nobody can decide anything without free will and consensus of all three estates. This Commonwealth is composed of three methods to govern, i.e. monarchy, aristocracy and democracy (Czubek ed. 1918: 403).

For contemporaries the concept of ‘mixed monarchy’ was not only the ideal form of government theoretically, but it represented the real constitutional structure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Chamber of Deputies (*izba poselska*), which was the Lower House of the bicameral Diet and represented the interests of the ordinary *szlachta*, corresponded to the democratic element, whereas the Senate (*senat*), in which Catholic bishops and high-ranking secular officials had their seats, corresponded to the aristocratic element. The elected monarch embodied the monarchical element in the ‘free Commonwealth’.

The concept of ‘Commonwealth’ also represented the principle of integrity of the Polish-Lithuanian state. Edward Opaliński mentions three types of usage of this term in the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century (Opaliński 1995: 27–36).

- a) It means the Kingdom of Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania or the whole Polish-Lithuanian state. In this case the term ‘Commonwealth’ implies a community of regions united voluntarily on the agreements with each other.
- b) It means the Diet. In this usage it can indicate all three estates of the Diet (the king, the Senate, and the Chamber of Deputies) as well as two chambers without the king or only the Chamber of Deputies. In the last case, ‘Commonwealth’ can be interpreted as the *szlachta* as a whole who were represented in the lower Chamber.
- c) It means the local diets (*sejmiki*). At the end of the sixteenth century, there were 44 local diets in the Kingdom of Poland and 24 in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Kriegseisen 1991: 28). Each nobleman had the right to participate in the local diet directly. In *sejmiki* they elected the deputies to the Diet, the judges of the Royal Tribunal (*Trybunał Koronny*) and the judges of local court. In this case the term ‘Commonwealth’ has an implication that the network of local diets represents the whole community of the citizen-nobles who monopolised the active political right in the Polish-Lithuanian state.

On the other hand, some authors were aware of the uniqueness of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in comparison with ancient and contemporary republics. Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro, a political thinker of the seventeenth century, distinguished two types of Commonwealth

(Ogonowski 1992: 30–3). One is the ‘urban Commonwealth’ (*respublica urbis*), which expands its territory through the conquest and annexation of the peripheral area by the core-city. In this type of Commonwealth it is relatively easy to agree on the public interests, because all citizens are from the same city. Athens and Sparta in ancient times and the Republic of Venice belong to this type. The other is the ‘Commonwealth of provinces’ (*respublica provinciae* or *respublica provincialis*). The Polish-Lithuanian state belongs to this second type. The ‘Commonwealth of provinces’ expands its territory not by conquest but by voluntary union between regions. The extensiveness of its territories and the diversity of people’s interests are characteristic of this type of Commonwealth. In such a vast Commonwealth, when one region of the Commonwealth falls into crisis, other regions may not be aware of the danger and loss of people there. Decision by majority in the Diet is ill-suited to this type of Commonwealth, because it enables the majority to ignore the interests of a particular region which has gotten into difficulty and asks the nation for help. In this regard Fredro argues that *liberum veto* is necessary in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in order to defend the ‘noble liberty’ (*cara libertas*) of its members. The right of *veto* is an important bond uniting regions with different interests in the ‘Commonwealth of provinces’.

Fredro’s arguments tell us how the contemporaries of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian state recognised the relationship between the constitution of the Commonwealth and the size of its political space.

3. The Constitutional Identity of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Its Limits

H. G. Koenigsberger describes the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as the typical case of a ‘republic *manqué*’ in early modern Europe. He points out that ‘in this vast, composite “commonwealth” the vision of liberty, the *aurea libertas* of the nobility, remained more narrowly class bound than in Sweden’ and ‘it proved impossible to make the vital transition from city-state republicanism to commonwealth republicanism’ (Koenigsberger 1997: 59). Why did the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth fail in this transition?

Antoni Mączak suggests that the element of space played an important and even decisive role in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He posits a hypothesis that

the well-known, even proverbial, weakness of modern Polish kings was caused by a syndrome of extensive privileges acquired by the nobility mainly during the fifteenth century, by a particular property structure (chiefly in Lithuania and the Ukraine) but also by feeble and difficult communications between the court (the king and central offices) and the nobles with their county assemblies (the diets) (Mączak 1995: 8).

One cannot readily believe that the weakness of royal power was caused only by the vast size of their territory and the difficulty of communications, because we know of empires in which despotic rulers wielded strong power over a vast territory with feeble communication infrastructure.² The most important factor is the combination of the territorial size of the state and the specific political culture of the nobility.

Andrzej Zajączkowski argues that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a kind of federation of local societies of noblemen-neighbours (Zajączkowski 1993: 66–80). The noblemen's 'society of neighbours' was organised around the manor house or the local diet. Theoretically, all members of 'society' were equal, though practically the magnates had power over the ordinary *szlachta*. The federation of 'societies of neighbours' took the form of a pyramid, in which the 'large societies of neighbours' (*sąsiedztwo wielkie*) of the magnates were placed on top of many 'small societies of neighbours' (*sąsiedztwo małe*) of the middle and poor nobles. Mączak describes this socio-political structure by using the concepts of the 'Commonwealth of self-government by the nobles' (*Rzeczpospolita szlacheckich samorządów*) and the 'clientelism of the magnates' (*klientelizm magnacki*) (Mączak 2005).

² Andrzej Nowak poses a question whether the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was an empire and suggests that the belief in the attractiveness of the Commonwealth's political model represented the 'Sarmatian ideological imperialism' (Nowak 2004: 356–67). Masaaki Sugiyama, a Japanese specialist of Eurasian history, also regards the Polish-Lithuanian state as an empire or a quasi-empire (Sugiyama 2003: 60, 75–6). This problem depends on how we define the term 'empire'. If we adopt the definition of 'empire' by the structure of metropolis (centre)/periphery, the decentralised political structure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth does not fit well with such a definition.

In the fifteenth century, the political structure of the Polish Kingdom began to be characterised by two phenomena. First, the townsmen did not acquire the right to represent themselves in the Diet. Second, the royal authority could not establish a strong apparatus for local administration under the direct control of the king. As a result the Polish-Lithuanian state became dependent on local self-government by the nobles. Theoretically all members of the nobility were equal, but in reality the noble estate was strongly stratified. In the seventeenth century the concentration of landed properties with the magnates advanced and many middle and poor noblemen increasingly became dependent on their wealthier neighbours in local society. With the restricted royal power and without the developed central bureaucracy, the political interests of the state were concentrated on the local diets, where the magnates wielded power over their clients. Each magnate pursued his own interests, and there was no commonly shared political will among them. The Commonwealth became a loosely federated accumulation of the magnate's petty 'kingdoms' without a strong political centre. Maćzak names this phenomenon as 'dominance of periphery' (Maćzak 1986: 134–40).

Maćzak's thesis is consistent and suggestive, but we can ask how the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth could continue to exist for several centuries, if the forces of decentralisation had been stronger than the centralising force since the fifteenth century. How was the political elite integrated, if it did not share any common 'political will'?

As previously stated, although Polish-Lithuanian society was inhabited by people with various religions and languages, the ruling noble estate could communicate through their common languages (Latin and Polish) and had a constitutional identity in common. A kind of legalism was an important element of the constitutional identity of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Not only the nobles, but also the monarch had to obey the law of the Commonwealth. When the monarch tried to enforce his own policy ignoring the necessary legal procedures, the noblemen opposed him stubbornly even if the substance of this policy was acceptable to them. I will give an example of how aristocratic legalism prevailed over the 'political will' of the nobles.

In 1646, the Polish king Władysław IV planned to mobilise the Ukrainian Cossacks and recruit soldiers for the war against the Khanate of the Crimea and the Ottoman Empire without consent of the Diet. The nobles, including the high dignitaries, objected to the monarch's actions.

Albrycht Stanisław Radziwiłł, the great chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, wrote in his memoir (12 May 1646) that he would prefer to have his own hand cut off rather than to sign his name and put the grand chancellor's seal on a document permitting the illegal recruitment of armies. Jerzy Ossoliński, the great chancellor of the Polish Kingdom, was of the same opinion on the refusal to sign the document, though he had rather stood by the king's policy. On 21 May, A. S. Radziwiłł expressed his objection directly before the king Władysław IV explaining that the chancellors were obliged to reject the document without it having received the agreement of the Commonwealth (Radziwiłł 1972: 246–9). In this case, both of the great chancellors agreed in maintaining the principle of 'the rule of law' against the illegal act of the king, no matter whether their 'political will' was consistent with royal policy or not.

The constitutional identity of the Polish-Lithuanian nobles was an important factor integrating the federation of 'societies of neighbours' and uniting the political elite of the Commonwealth. However there were some limits to this unification. Vertically, it was restricted only to the noble estate and did not include the non-privileged strata i.e. the townspeople and peasantry. Horizontally, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth could not succeed in strengthening its political influence over the Ukraine by constitutional integration (Sysyn 1985: 202–13). It is true that there was an attempt to include the Ukrainian elite into the political union of the Commonwealth in the middle of the seventeenth century after the Ukrainian uprising led by Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi (Chmienicki). In 1658, after Khmel'nyts'kyi's death, Ivan Vyhovs'kyi (Jan Wyhowski), the new hetman of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth concluded the treaty of Hadiach (Hadziacz), which granted Senate seats to the Orthodox hierarchs and assured the Cossacks of aristocratic privileges. The Hadiach Agreement was an attempt to enlarge 'the Commonwealth of Both Nations' to 'the Commonwealth of Three Nations' (Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian). In the next year Iurii Nemyrych (Jerzy Niemiryecz), who was one of the drafters of this treaty, made a speech for the ratification of the union of Hadiach at the Diet held in Warsaw:

The value of the Polish Kingdom, which cannot be compared with anything, is the liberty. It is this liberty that drew us to this society. We are

born and educated in this liberty, and now join to this society as free men (Kot 1960: 71).

In this statement of a Ukrainian nobleman we can hear an echo of the apotheosis of the 'golden liberty' written by a Polish humanist, Stanisław Orzechowski, one hundred years earlier.

However the concept of 'the Commonwealth of Three Nations' was not accepted by the majority of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Nemyrych was killed by them and the Hadiach union collapsed. The Ukrainian Cossacks on the left bank of the Dnieper chose to separate themselves from the Polish-Lithuanian state and to be under the suzerainty of Orthodox Russia. In the Ukraine, the 'composite republic of nobles' faced its most difficult test. There, though the upper stratum was partly influenced by the political culture of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility, the force of the ethnic and confessional identity surpassed the attractiveness of the 'free Commonwealth'. The Ukrainian case well illustrates the permeability of noble republicanism and its limits in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a political space.

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