THE NOBILITY OF LITHUANIA AND THE REFORMS
OF THE POLAND-LITHUANIA STATE
(1788-1792)

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In the second half of the 18th century the united Polish-Lithuanian State (the official name of the state was the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, the Polish and the Lithuanian\(^1\)) lived in the period of the political and economic recession. Due to the interference of foreign countries in the internal affairs of the Commonwealth, all the efforts to reform and strengthen the State have failed. Following the election of King Stanislaw August Poniatowski in 1764, Polish-Lithuanian State effectively became a Russian protectorate.

Therefore, the formed geopolitical situation in the Middle-Eastern Europe in the last quarter of the 18th century was useful to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Polish-Lithuanian political elite managed to make use of the situation and started strengthening the Commonwealth by reforming its parliamentary, administrative and judicial system.

On October 6, 1788 the king Stanislaw August Poniatowski convoked the Diet (\textit{Sejm} in Polish; \textit{Seimas} in Lithuanian) in Warszaw. Convened for the traditional six-week period, the Diet, whose number of deputies had been doubled in 1790, worked for four years. The Diet was to be known as the Four-Year Diet of Reform.

The Four-Year Diet of Reform implemented a number of important reforms that brought essential changes into the state’s internal life. It introduced a stable national tax for landowners (both secular ones and clergymen); enlarged the army, and determined new procedures for its formation and regulation\(^2\). On 18 April 1791, the Diet enacted a new Urban Statute. The royal towns were reorganised

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\(^{1}\) The Commonwealth of the Two Nations was founded at Lublin in 1569 by union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was an elective monarchy with a bicameral parliament comprising three estates: king, senate and knighthood.

into a network of ‘free’ municipalities. Within the towns, the legal and economic barriers separating nobles from townsmen were removed. Municipal citizenship was freely opened up to all ‘honest foreigners, craftsmen, all free men and Christians’1. Moreover, the law of the local assemblies was passed. It was the first law in the parliamentary history of the Commonwealth, which defined the character, rights, time and rules of procedure, and finally the composition of the local assemblies. According to the law, the nobles who were not landowners were deprived of the right to vote in the local assemblies. Consequently, the landless nobles, who were dependent on magnates, were to lose their political rights.

On May 3, 1791 the Diet passed a new Constitution, which determined the most important principles for organising order in the state, comparable to the Montesquieu’s theory of the separation of powers. The State became the hereditary monarchy2. The King was assigned only the executive power which he exercised through his ministers. The fundamental instrument of executive power was the Guardian of the Laws (Straż Praw in Polish) comprised the king, as chairman, the primate, the five ministers of police, internal affairs, foreign affairs, army and the treasury, the heir to the throne and the speaker of the Diet in an advisory capacity. The legislative power was vested in the Diet composed of two chambers: the Senate and the House of Deputies. The Senate retained only its power to veto and suspend the resolutions of the House of Deputies. The king’s role in the Diet, which had hitherto been that of a separate estate, was also restricted. Within the competence of the Diet rested first of all powers of legislation and taxation, but also the control of other authorities. The dependence of the Diet on the local assemblies was greatly reduced; the instructions given to deputies lost their binding power and became only recommendations. Also, new Constitution confirmed the law of the local assemblies, extended the rights of city dwellers; guaranteed freedom of religious beliefs; obliged state authorities to look after the peasantry and made considerable steps towards strengthening the central power and centralization of the state.

2 After Stanislaw August Poniatowski the throne was to pass to a Wettin of the Saxon electoral line. It was expected that this might limit the possibilities for foreign interference in Polish-Lithuanian, which had been such a galling feature of the last interregna, J. A. Gierowski, The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the XVIIIth Century. From Anarchy to Well-organised State, Krakow, 1996, p. 256.
The centralization principles of the state, accepted in the new Constitution, inevitably raised the status problem of Lithuania in the Commonwealth because the Polish-Lithuanian State reserved its federalistic character since the Act of Lublin Union in 1569. Both Lithuania and Poland had their own separated administrative institutions such as judicial system, army, financial system (the value of money was different in both countries). Moreover, there was the difference in length and weight measures as well as there existed customs between Poland and Lithuania.

Therefore, the efforts to reform and strengthen the state were undoubtedly directed against the dualism of the Commonwealth. Due to the federalistic character of the state, there existed the different attitude towards the reforms of the nobility in Poland and Lithuania. The attitude of the Polish nobility is rather clearly seen that is there were two political groups of conservatives and reformers in Poland, whereas in Lithuania the position of the nobles was directed not only towards the acceptance or denial of the reforms but at the status of Lithuania in the Commonwealth as well.

The position of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility on the reforms made at the end of the 18th century has been discussed in the historiography since the 19th century. The Polish, Lithuanian and Byelorussian historians tried to find evidence showing the local nobility acceptance of the reforms. The main goal was to find out the position of the local nobility on the Constitution of the 3rd of May, 1791. The results of local assemblies held in February 1792 were thought to be the evidence of nobility’s approval or disapproval of the new Constitution. The oaths of Constitution taken in the assemblies as well as expressed gratitude to King were regarded as the results of local assemblies.

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The attitude is maintained that not the single decrees of the assemblies but the scale of the practical implementation of laws adopted by the Diet (the reorganisation of the local municipal, administrative, or court system) reveal the scale of the acceptance of the real reforms in the local space and the extent of the vitality and survival of the ideas of the reforms. The scale of the practical implementation of reforms can be found by analyzing the activity of local assemblies in the period from 1788 to 1793.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the attitudes of the Lithuanian nobility towards the reforms and to discuss the demands they made to the Diet in the period of the modernization and centralization of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. An attempt is also made to analyse the practical implementation of new laws in districts. The attitude of the Lithuanian nobility towards the May 3rd Constitution is analyzed and compared with the ones of the Polish nobility.

The analysis is based on the extant archival materials of the assemblies of all districts of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1788, 1790, 1792 and 1793.


1 The copies of the documents of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) assemblies found in the archives by the Lithuanian historian Adolfoš Šapoka are kept in the Library of Lithuanian Academy of Science, the Department of Manuscripts (LMAB, RS): Lietuvos mokslių akademijos bibliotekos Rankaščių skyrius, f. 233, b. 125 (the documents of the year 1788), f. 233, b. 126 (the documents of the year 1790). The archival material on dietines of 1792-1793 is drawn mainly from the sources kept in the Lithuanian State History Archive (LVIA), Vilnius, and the Belarusian National History Archive (BNHA), Minsk: Documents of the assembly of Vilnius Palatinate Dietine, 1790-1792, LVIA, f. SA, b. 4238, b. 4555; Record of the Instruction to the Envoys of Trakai Palatinate Dietine, 28 May 1793, LVIA, f. SA, b. 6114, fos. 114-117; Documents of the assembly of Kaunas District, 1790-1792, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13806, 13807, 13808, Laudum to the Commissars of Kaunas District, 17 February 1792, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13808, fos. 616-616v; Instruction to the Envoys of Kaunas, Prienai and Smolensk Districts, 28 May 1793, fos. 537-538v; Documents of the assembly of Ukmerge (Wilkomierz) District, LVIA, f. SA, b. 14402; Act of Instruction to the Envoys of Ukmerge (Wilkomierz) and Starodub Districts, 28 May 1793, LVIA, f. SA, b. 14221, fos. 328v-329v; Laudum to the Commissars of Upytė District, 24 February 1792, LVIA, f. SA, b. 15285, fos. 2-3v; Record of the Instruction to the Envoys of Upytė District, 28 May 1793, LVIA,
There were seven palatinates and two duchies divided into twenty-two districts in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania after the First Partition of the Commonwealth (1772). There worked 55 local assemblies in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. 168 deputies were elected to the Diet in 1776, whereas since 1778 the number was increased up to 177 deputies. Until the reform of local assemblies, passed in 1789, there were 32 assemblies in Poland (it means 20 assemblies in Grand Poland and 12 assemblies in Minor Poland). 23 assemblies gathered in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania together with Livonia. There were 177 deputies elected to the Diet in 1788 (121 Polish deputies, 50 Lithuanian ones and 6 Livonian delegates)\(^1\).

On the threshold of the Four-Year Diet of Reform there was not any influential group of magnates which could have influence on the results of local assemblies in Lithuania. Therefore, pre-Diet campaign of 1788 was successfully conducted by the royal and reformist political groups. The aim of these two groups was to get rid of Russian influence, increase the army and introduce hereditary monarchy. According to the material of local assemblies, all 23 pre-diet assemblies of Lithuania approved only of one requirement, that is, to increase military forces. All the other requirements (to reduce taxes and solve private affairs) were related to the welfare of nobility. Meanwhile, in some Polish assemblies a claim to reform governmental system was already raised in 1788\(^2\).

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\(^{2}\) A. Šapoka, *Lietuva Reformų seimo metu*, Kaunas, 1936. Manuscript kept in the Library of Lithuanian Academy of Science, the Department of Manuscripts, f. 233,
Despite the negative attitude of the Lithuanian nobility towards the reforms in 1788, later, during the term of the Four-Year Diet, the position on them changed. Some Lithuanian noblemen started to support the King and patriotic-reformers’ policy. Moreover, they stood for the patriotic agitation in the palatinates and districts. It resulted in the acceptance of executive power reforms and in the establishment of new local self-government institutions.

The law passed on November 24th 1789 established new local self-government institutions (civil-military commissions of public order) in all administrative parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The civil-military commissions of public order were the first self-government institutions to stay in contact with the central executive power. The commissions were to be elected every two years in local assemblies from the landowners of particular districts. According to the law there were 15 commissars to be elected in each district. Since 1792 during the implementation of the new Urban Statute enacted in the Four-Year Diet townsmen were incorporated into the civil-military commissions. 3 townspeople were to represent the city interests1. The lawyers of land and castle courts in particular district and the great officers of state could take part in the session of commissions2.

The implementation process of the law started in December 1789 when the civil-military commission of order in Minsk palatinate was elected3 and continued till March 1790 when the Upytė district commission was formed4. According to the material of local assemblies, civil-military commissions of public order subordinate to central executive power were successfully established in the whole Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Not only the local political elite but the nobles without any political influence were incorporated into the establishment of new local institutions as well. Noblemen were

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2 Volumina Legum, (Cracow, 1889), vol. 9, pp. 136–137.
3 On 15 December 1789 the first session of the civil-military commission of order took place in Minsk, J. Górdziejew, Z Dziejów komisji porządkowych cywilno-wojskowych’, p. 171.
willing participants in the implementation of laws, for example, in the beginning of 1790 when the Kaunas district commission was formed there were more commissars to be elected than it was intended by the law\textsuperscript{1}.

However, some noblemen were against the social reforms and increase of taxes although they approved of reforms of political state system. According to archival sources, nobles only in some districts required finding other sources of income for military costs. They wanted to impose taxes on the clergy and to reduce expenditures on education. Generally speaking, the majority of the Lithuanian nobility were against the abolition of bondage and they did not want to confer political rights for citizens\textsuperscript{2}.

On the other hand, the Lithuanian noblemen especially cared for the rights of Lithuania in the Commonwealth. When the Diet started to discuss the state centralization project, the Lithuanian noblemen requested to retain the rights and privileges of Lithuania certified in the act of Lublin Union. These requirements were written in the instructions of 6 local assemblies in 1790\textsuperscript{3}. Moreover, 7 assemblies required every third Diet to be in session in Lithuania and the transfer of the Lithuanian governing institutions from Warsaw into Vilnius and Grodno\textsuperscript{4}. Also, there was a claim raised to increase the number of the Lithuanian senators and ministers\textsuperscript{5}.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{1}] Instruction to the civil-military and order commissars of Kaunas District, 10 February 1790, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13806, fos. 16-16v.
\item[\textsuperscript{2}] E. Raila, Lietuvos bajorų požiūris į Ketverių metų seimo reformas (pagal seimelių instrukcijas’), Lietuvos istorijos studijos, no. 3, 1996, p. 28-36.
\item[\textsuperscript{3}] Instruction to the Envoys of Vilnius Palatinate; Instruction to the Envoys of Brest Palatinate; Instruction to the Envoys of Upté District; Instruction to the Envoys of Grodno District, and Instructions to the Envoys of Rzeczica and Pinsk Districts, LMAB, RS, f. 233, b. 126.
\item[\textsuperscript{4}] Instruction to the Envoys of Kaunas District assembly, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13724, fos. 634-643; Instruction to the Envoys of Smolensk Palatinate, LMAB RS, f. 233, b. 126; Instructions to the Envoys of Volkovisk and Grodno Districts assemblies, LMAB RS, f. 233, b. 126, fos. 75 and 7; Instruction to the Envoys of Brest Palatinate assembly, LMAB RS, f. 233, b. 126, fos. 3-5; Instruction to the Envoys of Minsk Palatinate, LMAB RS, f. 233, b. 126, fos. 56; Instruction to the Envoys of Ukmergė (Wilkomierz) District assembly, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13942, fos. 532-540.
\item[\textsuperscript{5}] The requirements of Kaunas, Volkovisk, and Pinsk assemblies; voir Act of Instruction to Envoys of the assembly of Kaunas district, 22 November 1790, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13724, fos. 634-643; Instruction to the Envoys of Volkovisk District, LMAB RS, f. 233, b. 126, fos. 75; Instruction to the Envoys of Pinsk District, 18 November 1790, LMAB RS, f. 233, b. 126, fos. 2-3.
\end{itemize}
Despite the requirements of the local assemblies to retain independence, the Lithuanian representatives in the Diet supported the Constitution of May 3rd. At that time the concept of retention and strengthening of the state at risk of the Russian invasion was more important than the problem of the Lithuanian status in the Commonwealth. Although the Diet of 1791 functioned without the supervision of the Russian army, the pressure was felt and left its trace. Therefore, the fact that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania deputies at the Diet agreed to adopt the Constitution as a whole, does not prove that they approved of the model of a united state. Later, the Lithuanians achieved that a Mutual Pledge of the Two Nations was adopted on October 20, 1791, wherein a modified dual Commonwealth was legitimised1. ‘The Law of the Mutual Guarantee of Both Nations’ recognized the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the second part of a dualistic Commonwealth (Republic), equal to Poland.

A claim to increase the number of the Lithuanian deputies in the Diet was also implemented. The number of local assemblies was equalized in Minor Poland, Grand Poland and Lithuania. Each part of the Commonwealth was divided into 10 palatinates and 34 districts where assemblies gathered. In every assembly two deputies were to be elected. Consequently, the number of local assemblies increased up to 102 and the number of deputies rose up to 2042. Enforcing the law, some changes were made and the number of the Polish assemblies was reduced. In the February of 1792 there gathered 78 assemblies in the whole Commonwealth3.

Before enacting the new administrative reform, the Four-Year Diet on May 11, 1790 re-established the palatinate of Witepsk which was liquidated during the First Partition of the Commonwealth4. This reform was adopted on November 2, 1791. Implementing the law the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was divided into 10 palatinates and 34 districts5. Since the end of 1791 the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was

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5 J. Sobczak, ‘Zreformowane sejmiki litewskie wobec Konstytucji 3 Maja’, *Profesor Henryk Łowmiański. Życie i dzieło. Materiały z sesji naukowej poświęconej dziesiątej*
partitioned into the Palatinates of Vilnius, Trakai, Smolensk, Polotsk, Novogrodek, Witebsk, Brest, Minsk and the Duchies of Žemaitija (Samogitia) and Livonia. 8 new districts were formed: Užneris (Zawilejski), Eišiškės, Merkinė, Prienai, Telšiai, Slušk, Kobryn and Pinsk Zarzeczny. Considering the nobles’ request, the name of the new district called Pinsk Zarzeczny was changed into Zapinsk and the centre of the district became Stolin not Plotnica.

The Four-Year Diet reformed the system of courts according to which the courts of land, castle and ‘sucamerarius’ were united and the new collegiate organs were established. New courts were elected in the local assemblies for the four-year period. These courts functioned not in sessions like land and castle courts but throughout the year.

Moreover, the Diet established two separate organs for Lithuania and Poland. On December 3, 1791 the law named ‘The Normal delimitation in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania’ was passed. Two days later another law was announced named ‘The Land-ownership delimitation of various natures in Poland’. Thus, the boundary commissions were established. The aim of the commissions was to mark off the private boundaries from state, ecclesiastical and any other land-ownership, to solve boundary disputes and to create detailed territorial maps.

The activity of the assemblies gathered in 1792 revealed the scale of the practical implementation of laws adopted by the Diet in local space. The assemblies elected officers of newly-established districts and officials of new local institutions (reformed land courts and boundary commissions) and examined the work of civil-military and order commissions. The assemblies of February 1792 also declared the position in point of the Constitution of May the third. The decisions made in local assemblies were important to show the position on the reforms among local nobility.

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2 Act of the Resolution, 22 March 1792, BNIA, f. 1771, b. 17, fos.1.
According to the sources, establishment of new local institutions in Poland was complicated. In some local assemblies conservative magnates were against the new Constitution. Also, there was disagreement between the centres of ancient and newly-established districts. All in all, in Poland only 82.2 percent of assemblies accepted the reforms and 17.8 percent were hostile to them.

Differently from Poland, assemblies in Lithuania worked successfully. They demonstrated total acceptance of the Constitution. 27 assemblies took an oath; one assembly pledged the defence and 5 assemblies expressed gratitude to King for the Constitution. Only one assembly in the district of Piltyn (the Duchy of Livonia) did not gather.

The result was determined by the following reasons: 1) strong reformers’ agitation; 2) evident danger from neighbouring Russia which strengthened the perception to consolidate the state; 3) elimination of dependent landless nobles from political life. Assemblies showed the political maturity of the Lithuanian nobility.

Moreover, some new laws were implemented in Lithuania more successfully than in Poland, for example, ‘The law of Land-ownership delimitation of various natures’ was practically not realised in Poland whereas in Lithuania the realisation of this law was successful. According to the material of Vilnius Palatinate assembly, the boundary commission was already formed in Vilnius in the middle of

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1 See W. Szczygielski, Referendum trzeciomajowe..., p. 395.
2 The assemblies of Vilnius, Oszmiana, Lida, Grodno, Ukmergė (Wilkomierz), Kaunas, Prienai, Merkinė, Šiauliai, Raseiniai, Telšiai, Panevėžys, Breslav, Minsk, Žiežmariai (Starodub District), Alytus (Smolensk Palatinate), Volkovisk, Slonim, Kobryn, Brest, Pinsk, Plotnica (Pinsk Zarzeczny District), Mozyrz, Sluck, Bobrujsk (Rzeczica District), Cholopenicze (Orsza District), and Novogrodek.
3 The assembly of newly-established district of Užneris (Zawilejski) held in Postavy pledged the defence of the Constitution.
4 The assembly of Trakai Palatinate, the assembly of newly-established district of Eišiškės, the assembly of Duchy of Livonia gathered in Ilukšta, the assembly of Witebsk Palatinate, and the assembly of Polock Palatinate.
February in 1792. The boundary commission of Kaunas district was formed on February 27, 1792.

A lot of significant local officials sought to become boundary commissars. The list of the candidates showed that this position was highly rated. Lots of representatives of political elite personally aspired to take part in the delimitation and measurement of land possession. Boundary commissions were established and started their activity in Slutsk, Eišiškės, Telšiai, Slonim, Panevėžys and other GDL districts in a very short time.

The nobility willingly participated in the work of all new local institutions. In forming new municipal bodies, the circle of the local political elite expanded. A part of the nobility, who had not occupied any position in the district up until then, acquired real executive power.

Even in the summer of 1792 when the political situation changed and the Russian military intervention forced to abolish the reforms of the Four Year’s Diet, a part of the Lithuanian nobility remained loyal to the Constitution May 3rd. In some assemblies of 1793 requirements were raised to re-establish civil-military commissions, to improve the conditions of peasants, and to restore the law of local assemblies. Moreover, in 1793 as well as in 1790 the Lithuanian nobility sought to maintain the rights of Lithuania in the Commonwealth. Even in the circumstances of the second Partition the nobility demanded that the rights of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, defined by the Act of the Union of 1569, should be safeguarded, that the Statute of Lithuania should be upheld, and that the transfer of the governing institutions of the state outside the boundaries of the territory of Lithuania should be opposed, etc.

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2 Delegation of powers to the commissars of Kaunas District Boundary Commission, LVIA, f. SA, b. 13808, fos. 17-18.
1. During the term of the Four Year’s Diet the position of the Lithuanian nobility changed from moderate attitude to active acceptation of the reforms.

2. The majority of nobility supported all the ways of reforms including centralization. The rights of Lithuania in the Commonwealth were retained by passing subordinate legislation.

3. The creation of new local municipal institutions: i.e. civil–military commissions, new land courts, and boundary commissions, occurred smoothly in all districts of Lithuania. The nobility willingly participated in the work of these institutions. In forming new municipal bodies, the circle of the local political elite expanded. A part of the nobility, who had not occupied any position in the district up until then, acquired real executive power.

4. The Lithuanian noblemen not only accepted the reforms but they also implemented them more successfully than the Polish nobility.

5. Russia’s intervention and the reaction of conservative nobility were not able to stop the pro-constitutional position of noblemen.