

Federalism in the History of Poland

The free with the free, the equal with the equal

Federalism played a prominent part in the more than a thousand-years long history of Poland. For over 200 years, starting with the Polish-Lithuanian Union signed in Lublin in 1569, it comprised the foundation of the system of the First Republic. During the nineteenth century, at the time of the partitions of Poland, federalism became the theme of numerous utopian plans and conceptions, which, as part of an all-European structure, were to result in the regaining of independence. In the twentieth century the idea of a federation did not lose its attraction: it was applied upon many occasions, mainly in conditions posing a threat to Polish independence (the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920 and the Second World War). Nonetheless, federalism did not transcend the stage of projects. Polish federalism and Polish federal thought are based on an equal treatment of partners and respect for their distinctness, a feature connecting the systemic experiences of the **Commonwealth of Two Nations** and the ideas and projects originating in the nineteenth and twentieth century. This approach was succinctly expressed in documents accompanying the Union of Lublin: **the free with the free, the equal with the equal**, a slogan that became the leitmotif of our exhibition. The Commonwealth of Two Nations – the outcome of the Polish-Lithuanian Union – comprised a special federation experience on a European scale. Its system was based on the liberty and equality of the citizens, and the principle of activity entailed the participation of an essential part the population in public life and an accompanying feeling of responsibility for the state. Systemic evolution ran a course different than in the majority of the largest Euro-

pean states: already from the second half of the sixteenth century such states, outfitted with an extensive state administration, began veering towards absolutism, while the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, decentralised and based on the self-government of the gentry, did not cease referring to republican values. By the mid-seventeenth century the manner of comprehending and implementing those values started to lead to a serious crisis of the state. Our exhibition, however, does not deal with the reasons for the fall of the First Republic.

Starting with the sixteenth century the essence of the relation of the society or, as it was known at the time, the gentry nation towards the state is reflected in the term *rzeczpospolita*, a literal translation of the Latin *res publica*. During the Jagiellonian era, and despite the fact that Poland was a kingdom, the state was described as *rzeczpospolita* – *Respublica Regni Poloniae* – which denoted “common good”. This term expresses the gentry’s conception of a state whose citizens are not solely legitimate subjects but actually co-create it. Paraphrasing Louis XIV, the nobility of the Commonwealth could say: ***l’État, c’est nous***.

The exhibition starts with a display of the privileges that turned the nobleman into a free citizen (**liber civis**) who via his deputies participated in the enactment of the law and directly chose the king (the *virilium* election). Next we present the parliamentary system, which assumed its form in the sixteenth century (**libera respublica**), and whose prime element was the Sejm and the land dietines – the local forum of the politically active gentry. This system functioned in the conditions of the developed civic culture of a gentry society, upon many occasions engaged in activity pursued for the sake of the welfare of the state, conceived as a supreme category.



Allegory of the Commonwealth of Two Nations

unidentified Polish painter, end of the 18th century, Biblioteka Sejmowa

Gentry in the election field in front of a tent displaying flags with the Eagle of Poland and the *Pogoni* (pursuit) of Lithuania coats of arms

all around: shields with the coats of arms of voivodeships and lands

– a symbolic depiction of the unity of the Crown and Lithuania.

In the foreground: the election of the marshal of the Sejm electing the king.



Medal *Salus Reipublicae Suprema Lex Esto*

struck on the occasion of the opening of the Legislative Sejm on 10 February 1919.

J. Raszka, 1919, Biblioteka Sejmowa

Salus Reipublicae suprema lex esto

– Let the welfare of the *Res Publica*

be the supreme law – motto referring to the ideas of the Commonwealth

of Two Nations.



An important pillar of the Polish-Lithuanian state was its **sovereign law**. From the early fifteenth century it was assumed that the functioning of the state and the king’s governance was based on a contract and on binding the ruler by means of the law. The view about the supremacy of the law was transposed into political programmes and the work of the state institutions.

The civic activity of the gentry (particularly in the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century) was associated with its high political culture. One of the characteristic features of the society of the Commonwealth was its **multi-cultural, multi-national and multi-religious** nature. The exhibition features also all these issues, which influenced the image and thus also the permanence of the Polish-Lithuanian state.

Separate attention is due to the **Constitution of 3 May 1791**, the first written constitution in Europe, confirming the republican foundations of the state (albeit retaining the institution of the monarchy) and consolidating its federal form in *The Mutual Guarantee of the Two Nations*, added to the text of the Constitution.

We have decided to devote much attention to the Commonwealth of Two Nations since the values on which this federation was built have survived in Polish political culture, comprising the basis of all the pro-independence and anti-totalitarian movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. At the same time, let us underline that both the act and the fate of the Polish-Lithuanian Union continue to be the object of research and discussions conducted by Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian historians. The studies in question have fully developed only recently, and certainly need to be continued.

During the nineteenth century the federal idea in Poland changed, and became a way for planning a European order in which there

was a place for an independent Polish state. Among the many authors of the period we present Wojciech Jastrzębowski, the author of ***Konstytucja dla Europy*** (The Constitution for Europe, 1831), and Stefan Buszczyński with his chief work *La décadence de l’Europe* (1867). Both sketched a federal structure of Europe, with Jastrzębowski recommending a new political system founded on an equal allegiance of all united nations to Europeans laws, and Buszczyński propagating furthermore three liberties: free movement, free thought and free labour.

Twentieth-century Polish federalism (1918-1952) possessed primarily a political dimension, and pertained first and foremost to Central and Eastern Europe. During the interwar period and the Second World War it was envisaged predominantly as a way of protecting Polish lands against the threats posed by their powerful neighbours (the federation policy of Józef Piłsudski, the Head of State in 1918-1922, the idea of the *Intermarium*, the projects of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation from 1939-1942), although it must be stressed that society reacted with approval to plans developed by the pan-European movement. During the last stages of the war and its aftermath, Polish federalists, faced with a looming division of Europe into two camps, propounded the theses of building a union of the states of Central and Eastern Europe.

The accomplishments of Polish federalism and the civic values on which it was based deserve being recalled. From this viewpoint, we may easily perceive that today, in an era of a Europe of *small homelands* and the close cooperation of states recognising liberty, equality and the sovereignty of the law as a systemic foundation, the contemporary problems challenging civic societies are neither as exceptional nor as specific for our times as it is often believed.



Emblem elaborated by S. Buszczyński for a future European federation: a cross inscribed within the sun and a ring.

Latin motto reads:

In will – unity. In unity – freedom.

In freedom – salvation.