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## Selected Dysfunctions of Statehood during the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Critical Conclusions for Today

**Abstract:** The Polish State, with due regard to the time constraints on its continuity, is perceived from the perspective of more than a thousand years. Simultaneously, as an organised entity with its own values, it has been a mental problem for Poles since the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries and is continued until now. Thus, the reflections here have been restricted to the mentioned period because it is then that the main drawbacks of the Polish State began to occur. They include a description of these major flaws as we understand them and their effects. We often express the belief that our state disappeared from the map of Europe mainly due to the actions of our aggressive and finally partitioning neighbours. However, in doing so, we distance ourselves from the mistakes in managing the state made by the generations of our ancestors. This article analyses and exemplifies a deeper, critical academic reflection on these errors committed internally during the mentioned period and visible until today.

**Keywords:** *politics, state, Commonwealth, Poland, Lithuania*

### Introduction

The Polish State, with due regard to the time constraints on its continuity, is perceived from the perspective of more than a thousand years. Simultaneously, as an organised entity with its own values, it has been a mental problem for Poles since the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is the main issue analysed in this article.

The present reflections have been restricted to the mentioned period because it is then that the main drawbacks of the Polish State began to occur. They include a description of these major flaws as we understand them and their effects. We have taken a long time to take shape as a nation in the modern sense. Generally speaking, there are two concepts of the state in our national and state tradition, and these can be summed up by the two terms:

the Piast and the Jagiellonian ruling dynasties. In this connection, we often express the belief that our state disappeared from the map of Europe mainly due to the actions of our aggressive and finally partitioning neighbours. However, in doing so, we distance ourselves from the mistakes in managing the state made by the generations of our ancestors. A deeper, critical academic reflection on these errors committed during the mentioned period was first made in the second half of the nineteenth century by Michał Bobrzyński (1987) in the well-known work entitled *Dzieje Polski w zarysie* [An Outline of Polish History].

In my opinion, the loss of the status of a sovereign state should not be associated, as it is most commonly done, with the period beginning with the Third Partition in 1795 and nominally lasting 123 years. The protracted process of losing the attributes of sovereignty began with the accession to the Polish throne of the Saxon Wettin dynasty, whose rule initiated a steady weakening of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (also called the First Republic), leading to its ultimate collapse at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Specific Paradoxes in the Polish History as Points of Reference for Considerations**

The article's three main research questions are positioned as specific paradoxes perceived against the background of Polish history.

The first of them is that Poland's Union with Lithuania slowed down the process of intensive economic and legal modernisation of the Polish state, initiated by Kazimierz Wielki (Casimir the Great), the last king from the Piast dynasty and gave priority to a model of extensive development in terms of economy. That model was based on an increasingly obsolete serfdom system, on the downgrading of the status of the townspeople, and territorial expansionism of the magnates. Thus, the basis for the future development of capitalism was significantly limited.

The second issue is that the influence of state-oriented political thinkers on the ruling elites, especially from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, was only slight. Significant evidence of the disregard for the thoughts of intellectuals was the growing gap between the future-orientated advocates of reforming the state and the generally short-term-oriented ruling elites. Step by step, the state was appropriated by the profit-oriented magnates supported by a large part of the nobility obsessively guarding the attributes of their 'golden freedom'. A striking example of the reluctance of the latter groups to apply the proposed ideas towards a fundamental change in the shape of the state was the utter unwillingness to pursue the idea of establishing a national church and the ultimate victory of the supporters of counter-Reformation. The idea of the national church within the then religious and political circumstances, initiated in particular by Polish and Lithuanian Calvinist nobility, hadn't become the focal point for public debate until the reign of King Zygmunt August (Sigismund Augustus). However, the deliberations around this issue – also in the Polish parliament's lower chamber (Sejm) – were

short-lived and, from the very beginning, subjected to strong criticism by many opponents, including two influential papal nuncios, Luigi Lippomano and Giovanni Francesco Comendone. These efforts finally failed and were not revived as a realistic demand on a massive scale (Jasienica, 1965, pp. 381–382; Sokołowski, 1904a, pp. 302–307, 318).

Finally, the third issue, partly related to the second one, concerns the fact that the foreign policy of the political elites of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became a reversal of the principle known since the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Palmerston's maxim, which will be discussed below. It gave rise to numerous errors committed in this field, contributing to the ultimate loss of independence in 1795.

## **The Concept of State and Its Understanding**

The synthetic and relatively not very old definition of the state is the one proposed many years ago by Jerzy Kowalski, a professor of law at the University of Warsaw. He regarded the state as a class-type organisation from the point of view of its three main specific features: sovereignty, coercion, and territory (Kowalski, 1976, p. 79). The class aspect of this definition is *passé* in the current debate in Poland and is invoked with reluctance, yet, it is precisely what prompts cognitively important reflections.

Let us begin with the notion of sovereignty: the essence of the concept of the state acquired a completely new quality when a specific group of people, namely the nation, became the bearer of that sovereignty. The multitude of definitions of the nation has been a subject of a multifaceted debate that has been going on for decades and which cannot be settled by a single, universally accepted definition (Altermatt, 1998, pp. 26–67; W. Konarski, 2001, pp. 35–41). However, if we assume that we are interested in the combination of territoriality and law, then we should perceive the nation as a political or civic collectivity, not an ethnic-cultural one (Walicki, 1993). This first understanding gradually became prominent during the period after the French Revolution. Shortly before its outbreak, this interpretation was proposed by the third state and was heralded by the publication of the famous pamphlet *What is the Third State* by Fr. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (Baszkiewicz, 1989, p. 62, 122). It was this group, later also known as the bourgeoisie, which granted itself the attributes of a nation. Thus, it was no longer the king, as it was in the Absolutist regime of power (and not the aristocracy surrounding the Absolutist king), who had the status of the sovereign, but the hitherto third state.

The people's sovereignty is confirmed by the electoral rights attributed to them. This assumption, however, is only nominal since equality before the law was not always extended to all persons living in the state's territory. The historical model of such a situation can be found in the United States of America in their *statu nascendi* and the subsequent decades of their existence. Indeed, equality in exercising the electoral rights there applied only to white and well-to-do free people and did not include black slaves and indigenous peoples, i.e., Indians (Nowicka & Rusinowa, 1988; Rusinowa, 1983). The acquisition of these essentially

subjective rights by people who, over time, wanted to become Americans, i.e., immigrants, was not easy either. Subsequent and increasingly numerous groups of migrants arriving in America on a mass scale, especially from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not meet with a hospitable welcome from the already resident population of European origin. Those white Protestants of Anglo-Saxon origin (the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, WASP) who formed the American state were, on the one hand, keen to stress the importance of liberty and equality before the law. On the other hand, becoming sovereign in the newly established statehood, they denied such status not only to the mentioned autochthons. Namely, they saw the successive waves of immigrants, especially the Catholics from Ireland or Italy, and then the Slavs, although the latter also included Orthodox Christians, as a threat to the state's cohesion based on Protestantism. As a defence against the growing group of non-Protestant immigrants, especially against the Catholic Irish, the so-called nativism, represented by a movement called Know Nothing, was formed (Rusinowa, 1994, pp. 67–71). As a result, the newcomers' status as citizens was limited, lowering their social rank.

These facts illustrate the stages in the formation of the American nation. The next feature of the mentioned state, i.e., coercion, also concerned the new Americans, whose adaptation to the requirements imposed by the state nevertheless aroused resistance from the nativists. At the same time, the requirement that the immigrants should respect the laws of that country did not mean that they immediately became equal in their status with those who had lived here for generations.

It is important to remember that when we are born, we are automatically assigned to the country in which our parents are citizens. For the state is not a free entity in its literary sense but one based on administrative coercion. We can only initiate our individual and independent intention to change our nationality when we are of legal age. But even then, any decision we make means we agree to submit to the laws of the state of which we become citizens. The coercive aspect is thus always present *ergo* the state is not an inherently free entity.

Obviously, the most hostile ideology towards the institution of the state understood expressly as coercion is anarchism. According to Mikhail Bakunin, the essence of the state is violence, which means that it must be answered back with the same (Podgórska, 2008, p. 43). Human history shows that the use of violence in the form of acts of terror, initially against the monarchs and later on also against elected heads of the state or well-known politicians in general, did not bring about the collapse of the state as such. Instead, it may have significantly influenced its image as an efficient or inefficient structure. Let me make a brief digression at this point. Namely, unlike anarchism, the communist ideology did not envisage the destruction of the state by violent means but rather its decline and transformation into self-government. It was therefore intended to make it unnecessary, which leads to the logical conclusion that the essentially journalistic term 'communist state' should not be used. Concerning the countries governed by the so-called real socialism, it would be more appropriate to speak of *a state ruled by a communist party* (italics – note W.K.). However, in practice, communism became the ideology with

the hegemonic position in one of the two types of the totalitarian state existing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Seton-Watson, 1972).

Finally, regarding territoriality, it is worth remembering that every state, except for one represented by a government in exile, has a territory. It is therefore located in space, so it is clear which territory it is sovereign over and to whom the coercion applies.

### **The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (First Republic) as a Reference Point for the Critical Perception of the State**

One should again emphasise that in the broadest scholarly (and also journalistic) discourse, we are generally confronted with two traditions of viewing the Polish State from the perspective of over a thousand years. The former is associated with an ethnically homogeneous state that existed in the Piast Poland period. We perceive it as an example of a territorial organisation populated by a Slavic nation, compact and conscious of its separateness, forced, according to the National Democratic political messages in particular, to defend itself against the German pressure and to seek the alliance with tsarist Russia (Davies, 1992, p. 78). At the same time, it was a nation different from other ethnic groups *alias* nationalities, especially the Jews, who were then settling in Poland on a small scale. However, their centuries-long connection with Polish lands cannot be questioned. The beginnings of the Jewish settlement date back to the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, while the scale of that migration varied and became more intense at the time of Bolesław Chrobry (Boleslaw the Intrepid) and then Kazimierz Wielki (Klubówna, 1967). However, the ethnic homogeneity of the state at the time was still indisputable.

The latter tradition concerns an ethnically heterogeneous state, the origins of which can be traced back to the conclusion of the Polish-Lithuanian Union in Krewo in 1385. This trend deepened after the Union of Lublin was proclaimed in 1569 (Jasienica, 1965, pp. 403–409; Sokołowski, 1904a, pp. 329–331). The resulting Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not supplemented by the inclusion of the third ethnic factor, and as a result the transformation of the so-called state into the Polish-Lithuanian-Cossack Commonwealth did not take place (Jasienica, 1985, pp. 141–147). In geopolitical and ethnic terms, it was the main reason for the internal weakness of this state, which contributed significantly to its collapse in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In that state, not more than 10% of the population had the status of a sovereign, which, in practice, was exercised to a different extent due to the internal diversity of the nobility and the clergy (Samsonowicz, 1970, p. 178). At the same time, these two groups created the instruments of coercion mainly against the townspeople and the peasantry, rather than against each other. Finally, the territory of this state was steadily shrinking, especially from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The combination of the factors connected with the estate and ethnicity thus created the basis for conflict and for weakening the state through the adopted model of government based on democracy for the nobles.

The concept of an ethnically heterogeneous state was thus limited to the coexistence of the Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, especially in religion and language. It is worth to note that in later times, the Lithuanians' perceived the experience of the common state with Poland in a different way than the Poles. Indeed, a significant element of the Lithuanian national revival of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century involved evoking the negative aspects of Lithuania's links with Poland, namely, the Polonisation of the Lithuanians (Ochmański, 1990, pp. 219–220). Many Lithuanians think so also today.

It should be stressed here that the development of the Republic in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond was predicted in the profound reflections of one of the most eminent political thinkers in Europe at the time, i.e., Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (Andreas Fricius Modrevius). In his greatest work, *De Republica Emendanda* (On the Repair of the Republic), he referred to the most important aspects of the functioning of the state, diagnosing the processes occurring in it, and proposing rational solutions as to its future (Frycz-Modrzewski, 1857; Ziętek, 2006; Kurdybacha, 1953; Lepszy, 1954). The observations made by Frycz revealed his visionary style of pro-state scientific thinking and his high level of structured political expertise. They believe that political and constitutional solutions must be implemented based on education, knowledge, wisdom, and reason. However, his vision of the state as an entity intended to embody the rule of meritocracy was as bold as unrealistic. On the one hand, it gave the ruling elites a blueprint of what should be done to ensure the safe existence of the state then and in the future. However, due to their decision-making immaturity, as the next 200 years showed, they could not carry the burden of responsibility for the successful evolution of the state.

Apart from Frycz, in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared other thinkers who believed reforming the state was necessary. Let us recall two of them, but one should remember that implementing their ideas would give opposite results. The first is Wawrzyniec Grzymała Goślicki (Laurentius Grimaldus Gosliscius), a secretary to two kings, namely Zygmunt August and Stefan Batory (Stephen Báthory), who held high positions in the church hierarchy and was a supporter of rational state management, including the possibility of making the ruler accountable (Goślicki Grzymała, 2000). As Teresa Bałuk-Ulewicz has noted, the main legacy of Goślicki's arguments in *De Optimo Senatore* [The Perfect Senator/O senatorze doskonałym] was first the ruler himself, and then his closest milieu (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, n.d.; Stępkowski, 2009). A Jesuit priest, Piotr Skarga, promoted a different attitude toward royal power. Unlike Goślicki, he supported counter-Reformation views openly, yet he regarded the need to strengthen the position of the ruler as the premise for a strong state (Skarga, 1985, pp. 38–71; Tazbir, 1983). The differences in their viewpoints show how difficult it was for the visionaries of the time to reach a consensus on the proposed form of the state.

The divergent ideas of reforming the state were not convincing enough to those in power to go in either direction. There are some fundamental reasons for the internal weakness of the First Republic, which the ruling elites ignored. Firstly, there functioned the ineffective

and economically alienating system of serfdom rather than a system based on land tenancy. It prevented reaching a consensus which would strengthen the state's political system, in the shaping of which the peasants – in addition to the magnates, the clergy and the nobility – would take part. Secondly, there were no systemic prerequisites for the emergence of a native, ethnically Polish and numerous middle class, which fostered an increased resentment towards the Jewish or German, and, more rarely, Armenian populations living in the cities. Thirdly, the magnates and the nobles at their service continued to act in ways that weakened the internal security of the state, a clear expression of which was the *liberum veto*. And fourthly, the lack of a national church made it impossible to create a *raison d'être* shared to a similar degree by the vast majority of the Commonwealth's inhabitants (not citizens).

The emphasis on this last factor may be controversial due to the centuries-long association of the Poles' fate with Catholicism and the papacy expressed in our history through the principle *Polonia semper Fidelis* (Poland always faithful). At the same time, it cannot be denied that wherever the national churches were formed, the politico-legal position of the state was strengthened, which met with the approval of the overwhelming majority of the people living there. The national church, whose head was the reigning monarch, was practically independent of any external influence. Interestingly, the idea of a national church did not only mean a break with Rome. For Poland, it may also have meant a reorientation in Polish foreign policy, about which more below.

In places where the national church eventually gained the upper hand and became an important factor in the ideology of the, initially, dynastic nation-state, it was possible to lay the foundations for a strong monarchy and then a capitalist system, as well as to increase the standing of the national language. Also, the extensive and backward model of serfdom-based agriculture was abandoned, the maintenance of which alienated the numerous peasants, making them, at the very least, indifferent (if not deeply unsympathetic) to the fate of the state. It may be useful at this point to draw on the experience of the Nordic peoples. The victory of Reformation in Sweden and incorporated in Finland, as well as in Denmark with long-joined Norway, contributed significantly to the construction of social attitudes, which over time resulted in an affirmation of the state. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the military expansionism of both powers in northern Europe, *ergo*, Denmark and Sweden, began to decline and practically disappeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It meant directing these states' efforts towards building political, constitutional and economic stability. The origins of such an approach can also be traced back to a written primary act, as demonstrated by the case of Sweden in August 1772. It was followed first by a monarchist *coup d'état* by King Gustav III and then by the adoption of a constitution, which probably allowed Sweden to avoid the fate of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which went into oblivion as a state after the partitions (Anusik, 2013). Notwithstanding its *octroi* character, the Constitution partly reflected the spirit of the Enlightenment and stabilised the internal political situation in Sweden. On this background, there arises a question of whether the Polish Constitution of 3 May can be called the first fundamental law in Europe specifying in one written document the principles

giving the Polish State, from a comparative perspective, a modern character (*Konstytucja 3 Maja* ...). Interestingly, it is not only Sweden that made a comprehensive attempt to sort out the political system on a particular territory. Earlier on, it was attempted by... Corsica. Between 1755 and 1769, this island was an independent state with an extremely progressive Constitution that granted women active suffrage. In 1769, France took military control of it, ending the freedom aspirations of the Corsicans (Carrington, 1973). The Constitution of 3 May was certainly an attempt to save the Polish-Lithuanian state already in a situation of declining authority after losing a significant part of its lands due to the First Partition. In this respect, however, this attempt was belated in contrast to the Swedish one, made in the same year of 1772.

Let us recall once again that it was after the accession of the Saxon Wettin dynasty to the Polish throne that the Republic began to weaken in economic and political terms and its international standing. The actual, belated, process of reforming the state occurred during the Four-Year Sejm, but its beginnings should be sought in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Suffice it to recall here Stanisław Leszczyński, the exiled king, *nota bene* father-in-law of Louis XV (Forycki, 2006, pp. 173–175), and Stanisław Konarski, a representative of the progressive Piarist Order of the time, awarded with a well-deserved medal *sapere auso* (to one who dared to be wise) (S. Konarski, 2005).

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a kind of “bumper crop” of thinkers who attempted to reform the Republic, the written proof of which became the Constitution of 3 May, then called the Government Act. This name meant that the document concerned not so much a literally understood executive body, but the political system as a whole. It derives from the meaning of the word “government”, which is a literal translation of the French (*gouvernement*) or English (government) term, understood rather as a system than a physical government.

Of the research issues mentioned at the beginning of the article, one remains related to the reversal of Palmerston’s rule. Sir Henry John Temple, best known as Lord Palmerston, was a leader of the British Liberal Party and twice the Prime Minister between 1855–1858 and 1859–1865 (Brown, 2010). He is the author of a famous saying that synthesises an effective foreign policy. It reads: “We have no eternal allies or eternal enemies. Our interests are eternal, and to be guided by them is our duty” (Kissinger, 1994, p. 101). The essence of this rule, then, is to be guided in pursuing foreign policy by the permanent interests of the state while allowing for making changes of the allies in the course of its implementation. Therefore, it is a premise for the effectiveness of politics, which has become an example of pragmatism and, at the same time, evidence of the cynical treatment of the allies.

A contrasting approach is to conduct one’s foreign policy by appealing to a sense of mission rather than to one’s interests, geopolitical in particular. The history of states and nations shows few instances of political effectiveness achieved without resorting to cynical methods. In this author’s opinion, the reversal of Palmerston’s rule is exemplified by the foreign policy of the Polish-Lithuanian state. In other words, it is an unfortunate example of



putting a sense of mission over own interests. Unfortunately, many examples in our history of political actions demonstrate a lack of interest-based strategic thinking. Let me recall just three of them, fraught with significant consequences and strengthening not us but our nominal partners alias pseudo allies.

The first concerns the Polish-Hungarian involvement in the anti-Turkish crusade of 1443-1444. The entry of the armies of the two Christian states into its second phase, which ended in defeat at the Battle of Varna on November 10, 1444, showed the disastrous effect of King Władysław III's ill-considered breaking of the favourable truce with Turkey, concluded in the spring of the same year. The break-up had no logical justification either from a diplomatic or military point of view. This decision was taken as a result of the targeted actions of the papal legate at the time, Giulio Cesarini, urging the king to finally crush Turkey with the help of military reinforcements that ultimately did not arrive. The young king's mania for grandeur inspired by religiously motivated loyalty rather than the prudent interest prevailed (Sokołowski, 1904a, pp. 12–14).

The second example is the contribution in 1618 (though not directly) by the Commonwealth to the suppression of the anti-Habsburg independence movement of the largely Protestant Bohemians supported by Hungarian troops from Transylvania. Most of the latter were defeated by the Lisovians (Lisowczycy), i.e., units of Polish light cavalry already having a tarnished reputation for their wartime cruelty. The steps taken by the Republic were justified by August Sokolowski, stating that: "This was both due to the super-power position of the Republic and to the concerns for its own security as the fall of the Habsburg dynasty and the resulting increase of the Turkish power threatened the most vital interests of the Polish state (...)" (Sokołowski, 1904b, p. 186). This opinion is only partly justified. If we were unwilling to help the Czechs, the appearance at that time of "(...) an excellent opportunity to settle the western borders, to "recover" the ancient Piast land (i.e., Silesia – note W.K.) (...)" (Sokołowski, 1904b, p. 187) should have been the price to be paid by the Habsburgs to the Polish-Lithuanian state for their rescue. However, we did not receive any territorial concessions from Vienna, nor did we gain any respect from the Slavic people trying to assert their independence. There is no absolute certainty, but if the Republic had not become militarily involved, it could have become a mediator between the Bohemian rebels and the Viennese court, and in the long run, it could have influenced the geopolitical order in the region in its own favour. It cannot be ruled out that the Republic of Poland may have become an important ally based on reciprocity for the independent Czech state, while for a weakened but saved from collapse Austria, a necessary political and military partner for survival. However, as Sokołowski (1904b, p. 186) admits elsewhere "(...) Sigismund III (i.e., Polish king Zygmunt III Waza – note W.K.) was also driven by dynastic and religious considerations". Therefore, did the category of political interest understood in such a way give the Polish ruler and his milieu a certificate of strategic maturity? In defence of the actions taken by the Polish king, the argument of the Turkish threat is often quoted, which indeed made it necessary to calm down the situation beyond the southern border. Also, war

with Turkey was inevitable anyway: it started with the defeat at Cecora in 1620, followed by the successful defence of Chocim in 1621 (Sokołowski, 1904b, pp. 189–196). One thing is undeniable: the Habsburgs saved themselves from collapse thanks to the intervention of i.a. the Lisovians, while Poland ruined its reputation with the Czechs by not receiving any territorial compensation from the Habsburgs.

The third manifestation is the classic evidence of a missed opportunity to gain the benefits of a battle won. It is the victory of John III Sobieski at Vienna on September 12, 1683, which turned out to be nothing more than a firework and a swan song of the earlier power of the Commonwealth. At the same time, it was the second example in the same century of saving the Habsburg state, mainly by Poland referring – through the mouth of its then ruler – to the sense of mission based on Catholic axiology. It was consistent with the belief that we occupied the position of *antemurale Christianitatis*, or the bulwark of Christianity (Tazbir, 1984). Only the Habsburgs benefited from this.

### **The Continuity of Hereditary Traits**

The limited scope of this article means that the issue of inheriting the faults of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, outlined here and then discussed, as well as their social reception in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will only be hinted at here. On the other hand, and without a doubt, the features of the Polish State throughout this period deserve separate consideration.

In the post-1989 evaluations of the Second Polish Republic, which was established after World War I, there prevailed an apologetic narrative, even though the state quite quickly – since 1926 – morphed into an authoritarian structure and was regarded by many of its citizens as foreign, especially by the ethnically non-Poles. To this day, in the works of many Ukrainian historians, the interwar period is referred to as the Polish occupation of the areas of western Ukraine. Even in the past two decades, such an observation might have been verified by visiting many academic bookshops there, e.g., in Ivano-Frankivsk or Lviv. One may begrudge this, but one should also reflect on why this way of thinking appears attractive to some politicians there and intellectuals. Let us believe such stereotypes will be modified against the background of the military aggression began by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022.

Building an image of the state as a primarily efficient, though less and less democratic, structure began after the May Coup of 1926 and continued until the outbreak of the Second World War. The Polish model of authoritarian rule, in which a political group, rather than a party in the classic sense of the term, called *Sanacja*, became the ruling camp, was rejected not only by the numerous national minorities (Davies, 1992, p. 529). Many ethnic Poles also perceived flaws in the system of government whose advocates returned to the old practices of appropriating the state, evoking associations with the magnate coteries that used the petty nobility for this purpose. The pacified political opposition was becoming illusory. To recall great Polish writer Stefan Żeromski (2019), this was not a Poland of the ‘glass houses’...

The evolution of the Polish State in the post-war period consisted of several stages. In the Stalinist period, People's Poland was moving towards a totalitarian model, but it was finally halted after October 1956 (Davies, 1992, p. 712). The way of governing, colloquially referred to as 'crude socialism', continued by Władysław Gomułka's team, was replaced after 1970 by a specifically understood (although not verbally defined as such) model of managerial socialism. On the other hand, the time of Wojciech Jaruzelski was first an attempt to save by force the *status quo* and then to end the period of 'real socialism' through political decisions based on agreements with the representatives of the democratic opposition. Paradoxically, society could adapt in each of these models, although most Poles maintained critical attitudes towards the system.

Therefore, the People's Poland was an undemocratic state, although calling it totalitarian does not stand up to criticism. It was an example of a state structure with a hybrid character, containing – depending on the period – features that brought it closer to classical totalitarianism but also distanced it from it. The Communists' way of exercising power – whether they were a hegemonic party in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Poland, or a mono-party in Albania, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary or the USSR – was naturally not uniform, because it could not be so (Berglund et al., 1988; Marszałek-Kawa, 2012). The hypothesis that the People's Republic of Poland was totalitarian was verified negatively by me after visiting... the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It is how I became convinced that travel broadens the mind.

To sum up all the points made here, the fact is that for centuries we have had the problem of not only refraining from negative perceptions of our own state, but also from taking effective steps to make it work. In other words, we have no detachment from our negative views of the state or ourselves. As our history shows, we fail to appreciate that we have our own state, even when its importance has increased, as this can have been seen in recent years, since 2015 in particular. This attitude originated in the Jagiellonian times and was then consolidated and has been adopted both today and during the period of transformation after 1989, although its different aspects have been stressed and its verbal interpretation has varied. In my opinion there are three such inherited qualities.

Firstly, there is an enduring tendency to see people in power as a group appropriating the public sphere, although this occurs to varying degrees. It also prevents those in power from ensuring high moral and competence standards, increasing the negative perception of the state in the eyes of fellow citizens. This interdependence is manifested by the actions of those currently in power, which they call reforms or improvements in the functioning of the state, but which are assessed extremely critically by the parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition, and in fact by large segments of Polish society. These actions primarily concern the media, the judiciary or education, particularly higher education. A separate, often negatively assessed area is how those in power *ergo* the institution of the state, are dealing with the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, the role of noble lineage (both real and alleged) and a kind of unbridled individualism, which cannot be justified based on the experiences of the First Republic,

are unjustly glorified. At the same time, there is a reluctance, or even contempt, towards our peasant roots, which, after all, are predominant, although this no longer applies to our reference to bourgeois origins.

Thirdly, and finally, there is a tendency that has been present for centuries in the actions of the state, but also of ourselves, to seek allies – political and military – far from our borders, while at the same time expressing reserve towards states/nations close to us, which are considered hostile or even unfriendly to us. The latter trend has been highlighted from one side by the foreign policy of the ruling United Right camp since 2015, including defence policy, whose makers have referred with almost apologetic approval to the actions of the administration of the former American president, Donald Trump, and himself. However, there is another contradictory tendency to the thesis that underlines the necessity of regional (or neighbouring) cooperation to quote the Bucharest Nine or Three Seas Initiative since 2015 and Lublin Triangle since 2020. The cooperation of such a profile has been accelerated and oriented closer to the defensive way due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Thus, the necessity towards overcoming unconstructive experiences in the field of the past Polish foreign policy seems to be vital currently. It may also mean the chance to effectively modify former mutually negative stereotypes, e.g., in Polish-Ukrainian relations.

And last but not least, we, as a nation of individualists or – as Edmund Lewandowski (1987) maintains – people having a fondness for a sort of behaviour related to histrionics (*skirtotymia* in Polish – note W.K.), maintaining a sceptical attitude towards our own state, often allow the politicians we have chosen the opportunity to disregard our opinion about themselves. As a result, they remain in power, and we, being unable to change the situation, are becoming increasingly frustrated and maintain a negative perception of the state. It naturally is a vicious circle in which we have been stuck for centuries, as it has been synthetically summarised by Aleksander Bocheński (1988) in the title of his most important work, namely *Dzieje głupoty w Polsce* [The History of Stupidity in Poland]. That, however, is a separate theme to which many of us may recur.

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