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## **WAS THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH A KINGDOM OF ANARCHY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY? FOREIGN PERCEPTIONS, POLITICAL NARRATIVES, AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF PARTITION**

### **Abstract**

This paper critically reexamines the portrayal of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a 'kingdom of anarchy' in the eighteenth century, a label persistently echoed by European intellectuals, diplomats, and political observers. The Commonwealth, weakened by the liberum veto, unchecked noble privileges, and a weak central authority, became a symbol of dysfunction. These flaws fuelled a narrative of chaos, eagerly exploited by neighbouring powers to justify their interventions and eventual partitions of the state. Drawing on Enlightenment critiques, the paper analyzes the incisive commentaries of thinkers like Montesquieu, Leibniz, and Voltaire, who saw in Poland not just political decay but a cautionary tale for Europe. Moreover, it reveals how the rhetoric of anarchy was weaponized in the geopolitical chess game of the era, with Poland's neighbours actively sustaining its internal paralysis to secure their imperial ambitions. Finally, the study traces how the myth of Polish anarchy outlived the Commonwealth itself, shaping historical narratives and justifying the dismemberment of a once-mighty state.

**Keywords:** Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, anarchy, liberum veto, Enlightenment, partitions of Poland.

Poland, lacking a strong executive authority, a developed bureaucratic system, and a powerful military, stood in stark contrast to the Enlightenment ideal of a well-organized state. Intellectuals and foreign visitors to Poland were quick to criticize the country's outdated social structures, frequently highlighting the glaring economic inequalities and the widespread poverty affecting much of the population. They drew attention to the weakness of the urban centres, the slow pace of industrial development, and the stagnating internal market. Observers also noted Poland's failure to exploit its natural resources effectively. Additionally, the state of Polish culture and science was viewed unfavourably, with

society often being dismissed as 'barbaric'. In the 1760s, defamatory campaigns orchestrated and funded by the Russian and Prussian courts further intensified these criticisms. As a result, European commentators increasingly accused Poles of religious intolerance and fanaticism. However, the most significant factor undermining the Polish nobility's republic in the eyes of European public opinion remained the perception of rampant anarchy.

The purpose of this text is to examine the assessments and opinions expressed during the Age of Enlightenment regarding this phenomenon. First, I discuss the elements that contributed to the representation of Polish anarchy (I); next, I present the political principles that guided the neighbouring states in their approach to this issue (II); then, I explore the role of anarchy in the debates surrounding the First Partition of Poland (III), and finally, I trace how the concept of Polish anarchy shaped the discourse on the Commonwealth in the following years (IV). Throughout, I refer to selected, representative examples from politicians, intellectuals, travellers, and publicists.

## I

The decisive period for the crystallization of Poland's image as a 'kingdom of anarchy' – a term used by Prussian King Frederick II in 1768 (as discussed in detail below) – was the second half of the seventeenth century and the early decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> During this time, the Polish state descended into a deep crisis, with successive sessions of

<sup>1</sup> This study builds upon my research on the representation of Poland during the Enlightenment and examines the role of defamatory campaigns as a strategic instrument for legitimizing political actions and concealing the expansionist ambitions of neighbouring powers (i.a. J. Kordel, "Królestwo anarchii". *W poszukiwaniu nowożytnych wyobrażeń o Rzeczypospolitej i jej mieszkańcach*, Warszawa, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2020). It reiterates the main theses and findings while offering further illustration through examples drawn from previously unused sources. The image of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the public opinion of the Age of Enlightenment has been the subject of extensive scholarly research. Below are some of the most significant studies: R. Wołoszyński, *Polska w opiniach Francuzów XVIII w.*, Warszawa, PWN, 1964. M.H. Serejski, *Europa a rozbiory Polski. Studium historiograficzne*, Warszawa, PWN, 1970. *Das Polenbild der Deutschen 1772–1848. Anthologie*, G. Kozierek (ed.), Heidelberg, Winter, 1989. L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, University Press, 1996. S. Fiszer, *L'image de la Pologne et des Polonais dans l'œuvre de Voltaire*, (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 2001, 5), Oxford, Voltaire Foundation 2001. M. Forycki, *Anarchia polska w myśli Oświecenia. Francuski obraz Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej u progu czasów stanisławowskich*, Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2004. P. Ugniewski, *Media i dyplomacja. "Gazette de France" o sejmie rozbiorowym 1773-1775*, Warszawa,

the Sejm, which held exclusive authority to pass laws and approve taxes, frequently disrupted or sabotaged by rival factions, often under the influence of foreign powers. As a result, the term 'Polish Sejm' entered various European languages, coming to denote a chaotic, unruly, and unproductive debate, and, in a broader sense, disorder and anarchy. The country was ravaged by mutinies of unpaid military units, and Lithuania became a battlefield of civil war. The early years of the Great Northern War exposed a severe crisis within the Polish army. Initially, Poland fell under the control of Charles XII of Sweden, and later under Peter I of Russia, becoming a protectorate of its more powerful neighbours. Swedish and Russian diplomats decided on the appointment to the Polish throne and interfered in the nation's internal affairs, including its legal system. These events did not escape the attention of those observing Polish affairs. The situation in the Commonwealth began to be summed up by the saying, 'Poland is governed by disorder' (*Polonia confusione regitur*). Intellectuals increasingly criticised the political structures that entrenched the state's weakness: the election of monarchs with limited powers, the extensive prerogatives of the Sejm, the paralysing practice of the *liberum veto*, and the nobility's right to renounce obedience to the king. They observed that the nobility, who dominated the other estates, were often prone to corruption and driven by self-interest, neglecting the well-being of the state.<sup>2</sup>

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DiG, 2006. Idem, *Ludwik XVI – Stanisław August. Propagandowe wizerunki równoległe*, Warszawa, DiG, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Interactions and relationships among representatives of different ethnic, national, linguistic, and religious communities inevitably contributed to the formation and reinforcement of certain stereotypical perceptions. This process began long before the modern concept of the nation fully emerged. By the late Middle Ages, the repertoire of characteristics ascribed to various European peoples had already developed into a relatively mature form. An expression of the belief in Poland's lower level of civilizational development compared to Western European states was the notion of the 'Polish bridge'. Stanisław Kot extensively studied opinions about Poland throughout the entire early modern period. His study (*Rzeczpospolita Polska w literaturze politycznej Zachodu*, Kraków, Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1919, second edition: Warszawa, Aspra, 2017), published shortly after the end of World War I, remains a significant contribution to the field. A particularly interesting example is François Rosset's, *L'arbre de Cracovie. Le mythe polonais dans la littérature française*, Paris, Imago, 1996, which traces the evolution of Poland's perception in France throughout the early modern period. For the shaping of the image of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the seventeenth century, two key works are particularly important: *Die gelehrte Welt des 17. Jahrhunderts über Polen. Zeitgenössische Texte*, Elida Maria Szarota (ed.), Wien, München, Zürich, Europaverlag, 1972, and the recently published study by Waclaw Pagórski, „Wem zu wohl ist, der ziehe in Pohlen“. *Zum Polenbild in der deutschsprachigen Reiseliteratur des 'langen' 17. Jahrhunderts* Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2022.

Contemporaries were in broad agreement that the source of the crisis plaguing the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lays in a misguided understanding of liberty. This notion recurred in the writings of both critics and defenders of the noble republic, featuring prominently in the works of leading intellectuals as well as their lesser-known followers. In the mid-17th century, Hermann Conring, a distinguished expert on German law who was commissioned by Charles X Gustav to justify the Swedish invasion of Poland during the Second Northern War, noted a paradox in Poland's political system. He argued that while Poles were unwilling to submit to strong monarchical authority, they were equally incapable of fully embracing liberty. The nobility, rather than striving for genuine freedom, had fallen into a state of lawlessness. The *liberum veto*, a mechanism that paralysed Polish political life, became a symbol of this disorder. For Conring, this was evidence that Poles were incapable of maintaining their own state. Instead of strengthening its institutions, the nobility allowed their particular interests to undermine the very structures of power.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1660s, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz expressed similar concerns. In his work *Specimen demonstrationum politicarum pro eligendo rege Polonorum* (1669), despite efforts to curry favour with the Polish nobility, he presented numerous critical observations on the political system of the Commonwealth. Leibniz argued that, while a love of liberty is a virtue, excessive liberty can become a source of significant problems. "Liberty [...] should be limited by concern for security, so that in the absence of unity, the defenceless republic is not exposed to the mercy of its enemies".<sup>4</sup> For the German philosopher, overly broad freedom, which could easily devolve into lawlessness that disregards legal frameworks, posed a fundamental constitutional threat to the Commonwealth.<sup>5</sup> Leibniz also regarded the *liberum veto* as the most glaring manifestation of noble lawlessness, as it undermined the decision-making process and allowed private interests to prevail over the common good. He warned that if the warring factions did not put an end to their internal conflicts,

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<sup>3</sup> "Und ist warlich dieser Volcker-Arth, ob sie schon keine ganze absolute Herrschaft leiden können, dass se doch auch keine vollkommene Freyheit ertragen mögen" Hermann Conring, *Epistola Oder Sendschreiben Des Cyriaci Thrasymachi von der gerechten Kriegs-Armatur der Cron Schweden wider die Cron Polen* [p. 1., 1656].

<sup>4</sup> "Securitatis [...] cura libertas temperanda est, ne unione dissoluta hostibus inermis Respublica obiiciatur", G.W. Leibniz, *Specimen demonstrationum politicarum pro eligendo rege Polonorum, novo scribendi genere ad claram certitudinem exactum*, Vilnae [i.e. Gdańsk], 1659 [i.e. 1669], p. 19 (the Polish translation: *Wzorzec dowodów politycznych*, trans. by T. Bieńkowski, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków, Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> G.W. Leibniz, *Specimen demonstrationum*, pp. 19–21.

the Commonwealth would pay the ultimate price: “to disrupt unity is to destroy the state”.<sup>6</sup> According to Leibniz, unchecked anarchy would inevitably turn against the nobility, whose interests he equated with the prosperity of the nation. He argued that it would either lead to the collapse of the State or result in the imposition of absolute rule.<sup>7</sup>

In Montesquieu’s view, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a state characterised by degenerate liberty. Anarchy had overtaken its social and political life. The State was systematically destroyed by the nobility, who, lacking the republican virtue of moderation, pursued their own interests and turned the Commonwealth into a pawn in the power struggles of Europe’s elites. Montesquieu was convinced that Poland’s greatest ailment was the distortion of the concept of liberty. As he wrote in *De l’esprit des lois*, in the Commonwealth “the aim of laws is the independence of each citizen, which consequently results in the oppression of all”.<sup>8</sup> In the manuscript of his treatise, the philosopher added a remark at this point: “this is the flaw of *liberum veto*”.<sup>9</sup> According to Montesquieu, while the ‘free voice’ originally stemmed from the tradition of political consensus, it had morphed into a mechanism that entrenched anarchy. Reflecting on the problem of the *liberum veto*, Montesquieu argued that the unlimited right to dissent was a symptom of profound corruption within Poland’s legal system.<sup>10</sup> The principle of unanimity paralysed parliamentary life in Poland, leading to a state crisis: “If the legislative body did not convene for an extended period, there would be no liberty. Either there would be no legislative resolutions, and the state would fall into anarchy; or these resolutions would come from the executive, which would thereby become absolute”.<sup>11</sup> For Montesquieu, the alternative was clearly drawn: either anarchy or absolute power.

<sup>6</sup> “Unitatem penitus solvi, est Rempubicam interire”, *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14, 93.

<sup>8</sup> “L’indépendance de chaque particulier est l’objet des lois de Pologne ; et ce qui en résulte, c’est l’oppression de tous”, *De l’esprit des lois*, livre XI, chapitre 5, Londres, Nourse, 1772, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> “Inconvénient du *liberum veto*”, as cited in P. Matyaszeński, *Monteskiusz o Polsce*, in *idem* (ed.), *Monteskiusz w Polsce. Wczoraj i dziś*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo UW, 2018, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> “L’abus des lois de Pologne, c’est qu’elles n’ont pas puni le téméraire opposant”, *Pensées et fragments inédits de Montesquieu, Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, vol. 2, *Pensées. Spicilège. Geographica. Voyages*, A. Masson (ed.), Paris, Nagel, 1950, p. 554.

<sup>11</sup> “Si le corps législatif était un temps considérable sans être assemblé, il n’y aurait plus de liberté. Car il arriverait deux choses: l’une, ou qu’il n’y aurait plus de résolution législative, et l’état tomberait dans l’anarchie; ou que ces résolutions seraient prises par la puissance exécutrice, et elle deviendrait absolue”, *De l’esprit des lois*, XI, 6, p. 197.

The Commonwealth descended into chaos as successive Sejm sessions were disrupted, preventing the passage of new laws and the implementation of necessary reforms.

Montesquieu's perspective on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is further evidenced by the catalogue of books in the library at La Brède, his family estate. He annotated the list of works on the Commonwealth with two reflections: the first, attributed to Hugo Grotius, *Plebs praerogativis semetipsa donavit quibus sibi noceret*, and the second from Tacitus' *Annales: Magis sine domino quam in libertate*.<sup>12</sup>

The problem of the Polish nobility's misunderstanding and misuse of their liberty was not limited to philosophical discussions. An anonymous author of a pamphlet published in 1725, which addressed the so-called Bloodbath of Toruń, an event where the mayor and several townspeople were sentenced to death for crimes against public order, observed that, despite Augustus II's "great efforts to civilize his subjects", these attempts were in vain. The author pointed out that the constant stubbornness of the Polish nobility, "arising from excessive liberty, prevents the desired outcome. It is certain that they will remain the most wild and unrefined nation until they limit their unlawfully seized freedom and allow their kings to act more freely to teach them".<sup>13</sup> However, the author recognised that these hopes were more wishful thinking than a realistic expectation.

It is not surprising that *L'Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* also conveyed a vivid depiction of Polish anarchy. The main article on Poland (volume 12, 1765), written by Chevalier de Jaucourt, largely drew on Gabriel Coyer's work *Histoire de Jean Sobieski, roi De Pologne* (1761). Abbé Coyer portrayed Poland in line with the popular style of depicting the East at the time, based on contrasts, presenting Poland as a land of contradictions: "royal dignity alongside the name of a republic, laws with feudal anarchy, disfigured remnants of the Roman republic with Gothic barbarism, abundance with

<sup>12</sup> J. Ehrard, *Montesquieu et la Pologne*, in I. Zatorska and A. Siemek (eds), *Le siècle de Rousseau et sa postérité. Mélanges offerts à Ewa Rządowska*, Warszawa, Uniwersytet Warszawski. Instytut Romanistyki, 1998, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> "Wie viele Mühe sich der itzige [...] König gegeben, ihnen höflichere Sitten, und bessere Conduite bezubringen, liegt am Tage; aber ihr durch die allzugroße Freyheit unterstütztes einiges Widersprechen, verhindert allen Succceß, und es ist gewiß, dass sie so lange das wildeste und ungeschickteste Volk unter den Christen bleiben werden, bis sie ihre sich selbst angemäße Freyheit größtentheils fallen, und hievon ihren Königen freyere Hände lassen, sie eines bessern zu belehren, welches aber ihrer harten Köpffe wegen mehr zu wünschen, als zu hoffen" *Unpartheyisches Gespräche im Reiche der Todten zwischen Johanne Diazio [...] und Johann Gottfried Rössnern*, Berlin 1725, p. 112.

poverty”.<sup>14</sup> Jaucourt, building on this portrayal, argued that the Polish political system was marked by a tendency towards extremes: from complete anarchy to outright despotism. In his description of Poland’s early history, he highlighted the persistent tension between absolutist tendencies and anarchy. When Poles sought to curb the power of their monarchs and reject despotism, they often found themselves descending into chaos. Attempts to establish a collegial form of government consistently failed. The lack of the virtue of moderation meant that, in opposing royal despotism, the nobility themselves veered towards autocracy. This was further exacerbated by succession crises, such as the transfer of the throne to Louis of Hungary or the childless death of Sigismund Augustus: “Interregnums”, the author observed, “were almost always periods of anarchy”.<sup>15</sup> The author, following Montesquieu, argued that the root of Poland’s misfortunes lay in the improper use of liberty excessive privileges had led the noble class to retain the power of kings without fearing them. The most significant of these privileges was the right to elect the monarch, a power the nobility no longer knew how to wield effectively. He referred to the situation following the death of Augustus II, when the majority of the nobility elected Stanisław Leszczyński, only for the Russians to impose the deceased king’s son on the Commonwealth. “Poland may boast of its valiant nobility, capable of mustering one hundred thousand cavalry”, the encyclopaedist wrote, “but it was seen how ten thousand Russians, after the election of King Stanisław, dispersed the entire Polish nobility assembled in his favour and imposed another king upon them”.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these challenges, Jaucourt believed that the Commonwealth had the potential to recover, provided a wise and strong ruler emerged “one who would abolish the tribunate power and the *liberum veto*, to govern the nation by majority rule. Such a ruler, he argued, would educate the nobility, reminding them that their subjects, the very people who sustained them and descended from their common ancestors, the Sarmatians, were indeed human. He envisioned a ruler who would

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<sup>14</sup> “La Pologne, telle qu’elle est aujourd’hui dans le moral et dans le physique, présente des contrastes bien frappants; la dignité royale avec le nom de république; des lois avec l’anarchie féodale; des traits informes de la république romaine avec la barbarie gothique; l’abondance et la pauvreté”, *Pologne*, in *L’Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences*, vol. 12, Paris 1765, p. 932; G. Coyer, *Histoire de Jean Sobieski, roi de Pologne*, vol. 1, Varsovie 1761, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> “Les interrègnes ont été presque autant d’anarchies”, *Pologne*, p. 925

<sup>16</sup> “En vain la Pologne se vante d’une noblesse belliqueuse, qui peut monter à cheval au nombre de cent mille hommes: on a vu dix mille Russes, après l’élection du roi Stanislas, disperser toute la noblesse polonaise assemblée en faveur de ce prince, et lui donner un autre roi”, *ibid.*, p. 923.

abolish serfdom, that *civil plague* which stifled competition, industry, the arts, sciences, honour, and prosperity".<sup>17</sup>

In formulating his views on reform, Jaucourt failed to recognise that, although the leaders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth saw the need for deep reforms, their efforts were ultimately doomed to fail, as the state had long ceased to be sovereign, and neighbouring powers were resolute in obstructing any meaningful reform.

## II

Maintaining the inertia of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became a central tenet of the foreign policy pursued by its powerful neighbours, Brandenburg-Prussia and Russia. As early as the mid-17th century, Frederick William, the Great Elector, urged his successor to prevent any reforms that might curtail the liberties of the nobility, strengthen the monarchy, or improve the efficiency of the Sejm.<sup>18</sup> The Berlin court inserted clauses advocating the preservation of Polish anarchy into treaties with Sweden (1667, 1686, 1696) and Austria (1686).<sup>19</sup> Prussian diplomacy soon recognised the destructive potential of the *liberum veto*. In 1722, Frederick William I instructed his heir to always seek the dissolution of the Sejm's proceedings whenever Prussian interests dictated it.<sup>20</sup> Keeping the Commonwealth in a state of weakness was viewed as an opportunity for territorial expansion, with Royal Prussia as the primary objective, followed by potential claims on Courland, Samogitia, and Greater Poland.<sup>21</sup> During the Great Northern War, it became evident that similar objectives were a core part of Russian foreign policy. As mentioned earlier, after

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<sup>17</sup> "Celui qui abolira la puissance tribunitienne, le liberum veto, pour gouverner la nation par la pluralité des suffrages; celui qui apprendra aux nobles que les serfs qui les nourrissent, issus des Sarmates leurs ancêtres communs, sont des hommes; [...] bannira la servitude, cette peste civile qui tue l'émulation, l'industrie, les arts, les sciences, l'honneur & la prospérité: c'est alors que chaque polonois pourra dire", *ibid.*, p. 934.

<sup>18</sup> *Politisches Testament des Großen Kurfürsten (1667)*, in R. Dietrich (ed.), *Politische Testamente der Hohenzollern*, Berlin-Köln, Böhlau, 1986, p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> T. von Mörner (ed.), *Kurbrandenburgs Staatsverträge von 1601 bis 1700*, Berlin, Reimer, 1867, pp. 314–316, 478–486, 618–620.

<sup>20</sup> *Instruktion Friedrich Wilhelms I. für seinen Nachfolger*, in R. Dietrich (ed.), *Politische Testamente*, pp. 239–240. Similar remarks were included in the political testament of Frederick II, *Testament politique* (1752, in R. Dietrich (ed.), *Politische Testamente*, p. 350.

<sup>21</sup> A. Kamiński, *Polityka zagraniczna Prus 1701–1740*, in B. Wachowiak (ed.), *Prusy w okresie monarchii absolutnej, 1701–1806*, Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010, pp. 190–232.



the Battle of Poltava (1709), the triumphant Peter the Great reinstated Augustus II to the Polish throne, following his earlier forced abdication by Charles XII. In 1715, when the Polish nobility rebelled against the king, Russian diplomacy took charge of mediating the conflict, backed by tsarist military forces occupying the Commonwealth's territory. This mediation led to the Treaty of Warsaw in 1716, which was ratified by the "Silent Sejm" in 1717. In line with Peter I's intentions, the treaty reinforced the nobility's privileges, including the *liberum veto*, free election of the king, a weakened royal authority, and a capped army of just 24,000 troops. Due to Russia's opposition and its increasing influence over Polish political affairs, neither political reforms nor army expansion were possible from that point forward. Peter the Great and his successors were invested in maintaining the Commonwealth's weakness, as it was essential for keeping Poland dependent and for furthering the Tsardom's westward expansion.<sup>22</sup>

The alignment of goals between St. Petersburg and Berlin regarding Poland was cemented in the Russian-Prussian declaration signed in Potsdam in February 1720. The second article stated that both rulers intended to ensure that Poland's freedoms, laws, and privileges remained untouched. Moreover, should the Polish court attempt to introduce absolute or autocratic rule, the two powers would not only oppose such efforts but actively work to preserve Poland's existing system.<sup>23</sup> Following this agreement, Russian and Prussian diplomats successfully disrupted the 1719-20 Sejm, which was poised to vote on an alliance with King

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<sup>22</sup> U. Kosińska, *Mechanizmy rosyjskiej polityki imperialnej w Polsce od Piotra I do Anny Iwanowny (1697-1740)*, in A. Nowak (ed.), *Metody i środki oddziaływania imperiów. Ideologia i praktyka polityczna państwa rosyjskiego/ sowieckiego/ rosyjskiego w latach 1689–2022*, Warszawa 2024, pp. 97–120. Z. Zielińska, *Rosja wobec polskich prób reform w latach 1738–1744*, in eadem, *Studia z dziejów stosunków polsko-rosyjskich w XVIII w.*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 7–45. Eadem, *Polska w okowach „systemu północnego”*, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>23</sup> „Beyderseits Majestäten wollen auch jetzt und künftig jedesmahl eine besondere Attention haben, auf die République Pohlen, daß Sie bey Ihrer Freiheit, Verfassungen, und Constitutiones, derselben Praerogativen und Gerechtsame, immer und ungekränkt erhalten werden möge, sollte aber der Königliche Polnische Hoff [...] eine Souveraine und arbitraire Art zu regieren in Pohlen allmählig einzuführen trachten, so wollen [beyderseits Majestäten – J.K.] mit Rath und That nicht allein sich darwieder setzen, sondern auch die République kräftig dahin assistiren, damit solches abgestellt und alles in dem alten Stande und Wesen in Pohlen erhalten werde“. F.F. Martens (ed.), *Recueil des traités et conventions conclus par la Russie*, vol. 5, St. Pétersbourg 1880, p. 199–200. The role of Polish affairs in the alliance treaties concluded by neighbouring states is described more comprehensively by J. Kordel, 'The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Eighteenth-century Alliance Treaties of the Neighbouring Countries, 1720–72', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, vol. 116, 2017, pp. 209–248.

George I of England and Emperor Charles VI – a move that could have weakened Russia's influence over Poland.

Both courts were committed to keeping Poland in a state of internal paralysis, as evidenced by provisions that upheld noble privileges, especially the *liberum veto* and the free election of the king. Equally important were clauses aimed at preventing the expansion of the Polish army – key elements of what was referred to as Polish anarchy. These provisions were consistently reiterated in successive Russo-Prussian alliances, signed in 1726, 1729, 1730, 1733, 1740, 1743, 1762, 1764, and 1769, all of which emphasised the need to preserve Poland's political system and nurture noble freedoms, the core components of its internal disorder. A secret article concerning Polish affairs, nearly identical in each convention, stated: "Since the highest interest of His Royal Majesty of Prussia and Her Imperial Majesty of Russia requires special attention to be paid to the neighbouring Crown and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, they intend to make every effort to preserve the said Crown and Commonwealth under its current constitutions, freedoms, privileges, and laws. Any threat to this must be promptly averted and prevented".<sup>24</sup> This principle of preserving Poland's political status quo was also imposed by Russia on Sweden (1724), which had fallen increasingly under Russian influence after the death of Charles XII, as well as on Austria (1726, 1746).

Furthermore, Augustus III, who, as previously mentioned, ascended to the Polish throne through the intervention of Empress Anna after his father's death, was compelled to refrain from any efforts to resolve the prevailing anarchy.<sup>25</sup> The king was repeatedly forced to abandon his reformist ambitions, notably through the Austrian-Saxon treaty of 20 December 1743,<sup>26</sup> the Russo-Saxon treaty of 24 January (4 February) 1744,<sup>27</sup> and the Anglo-Austrian-Dutch-Saxon treaty of 8 January

<sup>24</sup> "Weilen Ihro Königl. Maytt. in Preußen, und Ihro Kayfl. Maytt. von allen Reußen interesse höchstens erfordert, auff die benachbarte Crohn und Republique Pohlen eine besondere attention zu haben; als wollen dieselbe auch Ihre äüßerste Sorgfalt seyn lassen, wie erwehnte Crohn und Republique, bey Ihren bisherigen Verfassungen, und Freyheiten, Praerogativen und Vorrechten erhalten, und alles, was dem zuwider möchte attentiert werden wollen, in Zeiten verhütet, und abgewehrt werden möge", *ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>25</sup> G.F. v. Martens (ed.), *Supplément au recueil des principaux traités d'alliance*, Gottingue 1807, suppl. vol. 3, pp. 1-10.

<sup>26</sup> "So jedoch anderst nicht, als ohne mindester Kränckung der Republic Pohlen Gerechtsame zu verstehen ist und vielmehr die Beybehaltung und Handhabung ihr der Republic Verfassung und Constitutionen zum Grund hat", F.A.W. Wenck, *Codex iuris gentium*, vol. 1, Lipsiae 1781, p. 730.

<sup>27</sup> "Дабы корону и Республику Польскую со всеми чинами при ея конституциях, преимуществах, вольностях, уставах и правах ненарушимо содержать я сохра-

1745.<sup>28</sup> The necessity of preserving Poland's political system in its unchanged state was also reaffirmed in agreements made by members of the anti-Prussian coalition during the Seven Years' War.<sup>29</sup>

The treaty commitments of the great powers were not mere hollow threats. Neighbouring courts had a wide array of instruments at their disposal, ranging from disrupting Sejm sessions to threatening military intervention, and ultimately, the use of force. These tactics were clearly evident in the case of the extraordinary Sejm planned for late 1744, which was meant to convene under the framework of a confederation. By mid-December 1744, as preparations were well advanced, a declaration from Empress Elizabeth reached Warsaw, containing explicit threats of intervention. In it, the Russian court asserted that it "would never consent to a confederation [...] that would be directed against the freedoms and prerogatives of the Commonwealth".<sup>30</sup> There was a clear warning that if any action were taken against the aforementioned "freedoms and prerogatives", meaning an attempt to curb the prevailing anarchy, "Her Imperial Majesty would not hesitate to take the necessary steps to oppose it with all her might".<sup>31</sup> This signified that any effort to reform the Polish system, strengthen the state, or reinforce its institutions would be met with resistance. This scenario repeated itself several times, following successive ordinary Sejm sessions that were disrupted by the use of *liberum veto*.

The political principles of the Russian state remained unchanged after Catherine II ascended the throne. In instructions sent to Russian diplomats in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth following the death of Augustus III on 6 (17 November) 1763, it was stated: "We feel particularly obligated to make it our foremost and constant duty to ensure the unalterable preservation of the Polish form of government, especially regarding unanimous decision-making in the Sejm".<sup>32</sup> Stanisław August

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нять", *Полное собрание законов Российской империи, Первое собрание*, vol. 12, (1744-1748), [Saint Petersburg] 1830, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> "Sans porter atteinte aux lois et constitutions", F.A.W. Wenck, *Codex iuris gentium*, vol. 2, Lipsiae 1788, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> "Maintenir de plus en plus la liberté de la nation Polonoise". F.F Martens (ed.), *Recueil des traités*, vol. 1, St. Pétersbourg 1874, p. 243.

<sup>30</sup> "Elle [Elisabeth – J.K.] ne permettra jamais aucune confédération, aucuns troubles ou autres nouveautés qui pourraient être suscitées contre [...] contre la liberté et les prérogatives de la République de Pologne". Russian declaration, Warsaw, 13 December 1744, quoted after M. Skibiński, *Europa a Polska w dobie wojny o sukcesję austriacką w latach 1740–1745*, vol. 2, Kraków 1913, p. 479.

<sup>31</sup> [Elle] ne manquera pas de prendre toutes les mesures convenables pour s'y opposer de toutes ses forces. Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> "Еще себя признаем наипаче обязанными полагать первым нашим неперменным попечением, чтоб польская форма правительства ненарушимо была

quickly came to realize the truth of these words. His early attempts to dismantle the anarchy during the first years of his reign provoked Russian diplomatic and military intervention.

Without going into detail, it should be noted that during the Sejm of 1767-68, Russia imposed legislation on Poland that entrenched all the system's weaknesses, with the *liberum veto* at the forefront. The forced introduction of this new legislation had two significant consequences: it deepened the existing anarchy and alienated much of the noble society. Russian actions met resistance from a substantial part of the population, leading to the Bar Confederation in 1768. This plunged the Commonwealth into four years of civil war, which was eventually suppressed by Russian forces. The internal unrest sparked by Catherine II's demands became one of the key arguments used to justify the eventual partition of Poland.

### III

The partition of Poland required both justification and legitimization. The neighbouring powers swiftly provided the necessary arguments for public opinion. A key argument was the need to control Polish anarchy, said to threaten regional stability. The division of Polish territory was portrayed as a beneficial act, one that would ease internal conflicts and prevent the outbreak of a broader European war.

The destructive impact of anarchy was already cited in the secret partition conventions. The February Prussian-Russian treaty detailed the breakdown of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Ongoing chaos, constant factional conflicts, and the moral decline of society meant that any measures taken, including Russia's military intervention against the Bar Confederation, failed to achieve their intended outcomes: "On the contrary, the spirit of faction grows stronger every day, and the anarchy is so powerful that only by curbing these disturbances can the state be saved from complete collapse".<sup>33</sup> The theme of anarchy resurfaced in the August treaties. Both the Prussian-Russian and Austrian-Russian conventions contained a passage describing the internal state of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: "The spirit of faction, unrest, and

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сохраняема; особенно в пунктах единогласного действия решения на сеймах". Instructions for Hermann Keyserlingk and Nikolai V. Repnin, , Сборник Императорского Русского Исторического Общества, vol. 51, St. Petersburg 1886, p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> "L'acharnement de l'esprit de parti et de faction y acquiert chaque jour de nouvelles forces, et que l'anarchie s'y enracine de telle sorte qu'il est à craindre que la perpétuité des troubles et des divisions n'entraîne la décomposition totale de l'État". F.F. Martens (ed.), *Recueil des traités*, vol. 6, St. Pétersbourg 1883, p. 72.

internal strife have shaken this kingdom for many years now. Each day, anarchy grows stronger, disregarding all authority. This raises legitimate concerns that the state will soon completely collapse. Such a breakdown would disrupt all neighbouring countries, disturb the existing harmony, and could even spark a general European war”.<sup>34</sup> It is striking that the argument of anarchy appeared in secret documents meant to remain hidden from the public. This raises the question: was the reference to anarchy truly an attempt to justify actions to other nations, or was it aimed at legitimising those actions before their own political elites?

Anarchy played a key role in the first public declaration announcing the partition of Poland, presented in Warsaw in September 1772 by representatives of the three courts. The text was circulated to the embassies of Prussia, Russia, and Austria in all European capitals, as well as to diplomats from other nations accredited in St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Vienna. The statement argued that the unrest in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had an exceptionally harmful effect, not only on the internal affairs of neighbouring countries, causing significant losses and damages to their citizens, but also on the security of Europe as a whole.

In response, the rulers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria deemed it necessary to take decisive measures to prevent the Commonwealth’s complete collapse and to secure peace in Europe, which was being threatened by the growing unrest: “Citizens had turned against one another, arming themselves, while agitators had seized legal authority and ruthlessly manipulated it, disregarding laws, public order, and even the safety of society. The justice system, law enforcement, trade, and even agriculture were either ruined or on the verge of collapse. The unrestrained excesses, an inevitable result of this anarchy, not only threatened the state’s survival but would inevitably lead to its total disintegration if the chaos continued”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “L’esprit de faction, les troubles, et la guerre intestine, dont est agité depuis tant d’années le Royaume de Pologne, et l’anarchie, qui chaque jour y acquiert de nouvelles forces, au point d’y anéantir toute autorité d’un gouvernement régulier, donnant de justes appréhensions de voir arriver la décomposition totale de l’État, troubler les rapports des intérêts de tous ses voisins, altérer la bonne harmonie, qui subsiste entre eux et allumer une guerre générale”. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> “Les citoyens s’armèrent les uns contre les autres : des factieux usurpèrent l’autorité légitime, ils en abusèrent au mépris des lois, du bon ordre et de la sûreté publique même. Justice, police, commerce, jusqu’à la culture des terres, tout est détruit ou menace une ruine prochaine, et les excès de toute espèce, qui ne peuvent manquer de résulter de cette anarchie, entraîneraient nécessairement l’entière décomposition de l’État pour peu qu’elle durât encore”. Russian declaration submitted by O. M. Stackelberg, Warsaw, 7 (18) September 1772, in Stanislas Auguste, *Mémoires*, A. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz (ed.), D. Triaire, Paris, Institut d’études slaves, 2012, p. 430.

These arguments found a receptive audience. Voltaire quickly became convinced that the Poles themselves were fully responsible for the partition of their state. In a commentary added to a later edition of *Les Lois de Minos* (written in early 1772), he unequivocally stated that the division of the Commonwealth's territory should be seen as the inevitable consequence of internal chaos: "The partition of Poland is the punishment for its dreadful anarchy".<sup>36</sup> Voltaire also referenced a passage from the treatise *La voix libre*, attributed to Stanisław Leszczyński, in which the author warned that if the political defects were not addressed, "perhaps the neighbouring powers will decide to divide our lands".<sup>37</sup>

In their official documents justifying claims to specific territories, the courts of Berlin and Vienna, following established tradition, relied on historical and legal arguments. The Russian court, however, portrayed its participation in the partition as an act of magnanimity, presenting its actions as part of an effort to improve relations with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, restore internal order, and improve the lives of its citizens. According to the Russian legal reasoning, the Empress, unable to tolerate the sight of Poland in chaos and decline, had decided, in agreement with neighbouring powers, to assist in halting the nation's further degradation. In the view of the author of the Russian argument, Russia's involvement in the first partition was an act of support: "It was an act of generosity that the Russian court, in agreement with two neighbouring powers, took it upon itself to curb the anarchy that was destroying Poland and ensured it a more organized, prosperous, and peaceful existence".<sup>38</sup>

From the Russian perspective, the legislation passed by the Sejm in 1767-68 posed a potential issue. The laws imposed at that time were incorporated into the Polish-Russian treaty, which also included a guarantee of the Commonwealth's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Russia managed to navigate this situation successfully. It was explained that Catherine II felt compelled to withdraw her guarantees, as they had been rejected by the Polish nobility during the Bar Confederation: "It would be absurd to

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<sup>36</sup> "Le démembrement de la Pologne est le châtement de l'anarchie". Voltaire, *Les lois de Minos* (*Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 6), Paris, Garnier, 1877, p. 202.

<sup>37</sup> "Peut-être même les puissances voisines s'accorderont-elles à partager nos États". Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "C'est un acte de générosité, que de concert avec les deux Puissances voisines de la Pologne, la Cour de Russie se soit prêtée à mettre fin à l'anarchie qui la déloit, et à lui assurer une existence mieux réglée, plus heureuse et plus tranquille". *Exposé de la conduite de la cour Impériale de Russie*, in *Recueil des déclarations, notes, et faits principaux, qui ont précédé et accompagné la Diète confédérée depuis le 18 septembre 1772 jusqu'au 14 mai 1773* [s.l., s.d.], p. 171.

continue upholding a guarantee for the Commonwealth that has been scorned and rejected by the overwhelming majority of the nation [...]. In a state of anarchy, where disobedience destroys all regular structures of government and completely undermines civil law, public law, which is continually violated, loses its power and effectively ceases to exist”.<sup>39</sup>

Frederick II not only used official channels to justify his claims to the newly incorporated territories, but also sought to convince philosophers of the righteousness of his actions. His arguments focused on the need to ‘civilize’ his new subjects, whom he viewed as still living in a state of barbarism. At the same time, he frequently invoked the issue of anarchy, emphasising its destructive impact on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It is worth noting that Frederick, who called Poland a “kingdom of anarchy” in his 1768 political testament, had good reason to view himself as one of its architects. The Prussian king was convinced that Poland’s anarchy stemmed from factors such as “the election of kings accompanied by civil wars, turbulent Sejms that end without resolutions, the lack of legislation, and a crippled judiciary. A Poland torn by factions is always weak”.<sup>40</sup> Even before the partition was officially announced, Frederick II began laying the groundwork by persuading d’Alembert of Poland’s complete disintegration: “Poland has no laws, it doesn’t enjoy what one would call liberty; its government has descended into reckless anarchy”.<sup>41</sup> Frederick echoed this theme in his memoirs, explaining to future generations that the acquisition held little value. He framed the incorporation of these lands into Prussia as an act of benevolence towards his new subjects: “Although this acquisition

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<sup>39</sup> “Il eût été absurde de soutenir plus longtemps en faveur de la République le poids d’une garantie, méprisée et rejetée par la voix individuelle de la plus grande partie de la Nation [...]. Dans une anarchie où la désobéissance anéantit tout Gouvernement régulier et détruit tout droit civil, le droit public, aussi perpétuellement violé, est de fait réduit à la même inexistence”. Ibidem, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> *Testament politique* (1768), in R. Dietrich (ed.), *Die politischen Testamente* p. 628. Earlier, in *Histoire de mon temps* (its first version was completed in 1746), Frederick II referred to Poland as “une république où régnait l’anarchie”. Describing the prevailing conditions in Poland, he stated: “Ce royaume est dans une anarchie perpétuelle : les grandes familles sont toutes divisées d’intérêt; ils préfèrent leurs avantages au bien public, et ne se réunissent qu’en usant de la même dureté, pour opprimer leurs sujets, qu’ils traitent moins en hommes qu’en bêtes de somme”. *Histoire de mon temps*, in *Œuvres historiques de Frédéric II*, vol. 2 (*Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 2), Berlin 1846, p. 5, 27.

<sup>41</sup> “La Pologne n’a point de lois, elle ne jouit pas de ce qu’on appelle liberté; mais le gouvernement a dégénéré en une anarchie licencieuse”. Frederick II to Jean le Rond d’Alembert, 26 January 1772, *Correspondance de Frédéric avec d’Alembert* (*Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 24), Berlin 1854, p. 618.

was useful and could become significant with proper reforms, when the province came under Prussian rule, it was mired in anarchy, chaos, and disorder".<sup>42</sup>

Many members of Europe's literary republic were inclined to believe this version of events. Fortuné Barthélemy de Félice, the author of *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire universel raisonné des connaissances humaines*, argued that the Poles' intransigence on the dissident question and the Bar Confederation had plunged the country into anarchy, with the partition being the natural result. He expressed hope that under these new circumstances, Poles would unite and establish a new order, "striving to live in peace and security in the provinces that remain to them".<sup>43</sup> In the pages of the liberal *Der Teutsche Merkur*, published by Christoph Martin Wieland, a leading figure in the German patriotic movement, the partition was portrayed as an opportunity for Poland: "May these new foundations bring happiness to a country that has so far known only misfortune, and may they support the welfare of all humanity! Yet the Polish elite seems unaware of the benefits these new arrangements could offer [...] Its constitution and internal organization will be defined, and in time, Poland may regain significance in Europe's balance of power".<sup>44</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, for his part, proclaimed the end of Polish anarchy, crediting Catherine II with the achievement: "The most absurd anarchy, the most insulting to the rights of freeborn men, the most oppressive to the people, no longer troubles Poland".<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Georg Forster, who did not learn of the first partition until April 1775, believed that the actions of Poland's neighbouring states were justified. The traveller, convinced

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<sup>42</sup> "Cette acquisition était utile, et pouvait devenir importante après que, par de sages arrangements, tout serait bien réglé. Mais dans l'état où se trouvait cette province lorsqu'elle tomba sous la domination prussienne, tout s'y ressentait de l'anarchie, de la confusion et du désordre". *Mémoires depuis la paix de Hubertsbourg 1763, jusqu'à la fin du partage de la Pologne* (Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand, vol. 6), Berlin 1847, p. 99.

<sup>43</sup> Heureux encore les Polonais si, réunis entre eux et prenant une forme sage de gouvernement, ils cherchaient à vivre dans la paix et la sûreté, dans les provinces qu'on leur laissera! Fortuné Barthélemy de Félice, *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire universel raisonné des connaissances humaines*, vol. 34, Yverdon 1774, p. 419.

<sup>44</sup> "Möchte das Glück des sonst so unglücklichen Landes dadurch gegründet, möchte das Wohl der Menschheit dadurch befördert werden! Die Großen in Pohlen scheinen freylich die Wohltätigkeit dieser neuen Einrichtungen noch nicht einzusehen [...] Seine Staats-Verfassung [Polens - J.K.], seine innere Einrichtung wird bestimmt werden und dadurch kann in der Zukunft auch dieses Reich in der Schale des Gleichgewichts für Etwas mit gerechnet werden". *Der Teutsche Merkur*, 1773, vol. 1, p. 277.

<sup>45</sup> "L'anarchie la plus absurde, la plus outrageante aux droits de l'homme né libre, la plus accablante pour le peuple, ne trouble plus la Pologne". L.-S. Mercier, *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante*, Londres 1774, p. 382.



of their righteousness, viewed the partition as liberating a country mired in civil war from the yoke of anarchy.<sup>46</sup>

Although not everyone agreed with these arguments, there was a widespread belief that the Poles had no one to blame but themselves. King Gustav III of Sweden, who was well aware of Russia's foreign policy towards states within its sphere of influence, also held the Poles responsible. "The sacred names of religion and liberty have led the Poles to their current situation. The abuse of even the noblest ideas brings disastrous consequences. As a witness to these upheavals, I tremble at the thought of the day, which inevitably approaches, when neighbouring powers will seek to exploit our internal unrest to subjugate us".<sup>47</sup>

While the Swedish king did not state this explicitly, his words imply that Poland's anarchy was not only the cause of its downfall but also a warning to other nations. They suggest the dangers of misusing the ideals of liberty and religion if they are not balanced by strong state structures.

It is worth noting that the concept of Polish anarchy was not solely criticized by its most vocal detractors. Figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who regarded the *liberum veto* with some leniency, and Gabriel de Mably, who was more critical yet remained sympathetic toward the Commonwealth, offered similar assessments.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV

Even after the first partition, analyses of the political situation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth frequently pointed to the issue of anarchy. Foreign commentators consistently emphasised the *liberum veto*

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<sup>46</sup> "Poland restored to peace, from anarchy and the horrors of civil war, by the united efforts of the leading powers in Europe". G. Forster, *A voyage round the world*, ed. by R.L. Kahn, *Georg Forsters Werke*, vol. 1), Berlin, Akademie, 1986, p. 644.

<sup>47</sup> "Les noms sacrés de religion et de liberté ont réduit les Polonais à l'état où ils sont maintenant. L'abus des choses les plus salutaires est nuisible. Spectateur de tous les chocs, j'attends en tremblant le moment que je vois approcher, où des puissances voisines voudront profiter de nos troubles pour nous assujettir". Gustavus III, king of Sweden to Marie Charlotte Hippolyte Boufflers-Rouverel, 14 June 1772, G. von Proschwitz (ed.), *Gustave III par ses lettres*, vol. 1, Stockholm, Norstedts Förlag, 1986, pp. 127–128.

<sup>48</sup> The perspectives of both thinkers on Polish constitutional matters have been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis: J. Michalski, *Sarmacki republikanizm w oczach Francuza. Mably i konfederaci barscy*, Wrocław, Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Leopoldinum, 1995, idem, *Rousseau and Polish Republicanism*, transl. by R. Butterwick-Pawlikowski, Warszawa, Instytut Historii PAN, 2015.

– though by then largely abandoned in parliamentary practice – and the excessive freedoms of the nobility as key factors in the state’s instability. They noted that this internal disorder allowed neighbouring powers to meddle in the Commonwealth’s affairs, exacerbating the chaos and paralysis within the country.

The author of the 1773 treatise *L’élève de la raison et de la religion, ou traité d’éducation* argued that Poland was mired in anarchy. He attributed this to the liberum veto, while also noting that foreign courts frequently bribed members of parliament, who then blocked new legislation to serve external interests.<sup>49</sup> The author further highlighted the vast social inequalities in Poland, writing: “the people suffer under the harshest slavery; the nobility have taken liberty to such unchecked extremes that Poland is more an anarchy than a government”.<sup>50</sup> For Christian Friedrich Schubert, editor of the Augsburg-based *Deutsche Chronik*, the Commonwealth was synonymous with anarchy. In a 1774 article, he posed the rhetorical question: “How wretchedly, how low has this kingdom, this republic, this anarchy, or whatever one may call it, behaved until now?”.<sup>51</sup> Étienne de Condillac, younger brother of Gabriel de Mably, similarly argued in his *Cours d’étude pour l’instruction du prince de Parme* that the Poles deliberately maintained a system that, instead of fostering effective governance, led only to anarchy.<sup>52</sup>

There were also authors who offered a more nuanced analysis of the situation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Joseph Marshall believed that the chaos consuming the Commonwealth allowed Russia to prevail within its borders. He attributed Catherine II’s successes to “the effect of the miserable government or rather anarchy”.<sup>53</sup>

His fellow countryman, William Coxe, while acknowledging that Poland’s misfortunes stemmed from excessive liberty, recognised that this liberty was maintained by neighbouring states. He observed: “The partitioning powers did less injury to the republic by dismembering its fairest

<sup>49</sup> “Il n’est donc presque pas possible de rien statuer de bon & de fixe dans un pareil Gouvernement; d’où je conclus que c’est une Anarchie”. *L’élève de la raison et de la religion, ou traité d’éducation*, vol. 3, Paris Barbou, 1773, p. 252.

<sup>50</sup> “Le peuple y gémit dans le plus rude esclavage; les grands y ont porté la liberté jusqu’à une licence si effrénée, que la Pologne est plutôt une anarchie qu’un gouvernement”. Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> *Deutsche Chronik*, 29, 7 July 1774, p. 229.

<sup>52</sup> “Le gouvernement de Pologne a les mêmes vices que le gouvernement des fiefs. Il semble que les Polonnois se soient étudiés à le rendre tout-à-fait anarchique”. E. de Condillac, *Cours d’étude pour l’instruction du prince de Parme*, vol. 15, Londres 1776, p. 8

<sup>53</sup> J. Marshall, *Travels through Holland, Flanders, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Lapland, Russia, the Ukraine and Poland*, vol. 3, London, Almon, 1772, p. 184.

provinces, than by perpetuating the principles of anarchy and confusion, and establishing on a permanent footing, that exorbitant liberty, which is the parent of faction, and has proved the decline of the republic”.<sup>54</sup>

Despite differing views on the causes of Poland’s downfall, both Marshall and Coxe agreed that anarchy was a central factor in weakening the Commonwealth. For Marshall, internal chaos provided a pretext for Russian intervention, while Coxe saw the excessive freedoms of the nobility as the root of internal divisions and destabilization, deliberately sustained by neighbouring powers.

Guillaume Raynal, the author of *Histoire philosophique et politique*, one of the most widely read works of the late Enlightenment, devoted considerable attention to the Polish question. In his writings on the Commonwealth, Raynal criticised the lack of a strong central authority, the system of free election, the ineffective legislative process, and the serfdom of the peasantry. The political and social structures of the Commonwealth, he argued, resembled those of a feudal system. The political privileges and economic dominance of the nobility, who prioritised their own interests over the common good, contributed to the disintegration and fragmentation of the state. This further weakened Poland, making it vulnerable to attacks from neighbouring powers. Raynal observed that even the weakest enemy could invade Poland with impunity, plundering towns and villages and taking the population into captivity.

Raynal was critical of the partition of Poland, noting that it was “carried out during peacetime, without laws, without pretext, without complaints, without even the shadow of justice, solely backed by the dreadful law of force, which, unfortunately, is the best argument for kings”.<sup>55</sup> Yet, he somewhat absolved the neighbouring powers of full blame, suggesting that the partition could offer a chance for the empowerment of the large portion of society that had previously lived in bondage: “May heaven grant that this crime of ambition turns to the benefit of humanity, and that through an act of noble charity, the usurpers break the chains placed upon the most industrious part of their new subjects! Their

<sup>54</sup> W. Coxe, *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark*, Dublin, Price et al., 1784, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> “Si des voisins inquiets et entreprenants n’avaient pas envahi jusqu’ici ses possessions; s’ils s’étaient contentés de la dévaster, de lui dicter des ordres, de lui donner des rois, c’est qu’ils étaient dans une défiance continuelle les uns des autres. Des circonstances particulières les ont réunis. Il était réservé à nos jours de voir cet État déchiré par trois puissances rivales qui se sont approprié ses provinces, qui enrichissent leur bienfaiteur, tandis que l’Europe entière a signé pour contrer cette invasion”. G.T.F. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, vol. 10, Maestricht 1781, p. 313.

subjects will become more loyal by being freer, and by ceasing to be slaves, they will become men".<sup>56</sup>

In later editions of his work, Raynal explicitly began writing about Polish anarchy. He argued that its root cause was the constant rivalry between the monarch and the aristocracy. The magnates, driven by greed, ambition, and distrust, sought to exert pressure on the king, stoking his hostility towards the very idea of liberty and pushing him into political intrigues. To maintain his position, the weakened monarch, unable to defend himself effectively, was forced to resort to unofficial tactics and deceit. The intensifying rivalry between political factions deepened the discord, fueling conflict and violence, which ultimately contributed to the country's downfall.<sup>57</sup>

Anarchy was a central theme in *L'horoscope politique de la Pologne, de la Prusse, de l'Angleterre*, a pamphlet written in 1779 by the controversial Montenegrin figure Stefano Zanovich.<sup>58</sup> According to the author, this anarchy stemmed from the political chaos caused by the absence of strong monarchical power and the excessive privileges of the nobility. The state was weakened, its structures disorganised, and its society deeply divided. The concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a small elite perpetuated injustice and fostered the growth of despotism.

Zanovich believed that the salvation of the Commonwealth could lie with the middling nobility, who had not yet been corrupted by excessive power and wealth. However, they were poorly educated, unable to grasp the true nature of the state's crisis, and indifferent to its future. They felt no sense of protection from the state, which left them disconnected from it: "They cannot love a republic in which they see only despots and the anarchy that makes them miserable".<sup>59</sup>

Zanovich believed that while the Polish people had much to be proud of in their laws, traditions, and independence, the prevailing anarchy

<sup>56</sup> "Fasse le ciel que ce crime de l'ambition tourne au bien de l'humanité, et que, par un acte glorieux de bienfaisance, les usurpateurs brisent les chaînes de la partie la plus laborieuse de leurs nouveaux peuples! Leurs sujets seront plus fidèles en étant plus libres, et en cessant d'être des esclaves, ils deviendront des hommes". Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>57</sup> "Dans cette anarchie, s'établit une lutte perpétuelle entre les grands et le monarque. Les premiers tourmentent le chef de l'État par leur avidité, leur ambition et leurs défiances; ils l'irritent contre la liberté; ils le réduisent à l'intrigue. De son côté, le prince, divisé pour commander, réduit pour se défendre, oppose la ruse à la ruse pour se maintenir. Les factions s'aggravent, la discorde met partout le flambeau, et les provinces sont livrées au fer, au feu, à la dévastation". Ibidem, p. 312.

<sup>58</sup> [S. Zanovich], *L'horoscope politique de la Pologne, de la Prusse, de l'Angleterre*, Pastorvecchio aux pieds des Alpes de Montenegro 1779.

<sup>59</sup> "Elle ne peut point aimer une République, où elle ne voit que des despotes et une anarchie, qui la rend malheureuse", p. 45.

and poor governance wasted these advantages and left the population without any real hope for change.<sup>60</sup> Anarchy made Poland particularly susceptible to foreign intervention, as neighbouring powers took advantage of the disorder to assert their influence and pursue their own interests at the Commonwealth's expense.<sup>61</sup>

Zanovich pointed to Russia's 1768 guarantee of Poland's political system (incorrectly assuming that it had been requested by the Poles themselves) as the ultimate proof of the country's subjugation. He was also convinced that other neighbouring states shared Russia's desire for the Commonwealth's downfall.<sup>62</sup> In his view, Poland would not cast off the yoke of foreign domination until it overcame the problem of anarchy. As he argued, "Such is the situation of the Poles: you are losing because your enemies, though they share many of your flaws, are neither plagued by anarchy nor by the apathy that has degraded, humiliated, and corrupted every aspect of your administration. This is your fault".<sup>63</sup>

In essence, Zanovich's critique could be summarised as: "The Poles teach us the evils of anarchy".<sup>64</sup>

Similar arguments appeared in the 1779 pamphlet *L'orang-outang d'Europe ou le Polonois tel, qu'il est*. Although the author did not explicitly use the term *anarchy*, they described the state of Poland in much the same way: the absence of strong royal authority, excessive privileges of the nobility, and a disregard for the law, all of which left the country weak and vulnerable to external interference. The author argued that the root of the Commonwealth's problems was the collapse of true liberty: "There is no real freedom: only its name remains, while the rest is mere pretence".<sup>65</sup>

This erosion of liberty resulted in a lack of care for the state, an inability to pass effective laws, disrespect for existing norms, and the

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<sup>60</sup> "Je vous demanderai, si votre anarchie ne rendra pas inutiles ces heureuses dispositions ? Quel bien voulez-vous que puissent espérer des citoyens, à qui un mauvais gouvernement ne permet d'avoir aucune espérance raisonnable?", *ibidem*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>61</sup> "Tout le monde voit, que le Roi et le Conseil Permanent ne sont que les instruments de vos ennemis, et que pour se soustraire à cette nouvelle autorité, il faudrait être en état de secouer le joug des trois Cours, qui l'ont établie, et qui la protègent", *ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>62</sup> "Ne vous y trompez pas, quoique cette Princesse gouverne arbitrairement vos affaires; elle n'est que l'instrument odieux de ses deux alliés qui sont bien aises qu'un autre fasse pour eux les injustices, et les vexations, qui leur sont utiles", *ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> "Voilà le cas des Polonois : vous succombez, parce que vos ennemis, qui ont plusieurs de vos vices, n'ont cependant ni votre anarchie, ni cette indolence, qui a dégradé, avili et dépravé toutes les parties de l'administration. C'est votre faute", *ibid.*, p. 69

<sup>64</sup> "Les Polonois nous enseignent quels maux l'anarchie entraîne après soi", *ibid.*, p. 25

<sup>65</sup> "Elle [Pologne – J.K.] ne conserve que l'ombre et le nom de liberté", L. Kermorvand, *L'orang-outang d'Europe ou le Polonois tel, qu'il est* [Hamburg] 1779, p. 22.

exploitation of the lower classes by the nobility. The weakened state became an easy target for foreign powers. The author pointed out that the Russians had imposed laws on the Poles, deliberately maintaining their weakness. For a long time, the Sejms had made no decisions beyond those forced upon them by Russia. All proposals for reforms and corrective actions were consistently postponed to future sessions, never reaching fruition. The author likened this inaction to a sick patient surrounded by false doctors, who argue and bicker while the patient dies for lack of proper care.<sup>66</sup>

The authors argued that anarchy was not merely the cause of Poland's internal collapse, but also the very condition that allowed foreign powers, especially Russia, to exploit the country and undermine its sovereignty. Without significant political reforms and an end to this chaos, Poland stood little chance of restoring stability or resisting the influence of external forces.

Although the prevailing tone in political discourse was often critical and sceptical, European public opinion did recognise the efforts being made to improve the situation in Poland. The deliberations of the 1776 Sejm, in particular, sparked hope for reform. The *Courier du Bas-Rhin* reported, albeit without providing details, that the proposed measures under discussion would "hasten the eradication of that dreadful anarchy, which has affected both the morality of Poland's inhabitants and the very body of the state". There was optimism that the reforms would bring political stability, establish an effective system of governance, and ultimately eliminate anarchy.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Pierre Rousseau's *Journal politique* carried an equally hopeful outlook. As the publisher noted: "We are approaching the moment when the fate of Poland will be decided. Feudal anarchy and fanaticism will likely take their final breath".<sup>68</sup> Positive sentiments were also found in *Der Teutsche Merkur*, which observed that the reforms "are all the wiser because they aim to suppress anarchy, so that liberty will support the throne rather than diminish its authority,

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<sup>66</sup> "Depuis longtemps ces diètes ne résolvent ou n'acceptent, que les arrangements que la Russie y fait enregistrer à coups de baïonnettes". Ibidem, pp. 34–35.

<sup>67</sup> "Le roi, qui a conçu cet utile projet, présidera à son exécution et accélérera par ce moyen l'anéantissement de cette affreuse anarchie qui portait autant sur le moral des habitants en Pologne que sur le physique de l'État. À cette anarchie succédera une police dont le plan paraît très profondément conçu, et qui établira pour la première fois l'ordre et la sûreté publique". *Courier du Bas-Rhin*, 1776, 12. October, p. 658.

<sup>68</sup> "Nous touchons au moment où le sort de la Pologne va être décidé. L'anarchie féodale et le fanatisme vont probablement rendre le dernier soupir. *Journal politique ou gazette des gazettes*, 1776, September, p. 20.

as had been the case thus far”.<sup>69</sup> Despite these optimistic views, not all politicians and commentators believed lasting change was possible. Frederick Augustus III, Elector of Saxony, expressed his doubts in his 1787 political testament, stating: “This kingdom is entirely at the mercy of its neighbours’ whims, and the king is merely a symbolic figurehead of a free nation”. He also added that it was difficult to predict whether genuine reform would be achievable.<sup>70</sup>

In summary, while some European observers expressed cautious optimism about the potential for reform in Poland, particularly following the 1776 Sejm, others remained sceptical about the country’s ability to implement lasting changes, given the entrenched political challenges and external pressures from neighbouring powers.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Russia and Prussia strategically exploited the discourse of Polish anarchy to advance their political interests. While internal disorder posed a significant challenge, foreign powers exaggerated this portrayal to legitimize their intervention, presenting themselves as guarantors of regional stability while, in reality, pursuing territorial expansion. This narrative not only justified foreign interference but also obstructed internal attempts at reform. Ultimately, it facilitated the partitions, allowing these powers to dismantle Poland under the pretext of maintaining European stability.

The rhetoric of anarchy was instrumental in undermining Polish reform efforts, as demonstrated by the obstacles faced during the Four-Year Sejm and the enactment of the Constitution of 3 May. The fear of a reformed Poland becoming a regional power is evident in contemporary diplomatic correspondence. Prussia and Russia remained committed to maintaining Poland’s weakness. As the Prussian minister and co-architect of the First Partition, Ewald Friedrich von Hertzberg, wrote to the Prussian envoy in Warsaw on 14 May 1791: “Poland has obtained a government more stable and better organised than in England, and thus it will become dangerous to Prussia. Sooner or later, it will take back West Prussia, and perhaps even East Prussia”. A few days later, in similarly alarmist terms, he warned King Frederick William II: “This is the

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<sup>69</sup> “Diese Operationen sind um so weiser, da sie zum Zweck haben, die Anarchie zu unterdrücken, zu machen, daß die Freiheit diene den Thron zu stützen, und nicht zu erschüttern, wie sie es that”, *Der Deutsche Merkur*, 1776, November, p. 192.

<sup>70</sup> “[Dieses Reich] hängt ganz von der Willkür seiner Nachbarn ab und der König ist eine bloße Vorstellung eines Haupts einer freyen Nazion”. J. Vötsch, ‘Konfession und Dynastie. Zum politischen Testament des sächsischen Kurfürsten Friedrich August III. von 1787. Mit Teil-Edition’, *Neues Archiv für sächsische Geschichte* 2002, vol. 73, p. 85.

most dangerous event for Prussia [...]” and urged efforts to “overthrow the new constitution with Russia’s help [...] on the basis of our mutual interests”.<sup>71</sup>

For propaganda purposes, the great powers could not openly admit that the strengthening of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was detrimental to their interests. Instead, they framed the abolition of Russia’s constitutional guarantee as a revolutionary and anarchic act. The reforms undertaken in Poland were portrayed by neighbouring states as a threat to European security.

Catherine II systematically shaped a narrative in which Poland’s political transformation was part of the same current of chaos and destabilization that had engulfed revolutionary France. In the spring of 1792, amid plans to mobilize European forces against France and on the eve of the formation of the Targowica Confederation and the entry of Russian troops into Poland, she wrote to Emperor Francis II: “But if what has happened in a country so far from my lands has commanded my attention to such a degree, then all the more reason for me to focus on what is unfolding in my immediate neighborhood. Regardless of the long-standing interest of all neighboring powers in preserving Poland’s former system of government [...], its collapse has brought consequences that may ultimately lead to the same unrest and anarchy that we now so regrettably witness in France”.<sup>72</sup>

In her correspondence with Melchior von Grimm, the publisher of the influential *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, which she hoped would amplify Russian narratives, the Empress accused the Sejm of violating the law and Stanisław August of treason. She saw the Polish reforms as a dangerous imitation of the French Jacobins. Emphasizing that all new Polish laws aligned with revolutionary French principles, she vowed that rather than fighting Jacobinism in Paris, she would eradicate it in Poland: “[The Jacobins] have erased from the world my former friend

<sup>71</sup> Quoted after: J. Dutkiewicz, ‘Prusy a Polska w dobie Sejmu Czteroletniego w świetle korespondencji dyplomatycznej pruskiej’, *Przegląd Historyczny* 1936, vol. 33, no. 1, p. 81.

<sup>72</sup> “Mais si ce qui est arrivé dans un pays, situé à une si grande distance de mes États, a excité Mon attention à ce degré, à quel point ne la dois-je pas à ce qui se passe dans mon voisinage le plus immédiat. Indépendamment de l’intérêt permanent de toutes les Puissances Voisines à conserver en Pologne son ancienne forme de gouvernement [...], indépendamment de cet intérêt, dis-je, la subversion de ce gouvernement a entraîné des suites, capables de produire à la fin les mêmes désordres et la même anarchie qu’on voit malheureusement régner en France” Catherine II to Francis II, 12/23 April 1792. *Leopold II., Franz II. und Catharina. Ihre Correspondenz nebst einer Einleitung zur Geschichte der Politik Leopold’s II.*, edited by A. Beer, Leipzig, Duncker & Humblot, 1874, pp. 172–173.



and ally, the Commonwealth, along with all the treaties it had with Russia. In the end, these Jacobins are spreading legal confusion everywhere. All these Polish arrangements match their laws in every matter about as well as a saddle fits a cow – as the Russian proverb goes. And you expect me to abandon my interests, those of my ally, the Commonwealth, and my republican friends, just to focus solely on the Parisian Jacobins? No, I will fight them and defeat them in Poland”.<sup>73</sup>

Catherine II, in coordination with the Berlin court, effectively employed the rhetoric of anarchy and revolution to justify military intervention in Poland and to discredit the reformist efforts that threatened their political interests in the region, ultimately leading to the Second Partition of Poland.

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The concept of anarchy was invoked in various contexts and manipulated to serve different purposes. The same individuals could ascribe to it markedly different meanings depending on the circumstances: it could refer both to the constitutional foundations of the noble republic, with *liberum veto* at its core, and to the efforts aimed at eliminating *liberum veto* from political practice.

Although the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not the only state struggling with political dysfunction, it became the one most closely associated with “anarchy”. Many countries faced ineffective administration, corruption, and political fragmentation, yet Poland was singled out as the ultimate example of chaos in need of intervention.

This perception was far from incidental – it served the strategic interests of neighbouring powers, which sought to portray the Commonwealth as a failed state requiring “order and stability”. This narrative not only justified their actions but also legitimized the partitions on the international stage. Despite its internal weaknesses, Poland remained a large

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<sup>73</sup> “Ils ont fait disparaître du monde mon ancienne amie et alliée, la république de Pologne, tous les traités qu’elle avait avec la Russie [...]. Enfin, ces jacobins cherchent à répandre partout la confusion des langues, car tous ces arrangements polonais vont avec leurs lois sur toute matière comme une selle à une vache, selon le proverbe russe. Et vous voulez que je plante là mes intérêts et ceux de mon alliée la république et mes amis républicains, pour ne m’occuper que de la jacobinière de Paris ? Non [...], je la battrai et combattrai en Pologne”, Catherine II to Melchior Grimm, Tsarskoye Selo, 4/15 June 1792. *Sbornik Imperatorskogo Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestva*, vol. 23: *Pis'ma Imperatritsy Ekateriny II baronu Mel'khioru Grimmu (gody s 1774 po 1796)*, St. Petersburg, Tipografiya Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk, 1878. It is worth emphasizing that the same arguments found in the letter to Grimm, which she hoped would be further disseminated by this man of letters, constituted the core content of the act of the Targowica Confederation.

and strategically significant entity, making it an attractive target for its neighbours. As a result, the myth of “Polish anarchy” became a potent argument used to rationalize the partitions, ultimately sealing the fate of the Commonwealth as a state subjected to external interference.

The eventual failure of reform efforts led to the dissolution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its removal from the political map of Europe. In January 1797, representatives of Austria, Prussia, and Russia signed a convention in St. Petersburg that finalized the partition, declaring: “It has been deemed necessary to abolish anything that might recall the existence of the Kingdom of Poland”.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, the story of Polish anarchy did not end with the Third Partition. Just a few years later, Claude-Carloman de Rulhière’s *Histoire de l’anarchie de Pologne* placed the blame for the state’s downfall squarely on anarchy. This narrative was eagerly adopted and perpetuated by nineteenth-century Prussian and Russian historiography, which continued to invoke the idea of Polish anarchy as a post-factum justification for the partitions.

As a result, this view remained dominant for over a century. It was not until the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that historians began to revise it, challenging the negative image of eighteenth-century Poland. Increasingly, scholars emphasize that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not merely a victim of its own weakness but also of the deliberate policies of neighbouring powers, which sought to weaken it and actively obstructed reforms.

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<sup>74</sup> “La nécessité d’abolir tout ce qui peut rappeler le souvenir de l’existence du Royaume de Pologne lorsque l’anéantissement de ce corps politique est effectué ayant été reconnu par [la Russie, la Prusse et l’Autriche]. Les hautes parties contractantes sont convenues, et s’engagent de ne jamais faire[...] la dénomination ou désignation cumulative de Royaume de Pologne qui demeurera dès à présent et pour toujours supprimé”. F.F. Martens (ed.), *Recueil des traités*, vol. 2, St. Pétersbourg 1875, p. 303.

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