

The Union of Lublin in the historical and cultural memory of Lithuania

Jūratė Kiaupienė (Lithuanian Institute of History)

Today we have gathered here to commemorate the Union of Lublin, which has united two nations – the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1569 the Commonwealth of Two Nations was formed and it managed to survive in Europe for 226 years.

After hearing the paper by the distinguished professor, I would like to begin from the place which the Union of Lublin occupies in the modern Lithuanian historical and cultural memory, which is significantly different to that which is observed in Poland. There are no streets or squares which bear the name of the Union of Lublin. There are not solemn commemorations of this date in the public life of the Republic of Lithuania. The Union of Lublin is not compared to the Treaty of the European Union. On the other hand, the Union of Lublin is taught in schools as an important event in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but in this case the question of the Union is left for historians to interpret and research.

Why did such differences between Lithuanian and Polish historical and cultural memory emerge? We should begin from a brief overview of the history of Polish-Lithuanian Unions.

Both Lithuanian and Polish states were formed during the Middle Ages. In 1386 the first union between them was formed as a dynastic marriage, the grand duke of Lithuania was crowned as the King of Poland. From that point on for 186 years both Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were ruled by the members of a Lithuanian Gediminid/Jagiellonian dynasty. During the Fifteenth century there were attempts to change the shape of the dynastic union, but both Poland and Lithuania remained separate, with different dynamics of their internal development, as well as a different understanding of the concept of the Union. During this period there was more political strife between the partners of the Union than agreement. Such was the prehistory of the Union of Lublin.

At the turn of the Sixteenth century, the shape of the Union inherited from the Medieval era, was no longer sufficient for the Early modern politics. There were attempts to renew the Polish-Lithuanian Union, by providing it with features that followed the *zeitgeist* of the era. But these attempts were unsuccessful, the attempts of renewing the union stalled. They stalled, because Polish and Lithuanian political nations throughout the first half of the Sixteenth century gave birth to new and different and competing visions for the future of relations between the states.

During the early Sixteenth Century Polish politicians attempted to create centralized Polish monarchy. They imagined that it will be a state which will include other territories in one way or the other related to the Polish kingdom as provinces, including the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They even imagined a new name for Lithuania as the future province – New Poland.

Political nation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania imagined the renewed union as a union of two independent nations - a composite monarchy. This concept of the union had acceptance among the all strata of nobility of Lithuania. What is more, members of Lithuanian political elite, who had in their hands the main levers of state power and the support of the political nation, in 1526 reinvigorated the idea which was first encouraged during the early Fifteenth century by the Grand duke Vytautas (1392-1430), which was not embodied at that time. It was the idea of elevating Lithuania to the status of a Kingdom. Contemporary ruler of Poland and Lithuania Sigismund the Old rejected this request.

Regardless of this decision by the ruler the notions of a separate statehood of Lithuania were further strengthened in the public political life. As it encountered the political culture of the Renaissance it strengthened its belief that the Grand Duchy must become a centralized state, ruled by a powerful monarch with a well-organized bureaucratic administration. Sixteenth century war with Muscovy for the control of the lands of Lithuanian Rus ‘, and the economic and political integration of these lands was a part of implementing this idea of centralized monarchy. On the other hand, Lithuanian political nation fully understood that good relations and mutual support between Polish and Lithuanian states ruled by a single ruler was essential. Therefore, Lithuania wanted a union, as a coexistence of two independent and equal political bodies – two states.

During the mid-Sixteenth centuries, after further complications of political and military situation in the region, there were serious steps taken in order to renew and modernize the union. Polish and Lithuanian political nations were to decide regarding the bonds of two nations in the future and look for consensus. The preparations for the renewal of the union was complicated, and caused a lot of controversy.

This work was to be finalized by members of the parliaments (Sejm’s) of two states, which gathered to Lublin in 1569 to a common Sejm. Polish and Lithuanian politicians brought political stances which were difficult to reconcile to Lublin. Before this Sejm Lithuanian senators, and representatives elected in powiats held a meeting and negotiated the political strategy and tactics which were to be used when discussing the issue of renewing the union with Poland in the common Sejm. What is more, the Sejm of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania received guarantees from the Grand duke Sigismund August, which were stated in the privilege issued on 21 of December, 1568. In it the ruler declared,

that in the Lublin Sejm no decisions related to the Lithuanian state could be taken against the will of its representatives or an act which would be sealed only with the seal of the Polish Crown. The ruler also promised not to take any decision regarding the union unilaterally, not to side only with Polish or Lithuanians, if the other side of the negotiations would not approve of the decision. Members of the Sejm from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania arrived to Lublin to negotiate the renewal of the Union with an oath of the Grand duke to forever protect the sovereignty of the Lithuanian state, as was legally formulated in the Lithuanian statute of 1566.

Start of the negotiations at Lublin Sejm was difficult. Mikalojus Radvila the Red, the political leader of the Lithuanian delegation, explained that Lithuanian and Polish sejms are separated by “bars”, which hindered them to start fruitful work at the Sejm. In order to understand what “bars” were there in the mind of the Lithuanian politician can be seen by reading the diary of the Lublin Sejm in 1569. There we see that on one day Lithuanians failed to arrive to a meeting with Poles at a joint sitting, while the King promised that they will attend. While returning from the hall where the sessions were held at the castle of Lublin, Poles met Lithuanian members of Sejm and started speaking with them, inviting them, stating that the doors were open for them. As he answered to this proposal, Radvila said that he knows, that the doors to His Majesty’s Polish lords are open, but that there are “bars”, that the Lithuanian representatives cannot pass, until they are lifted by His Majesty, the King. And during several occasions during the first months of the Lublin Sejm, representatives of Lithuanian Sejm repeatedly told the Poles, that they should not be angry and they should show timidity, as they explained that Lithuanians must firstly solve the most important issue with Sigismund August, as the Grand duke of Lithuania, which caused this crisis in the first place. They explained to Polish representatives, that firstly, Lithuanians must receive guarantees from the ruler, for its sovereignty, liberties and rights. They also reminded that the Polish Sejm must also recognize that the nations of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish Crown are equal “brothers”.

Situation was complicated by the bishop of Krakow Filip Padniewski, who at a sitting of a Sejm on February 12, 1569 stated, that the ruler of Lithuania Jogaila, when in 1386 he was granted the Polish crown gifted his patrimony – the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to Poland, and annexed it to the Crown in order for two countries to become one country and a single political body. Lithuanian political nation could not agree with the Polish proposal for the Union which stated, that the future elected ruler should no longer be granted the title of the Grand duke of Lithuania, and that his title should remain the King of Poland; that granted rights and liberties should only be confirmed with a single seal – the one of the Polish Crown; that only Polish Sejm would remain and that the Statute of Lithuania (1566) should be revoked. These demands by Polish politicians, supported by

the ruler Sigismund August, was understood by Lithuanian representatives as a threat to destroy one of the aforementioned “brothers” - the nation and the state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

As a response to this uncompromising stance of Lithuanian delegation, on 28 February, 1569, Sigismund August declared an ultimatum, that the members of both Sejms should gather in a single session and threatened, that should the session not take place, he will announce that two states in his domain will be joined, and he will single-handedly determine the form and contents of the new joint Polish-Lithuanian state. The political crisis deepened. In response to the threats of the ruler, on March 1, 1569, the Lithuanian delegation left Lublin.

Polish historiography traditionally calls this act the “Lithuanian flight”. But it would be simply unjust to call this act as a simple flight from the Sejm. Privilege issued by Sigismund August in 1568 stated that should the Union would not be concluded due to rightful and important reasons, which contradicted the liberties of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, should the representatives of Lithuania would understand the Union as a demotion of their state or its constituent parts, Lithuanians will have a right to freely leave the Sejm of the Polish Crown. When Lithuanian representatives heard from the ruler that he will unilaterally take the decision regarding the Union, they knew that the decision could be in conflict with the interests of Lithuanian state. They acted in accordance with the privilege issued in 1568, before the Lublin Sejm and left the Sejm in accordance with the privilege, thus discontinuing their participation in the proceedings of Lublin Sejm of 1569.

In terms of political culture this action could be described as a rebellion against the ruler in an attempt to safeguard the state. The work of the Sejm was hindered deliberately, in order to achieve a political goal. In spring of 1569 Poland and Lithuania, ruled by Sigismund August experienced a serious crisis, and even were on a brink of a military conflict.

In the Polish Sejm which continued its work in Lublin, radicals emerged victorious, and they were supported by the ruler. Sigismund August announced that he will to change the status of several territories (vojevodships), which were a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (lands of contemporary Ukraine), and that these areas are to be annexed by Polish kingdom. During the Lublin Sejm of 1569, Lithuanian state lost more than a third of its area by the will for the ruler and the members of Polish Sejm.

Political community of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania gathered in Vilnius to decide on what to do next. They saw that the ruler, the Grand duke of Lithuania and Polish, who called themselves brothers have disgraced the Lithuanian state and the nobility. In Vilnius and in the provinces, the discussions were brewing as the political nation prepared for the diet called by the “rebels” of Lublin Sejm. After

talks, the participants of the meeting decided that the delegation of Lithuanian Sejm will return to Lublin and continue the fight in the parliament. Discussions regarding the Union were renewed and for almost two months bitter arguing and searching for a consensus continued. This difficult compromise which was achieved is seen in the Act of Union of Lublin. This Act shows, that Lithuanian state and society lost vast territory and parts of its sovereignty. This incited the dissatisfaction of the Lithuanian society against its partner in Union, Poland, and it soured the atmosphere of the newly created composite state, and the conflicts between constituent parts of this state weakened the international positions of the Commonwealth.

The political community of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania consisted of magnates and nobility during the negotiations in Lublin. During the negotiations in Lublin showed that they wanted to preserve the Lithuanian political, legal and state identity. However, Lithuania did not attempt to break up the Commonwealth of Two Nations. It wanted to reinsure the status of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a full, independent, and equal to the Polish Kingdom, and to restore its historical territorial extent.

These were the facts of the Sixteenth century history. They, in my opinion, explain why in the historical and cultural memory of Lithuania, the Union of Lublin left more grievances than joy.

Modern Lithuanian historians and researchers who examine the Union of Lublin do not have a goal to deny the importance of the Union for the Early Modern European history. Union was concluded at the moment when the trends of absolutism began and the role of estates were started to be limited. At the same time the process of the Union of Lublin on the contrary show that the culture of parliamentary existed in Poland and Lithuania. This culture not only existed but also there was the will to apply it in practice. Members of two different political nations were able to discuss issues in a parliament and to find consensus. This demonstration of the Early Modern parliamentary culture – remaining and published diaries of the Lublin Sejm, which show the difficult process of negotiations and reveals the achievements of the parliamentary culture and the mistakes that were made.

The very fact that the union was concluded in the parliament is the most important contribution of the Union of Lublin of 1569 to the European history. It could be presented as an example for the modern politicians, that knowledge of parliamentary culture and its application give them opportunities to avoid confrontations and military conflict. This legacy of Union of Lublin should be further researched and published, as it shows the importance of mature political discussions

When discussing from the perspective of modern era, what the better understanding of Union of Lublin could provide for the youngest generation of Lithuanians, already born in the European Union, I would suggest these “lessons” of the Union:

The political space of the state created by the Union of Lublin, the Commonwealth of Two Nations, taught its politicians to coexist in difficult, contradictory circumstances, to find common positions and to build upon them without losing the state identity as Lithuania, without becoming Poland. This was an important premise for the vitality of the Commonwealth created at the Lublin Sejm.

The Sejm of the Commonwealth became the source of the parliamentary culture in the Central Eastern Europe. This was the space, where the political elites learned from the experiences of Early Modern parliamentary work. These values of the political culture, which are important today, must be recognized and cherished.

16-06-2017