Research Article

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The Wettins and the Issue of Inheritance of the Polish-Lithuanian State Throne in the Context of the Constitution of May 3, 1791: Position of the Lithuanian Nobility

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Abstract: The article analyses attitudes of the Lithuanian nobility towards the inheritance of the throne of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the Commonwealth) in the period of the Four-Year Sejm (1788-1792). Thorough analysis of historiography and research of narrative sources amplifies the position of the Lithuanian nobility towards the issue of inheritance of the throne of the Commonwealth as it was reflected in the political literature of 1787-1789 period. Analysis of the documents produced by the February and November dietines (Pol. *sejmiki*), 1790 of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (the GDL) reveals changes in the position of nobility towards selection of the successor to the throne with the king still alive. It was established, that in supporting the idea of a hereditary throne, Lithuanian political writers suggested different strategies in realizing this idea and proposed as candidates for the throne representatives of ruling dynasties of several states: Russia, Prussia, Saxony and Great Britain.

Changes in the position of nobility were significantly influenced by the activism of patriotic-reformist faction, which proposed the very idea of a hereditary throne and a candidate from the dynasty of Wettins: the GDL districts (Pol. *powiats*), having ignored the question of throne inheritance in the February dietines of 1790, in November of the same year agreed to the selection of Elector of Saxony as the successor to the King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania Stanisław August. However, even if agreeing to the Wettin candidacy, the GDL nobility did not support establishing of the principle of such inheritance. Most of the GDL dietines supported limited monarchy, politically and financially dependent on the political will of the nation. The Elector of Saxony was given certain conditions, the departure from which was to bring back an elective monarchy.

Keywords: Four-Year Sejm (1788-1792), succession, election, political literature, Saxon dynasty of the Wettins, dietines of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

1 Introduction

On 3 May 1791, by the resolution of the Sejm of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the nation received constitutional monarchy. In the new Constitution, succession to the throne was based on the need to protect the state both from the statehood-threatening external influence and from the attempts of local oligarchs to usurp the power. Chapter VII of the Constitution stated, that after King Stanisław August ‘has lived as much as God was to allow,’ and following that ‘the rule will be assumed by the current Elector of Saxony. The future dynasty of Polish kings shall begin with the person of Frederick August, current Elector of Saxony.’¹ Daughter of the Elector of Saxony Maria Augusta Nepomuk was announced Infanta of Poland, thus giving the nation a right to choose a different royal family after the end of

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the previous one. However, every king that ascended the throne was to swear to abide by the Constitution and the conditions of the agreement with the king (Lat. *pacta conventa*). The Constitution limited the powers of the king by establishing a rule that the king 'shall not be the absolute ruler but rather the father of the nation and its head.'² This way, the dynasty of the Wettins would be returned to the throne of Polish and Lithuanian State.

Election of the representative of the Wettin dynasty as successor to Stanisław August, as well as the very problem of the hereditary throne, are topics widely analyzed in historiography. A lot of attention from the researchers was given to political discussions in the Sejm and the period political literature as well as position of nobility regarding the reforms of the Four-Year Sejm and the Constitution of 3 May. However, the position of the nobility regarding inheritance of the throne and attitudes regarding the return of the Wettin dynasty to the throne, declared in the GDL dietines in February and November of 1790, did not receive any wider analysis, except for the general picture on the views of the nobility in the Commonwealth presented in the works of Zofia Zielińska.³ In addition, this question was not sufficiently researched by Adolfas Šapoka⁴ and Eligijus Raila⁵, who analysed the activities of the Lithuanian dietines in the period of the Four-Year Sejm.

Opportunities to evaluate the position of the Lithuanian nobility on the inheritance of the throne and acceptability of the Wettin dynasty are presented not only by voluminous political literature of the period in analysis, but also by the intensified research on the factions of the GDL nobility and the published documents of the GDL district dietines.

The aim of this article is to reveal the attitudes of the GDL nobility towards the inheritance of the throne of the Commonwealth in the context of the new 3 May Constitution, whilst underlining the motives for selection of the candidate from the Wettin dynasty as recorded in the documents of the 1790 dietines. The first part of the article, on the basis of analysis of the topic in historiography and political publications, presents positions of the Lithuanian aristocracy and nobility revealed in 1787-1789 discussions on the inheritance of the throne. After analysis and comparison of the results of the February and November 1790 dietines, the second part uncovers views of the GDL nobility towards the inheritance of the throne in general, and the selection of a candidate from the Wettin dynasty to succeed Stanisław August in particular.

2 Discussions on the hereditary throne of the Commonwealth of Both Nations and views of the Lithuanian nobility in 1787-1789

Before Stanisław August ascended the throne in 1764, political discourse in the Commonwealth was dominated by conviction that the right to elect a monarch was one of the essential privileges of the nobility and that a Catholic king elected from the Piast family of local aristocrats could best represent the interests of the nation and the state. The election procedure of the monarch was considered the embodiment of the right to choose by a free nation.⁶ Using the model of Great Britain, proponents of a hereditary monarchy were arguing that inheritance of the throne does not pose any threats to citizens' liberties and does not limit them.⁷

Intensive discussions between proponents of election and succession were live even before the start of the Four-Year Sejm, and were not over after the announcement of the 3 May Constitution. In the period of the Four-Year Sejm alone researchers have counted over 150 publications dedicated to the issue of a hereditary throne.⁸ The discussions involved several possible successors to Stanisław August: King's nephew Stanisław Poniatowski, grandson of Russian Empress Catherine II Grand Duke Constantine, Elector of Saxony Frederick William, King of Prussia Frederick William II or one of his sons – Frederick William, Ludwig or Karl.⁹ In 1789, the list of considered candidates was extended by successors to the throne of Great Britain Duke of York Frederick or Duke of Wales George, son in law of the general of Podolia Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, Duke of Württemberg Ludwig Württemberg and others¹⁰.

Certain political factions supported each of the candidates, yet the key motive for selecting a candidate for the hereditary throne was the strengthening of the geopolitical role of the Commonwealth, which was considered possible by the Polish and Lithuanian politicians of the time only through a union with one the ruling dynasties of Europe. By 1788 there were two concepts clarified among proponents of the hereditary throne of the Commonwealth: some were in favour of continuing the republican form of government ("moderate monarchy" or "limited monarchy"), yet others wanted to amplify powers of the monarch and to establish constitutional monarchy.

Among those that campaigned for a hereditary throne and election of a successor to Stanisław August still alive there was also a fairly strong camp favouring elective monarchy. One of the most vocal members of this camp was Polish field hetman Seweryn Rzewuski. Some ideas came forward from the proponents of the republican model of government and Polish artillery general Stanisław Szczęśny Potocki even suggested abolishment of the monarchy altogether.¹¹

Several famous Polish politicians and publicists (Stanisław Staszyc, Wincenty Skrzetuski, Hugon Kołłątaj, Adam Krasiński) argued in favour of the hereditary throne and election of a successor to Stanisław August while still alive. In favour of the hereditary throne and election of a successor to Stanisław August still alive argued famous Polish politicians and publicists (Stanisław Staszyc, Wincenty Skrzetuski, Hugon Kołłątaj, Adam Krasiński). In these discussions the Lithuanian voice was also heard. Still in July of 1788 an anonymous publication 'Letter of a Citizen of the GDL to the King Stanisław August'¹² saw the daylight, in which the author suggested to invite into the hereditary throne a representative from the Wettin dynasty. In the opinion of the author, the Wettins, being in union with Prussia, could neutralize the territorial demands of Berlin against Poland, making the state of the Hohenzollerns friendlier towards the Commonwealth thus strengthening it.¹³ This writing was the first public text that invited the ruler of Saxony to the throne and campaigned for the idea of the union between the Commonwealth and Prussia. Obviously, the author of the 'Letter of a GDL Citizen' was a member of the pro-Prussian faction.

Another suggested path on how to possibly tame the territorial demands of Prussia was a straightforward passing of the Crown of the Commonwealth to a representative of the Hohenzollern dynasty, best to Ludwig, son of King of Prussia Frederick William II. This idea was supported by one of the most active proponents of hereditary throne, leader of patriotic-reformist faction, marshal of the Lithuanian Court Ignacy Potocki who believed that in the case of succession by the Wettins Prussia, being in conflict with the Habsburgs, would block the entire project of succession.¹⁴

The pro-Russian politicians who campaigned for closer links with the Russian Empire maintained the opposing position on the candidacy to the throne of the Commonwealth. Elder of Livonia and future castellan of Trakai Kazimierz Konstanty Plater in a 1789 publication 'Vision of a Possible Future of Poland'¹⁵ suggested the passing of the hereditary Crown to the grandson of Russian Empress Catherine II, Grand Duke Constantine who could even be adopted by Stanisław August. In exchange for that, in the opinion of Plater, the Polish-Lithuanian State would be able to regain some territories lost to Russia and Austria during the First Partition and in the future could have claims to some conquered lands in Turkey.¹⁶

The idea of Grand Duke Constantine becoming successor to the throne was not new. This idea matured in the quarters of Grigory Potemkin, favourite of Russian Empress Catherine II, and was released to the public on the eve of the meeting between Stanisław August and Catherine II in Kaniv in the spring of 1787.¹⁷ This idea found support among aristocrats of the pro-Russian faction Grand Hetman of Poland Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, artillery general S. F. Potocki, who hoped with help from Russia to implement a federal model of governance in the Commonwealth, as well as some of the supporters of Stanisław August. The pro-Russian politicians considered the candidacy of Grand Duke Constantine to the throne of the Commonwealth as an alternative to the dynasty of Wettins, supported by the patriotic-reformist faction. This idea was revived later as well, in the context of the Second Partition of the Commonwealth in 1793 hoping to maintain the territorial integrity of Poland and Lithuania. In the words of a member of the Four-Year Sejm Antoni Trębicki in 1793, while chairing the dietine of Lithuanian Brest, '700 noblemen sought to pass an instruction which would require not only to announce the Targowica Confederacy illegal but also to send a representative to Petersburg to express the benevolence of the Polish nation to Catherine II, and to make sure that one of her grandchildren would be announced successor to the throne of Poland if that would ensure integrity of the borders, return of the annexed territories and governing policies, as laid out in "Malachowski's Sejm" (i.e. the Four-Year Sejm), were to be recognized and guaranteed.'¹⁸

However, let us go back to 1789 when the debate on the reform of the system of governance was joined by Samogitian nobleman and deputy in the Sejm, Maurycy Franciszek Karp. Despite personally considering a republican form of government superior to that of monarchy, Karp did not demand the abolition of monarchy, suggesting only limiting the king's powers. His focus was drawn by North America as a completely new alternative concept of democracy.¹⁹ The issue of a hereditary throne to this Samogitian politician and philosopher was a secondary matter; therefore, in his publications Karp paid little attention to the election-or-succession problem. In his support for the idea of the union with Prussia, Karp preferred to see in the throne of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth a member of the Wettin dynasty or one of the heirs to the throne of Prussia.²⁰

In the first year of the Four-Year Sejm, both in Lithuania and Poland the issue of election or succession drew diverse opinions, yet an active fight between proponents and opponents of the hereditary throne started in January of 1790, when Polish field hetman Seweryn Rzewuski published his famous writing about succession, comparing it to the oppression of a free nation.²¹ A dozen writers joined in either to criticize or to support the hetman, among which we again can find the elder of Livonia Plater who at the beginning of 1790 published 'Cosmopolite's [Address] to the Polish Nation.'²² Plater was deeply convinced that the state simply 'could not exist without a king' and that a hereditary throne was more beneficial than the free elections, which 'long ago had become only a fiction to cover up interference by foreigners.'²³ Probably, he was the first to widely circulate the argument about the harm to the nation's takeover by magnates, noting that this very 'fight of the magnates against the throne (i.e. the King) is devastating to the nation' and that this part of the political nation gains most in the course of the elections of the king.²⁴ In his consideration whether a successor to Stanisław August must be a fellow countryman or a foreign ruler Plater argued, that for the election of the king of local origins political nation of the Commonwealth is not ready yet and that proposing any local candidates would stir unrest and an internal struggle for power. Plater suggested the election of a foreigner who would be most beneficial for the Commonwealth because of his political ties and position. Plater still desired to see the grandson of the Russian Empress on the Polish and Lithuanian throne

Plater's position reflected the objectives of the pro-Russian faction, whereas members of the patriotic-reformist camp favoured the candidacy of Frederick August, ruler of the Wettin dynasty. How much of the discussion on the inheritance of the throne that heated up Warsaw reached voivodeships and districts of the GDL, and how the views among nobility regarding election and succession shifted, was demonstrated in the dietines of nobility in February and November of 1790.

3 From February to November dietines of 1790: the shifting views of nobility

Zofia Zielińska, researching February dietines of 1790 had only access to the GDL part of the data from the dietines of Orsha and Brest Litovsk.²⁵ Adolfas Šapoka succeeded in collecting data from five dietine resolutions.²⁶ After publication of the data by Jevgenij Anishchanka²⁷ and Robertas Jurgaitis²⁸, the information on 1790 dietines was complemented by the instructions from dietines in Grodno, Smolensk, Navagrudak and Vaukavysk, yet the position expressed in the dietine of Trakai voivodeship was revealed through the research of Wojciech Szczypiński.²⁹ This way we now have data on the positions of roughly 10 out of 23 dietines of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (together with Livonia) regarding the reforms of the Four-Year Sejm. Analysis of the documents from the dietines has shown that in the tribunal and economic dietines of February 1790 the issue of throne inheritance was not widely discussed but rather circumvented or avoided. For instance, a letter from the Vilkmergė (now Ukmergė) district dietine to the Sejm representatives expressed gratitude for '[their] longstanding service for the public good, especially that the new legislation shows the long awaited results of improving the fate of the Commonwealth,'³⁰ however completely omitting the issue of throne succession. A similar attitude was expressed by the dietines of Navagrudak, Pinsk, Brest Litovsk, Vaukavysk and Slanim. At the same time the Grodno nobility noted that if in the Sejm 'would be projects submitted regarding inheritance of the throne, and if the Estates of the Commonwealth were to consider deliberation thereof, in such case their Graces Representatives would not be permitted to take such important decisions and are obligated to address the district to get the resolution of all citizens [on throne inheritance], which will they have to abide by.'³¹

Thus, the majority of the GDL dietines on the top of the list were legal, economic and administrative issues important to the particular districts, but also contained an expression of gratitude to the Sejm for the initiated reforms and the adopted 'The basics on improving the form of governance'. Only in one dietine of Holopenichi did the nobility of Orsha district gather in February of 1790 and clearly stated their position in favour of the hereditary throne. A letter from the Sejm representatives Ludwik Gutakowski and Wincent Józefowicz undoubtedly influenced such a position of the dietine.³² In response to their address, the nobility of Orsha had written a letter to the representatives where they asserted that 'having no prejudice [Orsha] district maintains an opinion that without the hereditary throne it will be impossible to sustain continuous stable government that could resist this harmful influence of selecting a king practiced to this day [...].'³³ The nobles acknowledged, that 'without any unions with strong countries our nation will

not be able to stay safe and respected,’ therefore in the name of the district they unconditionally expressed support for the policies of the Sejm. However, the nobility of the Orsha district did not discuss any particular candidates to inherit the throne. Almost the entire corpus of district judges and lower rank officers of the Orsha district signed the letter. Analysis of the composition of participating members of the dietine shows that the mid-level nobility dominated it.

If, as one can judge from the data of February 1790 dietines, only a small fraction of the GDL nobility (i.e. only one dietine out of ten) openly favoured the hereditary throne, by the summer and early autumn of the same year the active campaigning of the patriotic-reformist faction fundamentally changed the position of the nobility. Proponents of the hereditary throne gained the upper hand in the summer of 1790 although there was no single opinion on a candidate to the throne. The faction of the Prussian proponents, with the active membership of grand hetman Michał Kazimierz Ogiński, continued to propose Prince of Prussia Ludwig. The projections were for the son of the King of Prussia to marry Infante of Saxony and in this way the Crown would be passed to the Hohenzollerns.

The ideas raised by political factions were reflected in the publications of the time, which included previously publicly absent writers. For instance, a student of Vilnius academy, a lawyer of the Lithuanian Tribunal, and a nobleman from Grodno district Jan Krzywkowski in writings on the topic of hereditary throne emphasized that the throne should not be given to any “absolutist state”, because then the Commonwealth would be condemned to become a province of that state.³⁴ The writer positively reviewed the period of Saxon rule and argued that ‘the capital of the nation accumulated during the rule of the Wettins was aimlessly wasted for the new election that instigated war with Moscow during which were killed or exiled over a dozen thousand people.’³⁵ Krzywkowski considered the principle of hereditary throne necessary to strengthen the nation. From such a candidate to the throne, the nobleman from Grodno district was expecting both political and financial assistance in developing the economy of the land by building cities, fortresses and ports. Therefore he pointed out the two most acceptable countries for the Commonwealth: Saxony and England (Great Britain). However, in selecting his arguments in favour of Saxony and seeking to present political and economic power of this state, the student of Vilnius academy did not excel at demonstrating his knowledge of geography and political history, placing the Wettin run country by the sea and turning Holland into an English ruled state. In his deliberations on a candidacy to the throne of Poland by a member of the English monarchy, Krzywkowski noted that in such a case the Commonwealth ‘would have a guaranteed access to the trade with the whole world, developed economy and craftsmanship.’ Also, a union with Great Britain would not pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the Commonwealth, since ‘England having ruled Holland for a long period of time, not only did not annul its rights but rather brought [this nation] closer to its own majesty.’³⁶ Krzywkowski’s orientation towards Saxony and Great Britain lends support to the idea that this nobleman from Grodno district was closer to the faction of King Stanisław August’s court rather than the entourage of hetman Ogiński whom he legally represented.

We shall note, that among those that publicly spoke up in the 1790 debates, only a few were Lithuanian representatives. These were Livonian bishop Józef Kazimierz Kossakowski, Livonian delegate to the Sejm Piotr Potocki, delegate from Smolensk Antoni Suchodolski, the delegate from Trakai Michał Brzostowski and the delegate from Minsk Piotr Pawlikowski. On 30 August 1790, after the start of discussions on Legislation of the Governing Reform bishop Kossakowski reminded Stanisław August of his duty to abide by the conditions of *pacta conventa* that do not permit discussing an heir while the king is alive, whereas Suchodolski called the hereditary throne a ‘coffin of freedoms.’³⁷ However, other Lithuanian representatives, such as Maciej Butrymowicz from Pinsk, Józef Weissenhof from Livonia, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz and Tomasz Wawrzecki were active in supporting “the project of succession”.

After month-long discussions, on 30 September 1790, by a majority vote, the Sejm selected the candidacy of the Elector of Saxony as the successor to the throne.³⁸ In order to prevent accusations by the republicans and the opposition that this act was without the consent of the nation, the Sejm asked for the approval of the citizens. In the dietines of November 1790 the nation of nobles had to say its verdict on the election of a successor to the throne with present King still alive and on this successor was a Wettin. Both confederate marshals of the Sejm, Stanisław Nałęcz Malachowski and Kazimierz Nestor Sapieha, had soon dispatched letters to the district nobles campaigning for support to the Elector of Saxony. Views among the GDL nobility towards the establishment of the hereditary throne can be seen in the resolutions of the dietines that allow verification of some assessments in the historiography of this topic.

We have access to materials from 20 out of 23 dietines assembled in November of 1790, and only of the resolutions from dietines of Ashmiany, Braslav and Starodub we know from the secondary sources. Analysis of the instructions issued by the dietines of the GDL nobility to their Sejm representatives shows that in the context of geopolitical tensions of the time, the majority of the nobles considered election of a successor to the throne with the king still alive as a “one-

time action”, necessary to maintain stability in the Commonwealth. It was agreed for the Elector of Saxony to become successor to Stanislaw August, although not without some reservations. Let us look at what arguments were employed by nobility of the districts to justify selecting Wettin a successor to the throne and what conditions were to be imposed.

The most important Lithuanian dietine of Vilnius agreed that the successor to Stanislaw August should be ‘His Highness Elector of Saxony [...] because of his ancestors and personal traits.’³⁹ However, their backing was conditional, because the Elector of Saxony could ascend to the throne only following these conditions:

1. In the future monarch’s powers over army and treasury should be separated and given to the nation;
2. The nation shall retain the right to sign international treaties;
3. Without consent of the nation, the monarch shall not announce a war;
4. After accepting the crown, the king shall not have the right to refuse it without consent of the nation;
5. The king shall be granted a rent of 6 million from the treasury and shall not have any claims on the income from economies in possession of the current king;
6. The king shall sign an agreement with the nation on conditions of the previous *pacta conventa*, i.e. the monarch shall maintain prevalence of the Catholic faith, freedoms and rights of the nobility, rights set by the Lithuanian Statutes, and shall not claim the right to grant offices and military ranks. If the king should not accept these conditions, the representatives shall not have the right to agree on another candidacy without prior consent of the nation.⁴⁰

The nobility of the Polotsk voivodeship laid out even more conditions for the new monarch (in total twelve points limiting powers of the king).⁴¹ The dietine of Lida nobility decided that the Elector of Saxony could be considered a successor to the throne only if he was to agree to the conditions with their roots in the sixteenth century traditions of the GDL, i.e. ‘such that were assigned to Sigismund August by the Commonwealth: to preserve the rights and statutes that protect the estate of nobility.’⁴² Special requirements to the Elector were posed by the dietine of Vilmergė district, demanding that neither the Elector of Saxony nor members of his family would have any claims to the land and public offices of the Commonwealth and that the Sejm was to establish a procedure on any future elections.⁴³

The nobility of Trakai voivodeship did not engage in any deeper deliberations on the matter of succession, noting that ‘they don’t think that interests [of the Elector of Saxony’s court] would be adverse to the Commonwealth.’⁴⁴ Nobles of Kaunas also supported selection of the Elector of Saxony, noting that they only agree on the coronation of a male descendant of August III. Also, the candidate would have to agree to the strict conditions, limiting his political and financial freedoms.⁴⁵ A. Šapoka attributed Kaunas dietine to the dietines that accepted the concept of succession.⁴⁶ Detailed analysis of the instruction allows for the argument that the nobility of Kaunas did not unconditionally support the principle of hereditary throne, rather supporting “electoral succession”, i.e. election of successor to the throne from the members of the Wettin dynasty.

The nobility of Upytė, just like that of Kaunas, when voting for the Elector of Saxony demanded that the heir to the throne would agree to certain conditions. If the Elector was not to accept the conditions of the nobility or would not have a male successor, then the issue of inheritance of the throne would have to be reconsidered.⁴⁷

The nobility of Grodno, which in February was against any changes in the *pacta conventa*, on 16 November dietine noted that ‘the sweet memories of the two kings from the House of Saxony, August II and August III, and the fitting gratitude to this famous European family’ motivates them to agree to the candidacy of the Elector of Saxony.⁴⁸ However, they noted that ‘the district agrees to elect a successor to the king with the King still alive only once’ and if the Elector of Saxony was to refuse the throne, free elections would have to be called following the previously established procedure. The nobles of Slanim,⁴⁹ Pinsk⁵⁰ and Starodub⁵¹ districts expressed the same position.

The Samogitian nobles expressed a completely opposing reaction to the address by the marshals on succession to the throne and the founding of the hereditary throne. The dietine assembled in Raseiniai, dominated by the supporters of the reformists, was in favour of the hereditary throne, however demanding to ensure the succession through the male line of the Elector of Saxony and that before ascending the throne the Elector would sign an appropriate *pacta conventa* agreement.⁵² At the same time, the nobility of the Navagrudak voivodeship noted that it agrees only to the lifetime election of the Elector, because it cannot be sure if this proposal would at all be acceptable to the Dresden Court, which did not send back any confirmation on this matter. Therefore, it recommended the Sejm to officially address the Saxon monarch on this issue. The nobility of Navagrudak also emphasized that free elections of the monarchs must be preserved for the future.⁵³

The Livonian dietine, attended by the supporters of the King the Zyberks, the Borchs, the Weizenhoffs and the elder of Livonia Plater himself, ‘by contributing to the perennial gratitude to the highest House of Saxony’ also allowed its representatives in the Sejm ‘to elect his highness Elector of Saxony as the King.’⁵⁴ However, analysis of the instruction by the dietine of the Livonian Duchy does not lend support to the argument that this dietine was in favour of permanently establishing the principle of hereditary throne as it was argued before in historiography.

Nobles of Orsha once again expressed their support for the idea of succession as the only opportunity to prevent negative outcomes of the interregnum periods. By agreeing to the election of the Elector of Saxony with the King still alive, the dietine of Orsha noted that this is ‘the most suitable person for the throne of Poland, whose two family members and previous rulers bring sweet memories in our nation.’ Just as the majority of the GDL dietines, the nobility of Orsha was in favour of the succession through the male line of the Elector of Saxony and demanded adherence to conditions of the *pacta conventa*.⁵⁵

The dietines of Vaukavysk, Brest and Rechyca also agreed to the Elector of Saxony becoming the successor to the throne, supporting the permanent election of an heir with the old monarch still alive. The instruction of the Vaukavysk dietine emphasized that, ‘the Sejm must pass the law which would forbid succession to the Polish throne to be passed not unto one particular person but a family, and that the heir to the throne would be elected with the king still alive in order to avoid disasters arising from the interregnum periods.’⁵⁶ Dietine of Minsk voivodeship, adhering to the recommendations of the marshals, also unanimously supported election of the Elector of Saxony as ‘the heir to the Polish Crown.’⁵⁷ The nobility of the Minsk voivodeship in their instruction to the delegates emphasized, that in the case of the Elector of Saxony not accepting the throne of Poland, they retain the right to choose another candidate. Such an alternative was pre-recorded in the resolution by the exiles of Smolensk voivodeship: if the Elector of Saxony was to refuse, another candidate for the hereditary throne was to be a member of the Hanover dynasty ruling Great Britain.⁵⁸

Only one dietine, that of Mazyr, categorically refused against any inheritance of the throne and did not say a word on the Wettin candidacy. Nobles of Mazyr noted that if a ‘majority were to vote in favour of the hereditary throne, the delegates must enter their protest into the records of the Warsaw courts.’⁵⁹

The choice of language used in formulating instructions was often rather complicated and that opened roads to differing interpretations. Therefore, in historiography the positions of one or the other dietines were viewed differently. According to the calculations by Walerian Kalinka, only two Lithuanian dietines were in favour of establishing the hereditary throne.⁶⁰ In the opinion of Zofia Zielińska, there were six such dietines: Breslav, Kaunas, Upytė, Samogitia, Orsha and Livonia. Adolfas Šapoka argued that out of 23 dietines in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania only Kaunas, Samogitia and Orsha dietines supported the concept of a hereditary throne.⁶¹ In our view, by proposing the idea of “succession through election” the nobility of Kaunas did not support the principle of hereditary throne, yet dietines of Samogitia, Upytė and Orsha agreed to this principle only after proposing additional conditions.

Even though the nobility did not show support to the founding of the hereditary monarchy, it understood the situation the country was in and supported the election of a successor to Stanisław August while he was alive. Even 22 out of all dietines of the GDL voted in favour of selecting the Elector of Saxony to become successor to the throne. Dietine of Mazyr was the only one that did not express any support to the Elector of Saxony becoming heir to the throne. These tendencies were close to the situation in the Kingdom of Poland. In the entire country, 50 out of 55 dietines in November 1790 expressed their support to the election of the Elector of Saxony with the king still alive.⁶² The choice of a Wettin to become an heir to Stanisław August amplified positions of the patriotic-reformist faction and paved the way for the 3 May 1791 Constitution.

4 Conclusions

In the period of 1787–1790, the position of the GDL nobility regarding a hereditary throne were close to the tendencies prevalent in the entire Commonwealth. The spectrum of views ranged from the support of succession to an apology of election to the throne, from constitutional monarchy to campaigning for the republican or federal model of government. Writers in the GDL actively participated in the discussions regarding inheritance of the throne. While supporting the idea of a hereditary throne, Lithuanian representatives offered different strategies in realizing this idea and suggested

several potential candidates to the throne of the Commonwealth: the ruling dynasties of Russia, Prussia, Saxony and Great Britain.

While omitting the question of the hereditary throne in the February dietines of 1790, in November of the same year nobility from the districts of the GDL expressed their support to selecting Elector of Saxony as the heir to Stanisław August. This was influenced by the active campaigning of the patriotic-reformist faction. However, even after agreeing to the candidacy of the Elector of Saxony, the nobility of the GDL did not support permanent establishment of the hereditary throne. The majority of the GDL dietines were in favour of a limited monarchy, politically and financially dependent on the political will of the nation. Certain conditions were formulated for the Elector of Saxony and in case of non-compliance an elective monarchy was to be brought back.

Analysis of the documents from the GDL dietines shows that the positions of nobility were affected by two factors: geopolitical situation and tradition. The key motive for choosing the Elector of Saxony, as expressed in the November dietines of 1790, was the insurance of stability in the nation in the face of the foreign threat and the return of the Wettin dynasty, which over 60 years successfully ruled the country.

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