The turbulent times of John III Sobieski – an outstanding strategist, organiser and warrior, hailed by the Tartars as the Lion of Lechistan – are illustrative of the political culture of the time and the difficult geopolitical choices to be made. They are an example of geoculture, and thus show the links, unfortunately negative, between the political habits prevailing in the Commonwealth and the ability to meet geopolitical challenges. They are a warning to contemporary Poles, but also to other nations of the former Commonwealth.

Institutions create political culture

There is a perception that a number of institutions of the noble democracy of the Commonwealth weakened the state and led to its collapse, i.e., the Partitions. Among these are the weakness of the government, i.e., the central authority, primarily the king, but also the tax system and the army. The opposition was too strong and it disorganised the state. Its primary instrument of destabilisation was the *liberum veto*, i.e., the ability to break up the Sejm. At the same time, other powers had a powerful influence on the functioning of the opposition and its destructive activities. Through common bribery, they prevented constructive action, including that aimed at introducing reforms and adopting an appropriate geopolitical strategy to respond to security challenges.

Interestingly, the neighbouring powers and the magnates they corrupted stood up for the rule of law and democracy, i.e., the freedoms of the nobility. They believed that blocking political reforms would guarantee chaos in the Commonwealth, i.e., weakening this huge state. In doing so, the opposition went mostly unpunished, even when it committed outright treason, i.e., collaboration with external powers against the legally elected royal authority. This was the case, for example, at the time of the Swedish Deluge (1655-1660). It was not only a war between Sweden and the Commonwealth, but largely a fratricidal war. A huge section of the magnates and nobility, including John Sobieski himself, sided with Charles Gustav. What a terrible mistake it was to support Charles Gustav is best demonstrated by his plans to carry out the partition of the Commonwealth, together with George Rákóczi, the Cossacks, and Brandenburg.

Another institution that was destroying the potential of the state was the free election, especially the possibility of electing the representative of a foreign dynasty. This, of course, legitimised foreign influence on the Commonwealth's politics. It propagated corruption on a wide scale, above all foreign bribery of

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magnates. It is the institution of the free election that explains the overwhelming support of the nobility for Charles Gustav during the Deluge. He was elected king against the then incumbent John Casimir Vasa (also from a dynasty originating in Sweden).

In Sobieski's time, the demand for the election of a Piast, i.e., a native politician, had increasing support among noble society. This aroused the resentment and jealousy of at least some of the magnates. For someone equal or even inferior to their status was to sit on the throne, which contributed to ostentatious disregard and disrespect for authority, extreme opposition because it broke the law, and often led to civil war. This attitude of the magnates was encountered by Sobieski's predecessor, Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki, but John III himself also struggled during the years of his reign. Sobieski's drive to establish a dynasty could have stabilised the system of power in the Commonwealth, but was torpedoed by his political opponents at home and abroad – under the banner of protecting the rule of law, or the freedoms of the nobility, of course. Sobieski was similarly prevented from making further attempts to reform, or strengthen, the state. For example, the opposition did not agree to the king's proposal that a member of parliament breaking up the Sejm should be branded a traitor to the homeland.

Political culture – startling parallels with contemporary Poland

Institutions create political culture, and bad institutions perpetuate the pathologies of public life. This was the case with the free election, which perpetuated the negative influence of external powers on the Commonwealth. It blurred responsibility for the common good, the sense of identity and national interest, and undermined the treason that often hid under the defence of the rule of law and democracy, i.e., the rights and freedoms of the nobility. The free election also became an institution that propagated corruption, which was particularly dangerous with foreign money. Unfortunately, Sobieski's own election to the throne was also lavishly paid for by the French court (more than half a million *livres* were spent).

Most dangerous, however, was the collaboration of courts hostile to the Commonwealth with the opposition against the legally elected royal authority. The simplest way for rival powers to stop the Commonwealth's reforms was to bribe the magnates, i.e., the most influential politicians of the time. And the institution of the *liberum veto* enabled the paralysis of the state, which began in Sobieski's time, the 17th century. The influence of foreign countries on the democracy of the nobility was further shaped by attitudes towards neighbouring powers, especially Western

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European ones. The politicians of the time therefore sought to rely on assistance from these powers, and also welcomed foreign titles and decorations with relish, and were open to alliances with foreign dynasties. They saw it as a source of ennoblement. This was the case with the marriage of the heiress to the Radziwiłł fortune, Ludwika Karolina, whom the family married to the Elector of Brandenburg. Not only did this complicate John III Sobieski's geopolitical strategy, but it gave enormous financial resources to the enemies of the Commonwealth, which they later used to its detriment. In other European powers of the time, such behaviour by subordinates – against the will of the state authorities – would have been impossible.

The example described illustrates another feature of the political culture, namely the extreme particularism of influential politicians, i.e., their putting their own interests above the common good. Another example was the frequent focus in the Sobieski era on internal struggles for influence and positions instead of the solidary defence of the homeland. Even at the time of the greatest security threats, intra-national political rivalries were more important than focusing on strengthening the military. There was a fear of entrusting too large an army to Sobieski, as this could have strengthened his position, and his possible military successes were thought to lead not to the protection of the Commonwealth, but to a consolidation of his authority that was a risk to his opponents. This was the case, for example, in the face of the Turkish invasion of 1672. It was said at the time that it was better to see Turchin in Cracow and Warsaw than to allow Sobieski's partisans to take power. In other words, it was a pathology of the political culture not to allow a political rival to succeed, even when it would have been an obvious geopolitical success for the homeland.

The disappearance of the categories of the common good and patriotism, i.e., the willingness to sacrifice one's own benefits for the good of the homeland, was directly linked to a disregard for the government of one's own country (i.e., the royal authority), as well as collaboration with foreign countries. This resulted in a lack of consistency in state policy. Even if Sobieski's triumphs were on the battlefield, they were mostly not used strategically. This was prevented by internal struggles and the torpedoing of these intentions by the opposition, most often bribed by foreign powers. This was the case, for example, with Sobieski's 1673 victory at Chocim.

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Strategy influenced by political culture

Sobieski had a bold geopolitical strategy, but one that he could not put into practice. This was prevented by the political culture prevailing in the Commonwealth. The King was pained by the loss of Ducal Prussia (at the time of the Swedish Deluge), a wealthy province that had become an economic base for Berlin's increasingly hostile policy towards Warsaw. As late as 1667, Frederick William concluded a treaty with Sweden to cooperate and maintain the state of chaos and anarchy in the Commonwealth under the noble slogan of protecting democratic rights and freedoms. Berlin later sponsored a treaty with Austria and Sweden to protect the free election in the Commonwealth, which was intended to prevent Sobieski from realising his dynastic plans.

Meanwhile, Brandenburg and Ducal Prussia were an increasingly authoritarian state and far from the democratic standards then practised in the Commonwealth. It was Sobieski who was able to become the defender of the rights and freedoms of the Germans, as the Prussian states expected this of the Commonwealth at the time. The ruler therefore wanted to stand up for the German nobility and detach Ducal Prussia from Brandenburg and thus restore the former fief to the motherland. This was intended to facilitate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's access to the Baltic Sea, as well as to interrupt Berlin's march towards power, which, as it later turned out, was to fatally threaten the Polish-Lithuanian state.

Sobieski's aims were dictated by personal considerations, namely the desire to make Prussia his own domain, creating a convenient position for the introduction of a dynasty. Furthermore, the defeat of Berlin was essential for the preservation of the Republic's geo-economic prosperity, but also for the survival of the state. It was therefore of fundamental geopolitical importance for the situation in this part of Europe. To achieve his aims, Sobieski even signed treaties with Sweden and France that targeted Berlin. Unfortunately, these plans were thwarted by the attitude of the opposition, bribed by Berlin and Vienna.

The money flowing to Sobieski's opponents from the Great Elector was linked to a desire to keep the Commonwealth weak and torpedo John III's strategic plans. Austrian funds, on the other hand, were prompted by the Turkish threat. The Habsburgs' aim was to embroil the Commonwealth in a conflict with the High Porte and thus distract the Sultan from his expansion towards Vienna. The idea was that Warsaw would take the main burden of defending the Habsburgs against the Ottoman Empire. Eventually Sobieski gave way to the opposition. Instead of

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concentrating on other strategic directions, he became embroiled in a long-standing dispute with an empire that was, after all, slowly declining, although it obviously had to mobilise and largely weaken the potential of the Two Nations.

The aim of the Commonwealth should have been to focus the efforts of the High Porte on battles with Moscow or the Habsburg Monarchy, and possibly use these conflicts to regain Podolia. In other words, Sobieski should not have gone with the relief to Vienna in 1683, but rather try to regain Kamieniec Podolski at that time. As a result, Warsaw's long-standing alliance with Vienna benefited the Austrians to the greatest extent, and the Commonwealth to a very small extent, apart from the fame of the Lion of Lechistan himself.

Another important geopolitical direction should be Moscow, the rising power that determined the downfall of the Commonwealth and the Second Republic. From a geopolitical perspective, the alliance of Moscow and Berlin proved to be the greatest threat to Polish statehood. However, each time the decisive factor was the strategy, capability, and determination on the part of the Muscovites. During Sobieski's lifetime, the Commonwealth failed to capitalise on its military successes at Polonka and Cudnow (of 1660), followed by the campaign of 1664. These missed opportunities were bound to come back with a vengeance.

Sobieski himself approved the treaty of Grzymułtowski, which was humiliating for the Commonwealth, and which allowed Moscow to interfere in the internal affairs of the nobility's democracy, as well as handing over huge parts of the country to the Muscovites, including Smolensk, Severodvinsk and Chernivshchyna. Worst of all, however, was Moscow's annexation of Kiev and left-bank Ukraine. This nullified the chances of transforming the Commonwealth into a Three Nations state, as well as fundamentally strengthening Moscow geo-economically. The source of Moscow's success was therefore the Commonwealth's inconsistency on the battlefield, which allowed the expansion of the Muscovites, and before that the fratricidal civil war with the Cossacks. If the Hadiach Treaty of 1658 had been implemented and the state system transformed into a Commonwealth of Three Nations, it would probably have succeeded in halting the imperial ambitions of the Muscovite Tsar. Sobieski did not have enough determination and support for such actions among the noble elite to reactivate the provisions of this treaty. There was an opportunity for this in 1682, with the death of Fyodor Romanov.

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Conclusions from the Sobieski era

The political culture of the Commonwealth was the primary source of the state's weakness. Its most pathological features still seem to be present in Polish public life. These include succumbing to the influence of foreign centres of power and a lack of respect for Polish authorities, while at the same time being excessively fascinated by foreign countries. There is a lack of loyalty to one's own state and legitimately elected government, especially in dealings with foreign countries. It remains a feature of political culture to dilute or disavow the notion of treason, corruption, but also patriotism. The ad hoc and vested interests of politicians also still seem to prevail over the common good, even in the face of serious security challenges. Unfortunately, all these flaws in the political culture impinge on the geopolitical strategy and the opportunities for its effective implementation.

The methods and basic principles of the geopolitical game practised during the Sobieski era are still valid. This primarily concerns the interference of external rivals in Polish democracy under the banner of defending its rights and freedoms, but in fact with the aim of disorganising and weakening the Commonwealth. The rule of thumb to pass on the costs of dealing with international threats or crises to neighbours, and preferably geo-economic rivals, is also current, on the principle that the worse off a rival is, the better for us. It is a pity that, to this day, Warsaw has not learnt to make full use of such methods for its own benefit.

In Sobieski's time, two powers with their capitals in Berlin and Moscow were rising and becoming an existential threat to the Commonwealth. It is on them that the political elite should focus. Instead, state resources were squandered on other issues. It was mainly Vienna that benefited from such action. Another consequence was the abandonment of ambitions to the east and north-west. The key to weakening the Germans was the division of Brandenburg and Ducal Prussia, thus stopping the unification process of the German states. In turn, stopping Moscow's territorial ambitions in Ukraine would be essential to defeat Moscow.

As it seems, these two geopolitical conclusions are still relevant today, as evidenced by the 1990 German reunification and Vladimir Putin's Russian aggression against Ukraine. After reunification, modern Germany became too powerful and thus dominant in the EU and Central Europe. Hence, political forces have emerged in our region that oppose this domination and seek to increase autonomy vis-à-vis Berlin. On the other hand, breaking Kiev out of Moscow's orbit of influence is a huge opportunity for Poland. However, this is only possible if integration processes in

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Central and Eastern Europe can be deepened. Still, as in the Sobieski era, the geopolitical challenge for Warsaw is simultaneously the policies of Moscow and Berlin.

A book authored by Professor Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse, is planned for publication in 2023, entitled: *Geokultura, czyli o związkach geopolityki z kulturą* [*Geoculture, or on the links between geopolitics and culture*], Centre for Political Thought, Krakow.

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