

Consensus in Polish political history

Politics and Harmony



Prof. Janusz Tazbir focuses on the history of culture and religious movements in 16th–17th century Poland

JANUSZ TAZBIR
Polish Academy of Sciences
bck@pan.pl

Is the presence of harmony (which in the political domain is identified with the idea of consensus) always a factor conducive to the development of civilization – or was the emergence of the modern Polish state in fact more the product of a multiplicity of views and a certain degree of conflict?

The wider notion of harmony – naturally and quite comprehensibly – was first interpreted in musical terms, whereby all manifestations of disharmony were condemned as being identified with discord, the seed of civil strife. Such is the construal of harmony that emerges from the *Collection of Essential Information (Zbiór potrzebniejszych wiadomości)*, an Enlightenment-age encyclopedia authored in 1781 under the guidance of Ignacy Krasicki. Only after offering an explanation that harmony “signifies the product of various tones in agreement with each other, rendering an overall sound” does the encyclopedia entry discuss harmony in rhetoric (speech), painting, and lastly theology. In that era of struggle for religious hegemony in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, harmony – or rather the lack thereof (i.e. a lack of consensus) – was invoked nearly just as often as in music, as the main cause for the downfall of states. The key example held up here was that of Hungary, whose multiplicity of faiths was considered to have rendered it such easy prey for the Ottoman Porte.

Harmony’s few opponents...

The outstanding historian Władysław Konopczyński, in his still-pertinent monograph *Liberum veto* (reprinted: Kraków 2002), culled together the names of just over a dozen individuals who were urging the

reform of Polish parliamentarianism prior to the enactment of the Constitution of the Third of May (1791). Of them, only eight were calling for the principle of unanimity to be abandoned. Konopczyński comments on this state of affairs quite bitterly: “This was no camp; it was a drop in the ocean; these were exceptions, not even isolated cases.” I myself have encountered even less success in researching the reform movement in Poland, from its outset to its sad end – only being able to identify a single writer who defended the principle of tolerance while appealing in specific to the concept of harmony.

This source was Mikołaj Ławrynowicz (Laurinowicz), who was himself not only a Catholic but also a Bernadine monk, and whose panegyric in homage to Tomasz Zamoyski, published in Lwów in 1639, moreover had to pass through monastic censorship. Laurinowicz worked under the premise that two diametrically opposite natures would always exist within human society, much like fire and water in nature. And so, although there was no sect in the world that was not to be found represented in Poland, with even paganism propagating in the country, this nevertheless served the Lord God well: “As the variety of elements to be found under the broad heavens doth no harm to the heavens or earth, but indeed such discordant things give rise to a single beautiful harmony, like a lute of different strings, playing almost against one another, so too the variety of the sects to be found in the Crown hath never harmed and doth not harm the Crown, but indeed, with its

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The Declaration of the Warsaw Confederation (1573), considered the “great charter” of tolerance in Poland, contained articles that aimed to preserve civil order and religious peace between religious groups



Maciej Bonarski/MNW

contrast and contradiction it offers good occasion to the minds of fervent Catholics, much as iron be sharpened and tempered by stone put against it.”

This statement, extraordinary given who it is coming from, is striking in its modern approach to the issue: the view that the unhampered clashing of opinions could be beneficial to the intellectual level of Catholics themselves. More importantly, the treatment of heresy not as a dissonance, i.e. something deserving to be immediately stamped out, but rather as one of the necessary elements within the overall harmony of the world, stands in stark contrast to the tenor of the Catholic propaganda of the day. The same goes for the opinion that the presence of diverse sects “hath never harmed and doth not harm the Crown.”

..and many proponents

Laurinowicz voiced such views at a time when the victory of the Polish counterreformation was already a foregone conclusion. As early as in the 16th century, pride was taken in the wise policies pursued by the kings of the Commonwealth who were successful in preventing civil warfare on religious

grounds, King Zygmunt August in particular. According to Marcin Białobrzieski, abbot of the Cistercian cloister in Mogiła, had there been a different ruler, one avid for “bloodshed and desirous of predicaments and civil discord,” Poland would have seen religious warfare, “whose harm is clear to those who have known it.” This represented indirect praise of the notion of political compromise – something that would nowadays be referred to in Poland as the “Round Table” principle – yet at the same time it called into question the principle of political harmony, understood as entailing total confluence of views. It was just such a compromise, following the heirless death of King Zygmunt August, that led to the enactment of what was called the Warsaw Confederation (January 1573). This “great charter” of Polish tolerance granted the entire nobility the right to freely choose their faith and to fund the corresponding schools, places of worship, and publishing activities.

The declaration of the confederation was in August 2003 entered on the register of the “Memory of the World” program patronized by UNESCO; also listed at that time were the 21 points of the Solidarity agenda approved in August 1980. Nevertheless, one may

This sketch for the *plafond* (decorated ceiling) in the Great Hall of the Royal Castle in Warsaw – “The Separation of the Four Elements” by M. Bacciarelli in 1778, commissioned by King Stanisław August – shows how the “order of the world” was a fundamental issue for the king

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The Constitution of the Third of May (1791), the passage of which is depicted below, contained an article on apostasy (essentially a ban on conversion to any faith other than Catholicism), diverging from the highly enlightened standards of the remainder. Few know it was in fact included there at the initiative of Poland's highly enlightened ruler Stanisław August Poniatowski

doubt whether these documents are tokens of national concord and a complete harmony of views. The Warsaw Confederation declaration was opposed by nearly the entire episcopate and the vast majority of the subordinate clergy. The Solidarity agenda, too, continues to have its critics on both sides of the political fence (the same likewise holds true for the outcome of the "Round Table" talks of 1989).

Harmony and progress

Historians who consider the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's faulty political system to have been one of the reasons for its downfall often lament that 16th-century or even 17th-century Poland did not witness any political conflict that could have facilitated radical reform of the ossifying system – a system that elevated the principle of complete harmony in parliamentary (Sejm) debate to the status of political dogma, bear-

ing the stamp of the ominous *liberum veto*. Let us cite Władysław Konopczyński once again: "Despotism does not demand any virtues other than obedience, while Poland's liberty demanded state sensibilities, sacrifice, and vigilance from hundreds of thousands. These sufficed in one generation, yet were lacking in subsequent ones."

Moreover, not all present-day researchers harbor blind admiration for the Warsaw Confederation of 1573. On its four-hundredth anniversary, the outstanding historian of the 16th-century Stanisław Grzybowski wrote: "The Warsaw Confederacy proved to be an enduring and stable element [...] When juxtaposed against the course of events in other countries, the confederacy and the fate it met attested to the strength of the Polish political system at that time and the *esprit de corps* of the nobility, their resistance and political maturity. The confederation represented



K. Wojniakowski, Passage of the Constitution of the Third of May (1791)/MNW

a great product of the Polish Renaissance. Yet it emerged late in the era, into a world that was already Baroque in many regards, a world not of Renaissance harmony but of the violent conflict that shaped the Baroque view of reality. It was a stable element; yet the world moved on. And it was not order, not peace or harmony, but rather struggle and conflict that propelled it onward.”

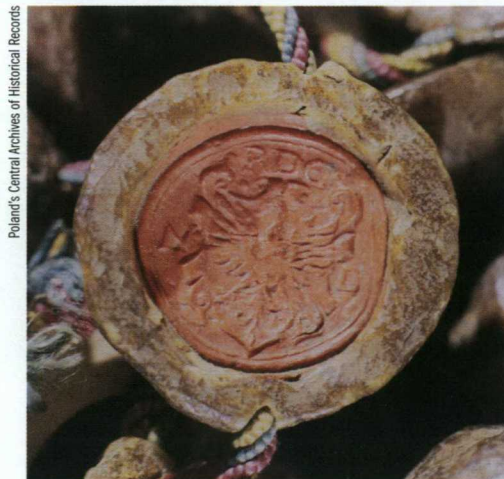
Jan Kochanowski, the leading Polish poet of the 16th century, tried to reinstate that harmony in his well-known poem *Harmony (Zgoda)*. This work expressed a twofold disappointment: the disappointment of a humanist forced to lament how pertinent and fruitful discussion of literature, art, and human attitudes was perishing in the face of intellectually fruitless dogmatic strife, and the disappointment of a citizen-noble, stemming from a conviction that hot-headed religious disputes could undermine the political unity of the noble estate, thereby threatening the interests of the entire Commonwealth.

Nevertheless, neither the poet’s fears nor his hopes would be fully realized. On the one hand, religious disputes did not do much damage to the coherence of the noble society, and its political divisions did not coincide with religious ones. Yet on the other hand, by calling upon the dispute-mongers to look to the Council of Trent, the author of *Harmony* was pointing them in the wrong direction – the work of the Council, completed one year before Kochanowski’s work emerged, had put an end to all hope of reconciliation between the opposing sides in the reformation of Christian faiths.

Kochanowski looked with similar disgust upon his countrymen steeped in Sejm squabbles or religious disputes, which all undermined what was the poet’s highest ideal: “*Zgoda*.” This, the title of his aforementioned work in Polish, alongside its meaning of “harmony” likewise carries the senses “agreement” and “consent.” Yet the question “Consent to what?” seems to be much less essential for Kochanowski than harmony and unanimity *per se*.

One religion, one state and peace

The poet and political writer Łukasz Opałiński, when defending the Commonwealth in 1648 against allegations of tolerating heresy, cited the triumphs of Polish Catholicism. The



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The stamp of Mikołaj Radziwiłł, chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, on the Declaration of the Warsaw Confederation

use of gentle measures – rather than imprisonment, the sword and the stake – had successfully converted most dissidents. Thus there was hope that the remaining non-Catholic population would “come to its senses and there will be one faith, one baptism, one indivisible Church, as long as Poland endures in fraternal concord and peace.”

Few know that the article of the Constitution of the Third of May concerning apostasy (conversion to a different faith), an article that diverges from the remainder, was included there at the initiative of a highly enlightened ruler and ultra-European. King Stanisław August Poniatowski was afraid that the Ruthenian peasants who inhabited the eastern lands of the Commonwealth would begin to convert to Orthodoxy *en masse*, which would hamper or even preclude their polonization. The king’s dream was for the Commonwealth, a quarter century after the Constitution was enacted, to be inhabited exclusively by Polish-speaking Catholics. Such *sui generis* “harmony” was supposed to be accomplished via top-down polonization in the schools, judiciary, and administration, where leading Enlightenment-era figures wanted to introduce Polish as the sole obligatory and official language.

The false face of harmony

Victor Hugo once wrote that “this specter, the past, is given to falsifying its own passport.” This superbly reflects a certain tenet urging the need for “moral-political unity of the nation” – a catch-phrase used by Polish propaganda in the Gierk era just as eagerly as it is now employed by the extreme right,

Consensus in Polish political history

The "Round Table" talks between representatives of the Communist authorities and the opposition, which were watched by the world in 1989 and launched a political transformation in Poland, does have their critics - just as the Declaration of the Warsaw Confederation did 400 years before



Jerzy Kosiński/Fotomora

both church and secular. Harmony of this sort seems to have found its fullest expression in the pseudo-elections of Communist-era Poland, when more than 90% of the population expressed its support for the agenda of the party and government. The example was of course set by the Soviet Union, where a vast majority of voters backed the bloc of Bolsheviks and independents, yet several million of them had to subsequently be sent to gulags and shot as enemies of the people.

I will not conceal the fact that harmony seems to me to be a somewhat dubious ideal. Especially when it is taken to entail the end of all disputes, religious or political. This goal is unattainable without reintroducing censorship and the category of "political prisoners" (the latter was abolished by during Piłsudski's era of *Sanacja* in Poland, and was not, for obvious reasons, reinstated by the People's Republic of Poland). All attempts at too far-reaching a compromise will likewise be hampered by the memory of past agreements that were breeched.

Here we should not repeat the mistakes made by Kochanowski centuries ago: calling for concord and total harmony in working on behalf of the Polish state, without stopping to consider the price that must sometimes be paid for such harmony. Or to consider the frequently purely superficial nature of harmony.

A classic example here is to be found in the pastoral journals and memoirs written in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries, describing the relations between the Ukrainian villagers and Polish manor courts in simply idyllic terms. Most such authors shared the delusions held by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, who oblivious to recent events writes in her *Conflagration (Pożódze)*: "These people lived well and amicably with the Polish landowners, eagerly recognizing the superiority of their masters and respecting it." Faith was harbored "in the existence of harmony in the Eastern borderland society" (Miroslaw Ustrzycki), which even the most perfidious, mass-scale propaganda could not undermine. So much greater was the shock when mass pogroms began: the robbing and plundering of manor homes, and the murder of their owners and their entire families. Harmony transformed into horror from one day to the next, and the victims of this nightmare could but echo the words of the playwright Wyspiański: "All was but a mask of pretense, painted picture false in substance" ("*wszystko była podła maska, malowany fasz z obrazka*"). ■

Further reading:

- Bérenger J. (1999). *Tolerance ou paix de religion en Europe centrale (1415-1792)*. Paris: Honoré Champion.
 Lecler J. (1954). *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme*. Vol. I. Paris: Aubier. Editions Mouton.
 Tazbir J. (1973). *A State without Stakes. Polish religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. Warsaw: The Kościuszko Foundation.