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The Sejm in the English Periodical Press (Newsbooks), 1641–1660

Sejm w angielskiej prasie periodycznej (1641–1660)

The article discusses how the English periodical press (newsbooks) published between 1641 and 1660, i.e. from the birth of that medium to the Stuart Restoration, presented the Sejm and the parliamentary system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Primary sources show that English newspapers regularly printed reports on the Sejm. This allowed the English-reading public to follow events and form a general picture of Polish-Lithuanian parliamentarism. However, that picture was very incomplete – the reports focused exclusively on the Sejm in session and did not deal with other elements of the parliamentary system. Similarly, information on the composition of the Sejm and the legislative process was scarce and often vague. At the same time, some of the reports provided readers with very detailed information on specific events or topics, e.g. the end of the deliberations of the first Sejm in 1652. What is also very interesting is that the Sejm was present in the domestic political discourse in England, mostly in connection with the relations between the King and his subjects or the legal status of Parliament.

Keywords: parliamentary system, 17th century, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, England, periodical press, newsbooks

W tekście omówiono sposób, w jaki angielska prasa periodyczna (newsbooki) wydawana w latach 1641–1660, tj. od narodzin tego medium do restauracji Stuartów, przedstawiała sejm i system parlamentarny Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów. Ze źródeł wynika jasno, że angielskie gazety regularnie drukowały relacje z obrad sejmowych. Dzięki temu angielscy czytelnicy mogli śledzić związane z obradami wydarzenia i próbować wyrobić sobie ogólny obraz polsko-litewskiego parlamentaryzmu. Był on jednak bardzo niepełny – sprawozdania koncentrowały się wyłącznie na obradach sejmu i nie dotyczyły innych elementów systemu parlamentarnego. Podobnie informacje na temat składu sejmu i procesu legislacyjnego były skąpe i często niejasne. Jednocześnie niektóre raporty dostarczały czytelnikom bardzo szczegółowych informacji na temat konkretnych wydarzeń lub tematów, np. zakończenia pierwszego sejmu w 1652 r. itp. Bardzo interesujące jest również to, że sejm był obecny w wewnętrznym angielskim dyskursie politycznym, głównie w związku z relacjami między królem a jego poddanymi lub statusem prawnym parlamentu.

Słowa kluczowe: system parlamentarny, XVII w., Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, Anglia, prasa periodyczna, newsbooki

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I. Introduction

The seventeenth century was rich in events of significance for European parliamentarism. To name just two, in 1640 a dispute with his subjects forced Charles I Stuart to convene the first English parliament in over a decade. As a result, Parliament soon became not only a party to an internal political conflict, but also the main decision-making centre in the country. Not long afterwards, the events of March 1652, during the deliberations of the Sejm in Warsaw, seriously changed the approach to the parliamentary procedure and underpinned the future use of the *liberum veto* as a destabilising element in the parliamentary system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Those events naturally attracted interest in other countries, especially as foreign examples could be invoked in current political discourse and were therefore often mentioned in the press – a relatively new, but already well-developed, medium in Western Europe. In Poland-Lithuania, the first periodical newspaper did not appear until 1661, so Polish readers had had no opportunity to follow events in England in the 1640s and 1650s in the news press. However, the reverse was possible. Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse how the periodical press published in England – i.e. newsbooks, the emergence of which was largely linked to the proceedings of the Long Parliament – presented Polish-Lithuanian parliamentarism and how that portrayal could function in the English public sphere of the period. In other words, this article attempts to answer the questions as to what the readers of newsbooks might have learned about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's Parliament and the parliamentary system, what topics and events were covered by the reports published in newsbooks, what general image of the Sejm emerged from those reports, and whether the Sejm was ever placed by newspaper editors in the context of the domestic situation in England.¹ The methodology employed in this study is a media content analysis, with an emphasis on the qualitative approach because, particularly in the case of the early modern press, a “quantitative content analysis has not been able to capture the context within which a media text becomes meaningful”.² However, variables typically used in a contemporary media content analysis – such as positioning, prominence of mention, or size and length – have been relied on to a very limited extent, due to the specificity of early modern newspaper publications.³ At the same time, some elements related to the editorial practices of newsbook editors have also been identified and analysed.

¹ Since one of the main objectives of historians should be to avoid both the explanation and confirmation bias, it would be risky at this point to formulate a specific hypothesis about the level of awareness of the Polish-Lithuanian parliamentary system among English readers in a manner typical of the social sciences. It is more appropriate to adopt an approach based on the formulation of key research questions pertaining to the object of analysis when working with this type of primary source material.

² J. Macnamara, ‘Media Content Analysis: Its Uses, Benefits and Best Practice Methodology’, *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2005), p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

II. English periodical press, 1641–1660

When Charles I Stuart first convened the Short Parliament (April 1640) and then summoned the Long Parliament (November 1640), a vital element that had been missing for more than a decade re-entered English political life. Moreover, as the conflict between the King and some of his subjects intensified, Parliament became an alternative, and subsequently the main, centre of power in the state. Although its role was drastically reduced over time, it continued to function formally during the Protectorate, and eventually it played an important role in the Stuart Restoration.

The events surrounding the convening of the Long Parliament, and in particular the disputes among representatives of different political factions in the House of Commons, naturally attracted interest in the public sphere that had been forming in England for some time.⁴ This, first and foremost, refers to participants in the domestic political discourse, for whom access to information about current events was crucial in order to be able to participate in that discourse. The answer to the said need for information was first to be found in manuscript newsletters, then in printed pamphlets, and finally in newsbooks, the first of which – ‘Heads of Several Proceedings’, containing only reports of the proceedings of the Long Parliament – appeared in London on 29 November 1641.⁵

What followed was a veritable flood of periodicals whose main purpose was to report on political events taking place in the country. This was a change from the 1620s and 1630s when, for a variety of reasons, the serial newspapers (corantos) had focused almost exclusively on foreign news.⁶ As Joad Raymond has pointed out, newsbooks made up a significant part of the print market, accounting for up to a third of the total number of titles published in certain periods (e.g. 1644–1645 and 1651–1654).⁷ Providing their readers with news on a regular weekly basis, they were a major printed source of up-to-date information. Published in London, they were also read outside the capital. Their exact circulation is not known, but it is likely that in the 1640s the most popular titles were produced in runs of over a thousand copies. They were also among the cheapest printed materials on the market. Additionally, as the literacy rate in England was relatively high⁸ and the language used by the editors was usually

⁴ P. Lake, S. Pincus, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2006), pp. 270–292.

⁵ J. Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks 1641–1649* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), pp. 20–21.

⁶ For more on corantos, see: J.E.E. Boys, *London’s News Press and the Thirty Years War* (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2011); M. Frearson, ‘London Corantos in the 1620s’, *Studies in Newspaper and Periodical History*, vol. 1, no. 1–2 (1993), pp. 3–17.

⁷ J. Raymond, ‘News’, in J. Raymond (ed.), *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*, vol. 1: *The Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011), p. 386.

⁸ See J. Raymond, ‘International News and the Seventeenth-Century English Newspaper’, in R. Harms et al. (eds), *Not Dead Things. The Dissemination of Popular Print in England and Wales, Italy, and the Low Countries, 1500–1820* (Brill, Leiden–Boston–New York, 2013), p. 234.

simple vernacular English, newsbooks were one of the most readily available and accessible forms of prints of the time that were read and engaged with by the reading public. They can therefore be seen as one of the key elements in the development of the opinions and perceptions of their readers, particularly on the subject of which the readers had no other means of verification.⁹

A newsbook was usually 8 pages long, although more established titles would have 12 or 16 pages. It was printed the day before it went on sale, dated on the front page, and it covered the news of the previous week. The authors and sources were usually anonymous, but sometimes there would be an editorial written by the person in charge of the newspaper. The news items were usually presented in chronological order, as they had been received. While some titles preferred to focus on information and rarely used a polemical tone, others built up their readership by engaging in fierce polemics. This was clearly linked to the fact that newsbooks very quickly became an instrument of propaganda as well.

Newsbooks were used much more widely and effectively by the King's opponents. The parliamentarian 'Mercurius Britannicus', founded in response to the success of the prominent royalist title 'Mercurius Aulicus', was one of the most successful newsbooks of the early 1640s. A number of titles supported the agenda of different political groups, e.g. 'The Moderate' was considered to be the journal of the Levellers, while the 'Moderate Intelligencer', "though apparently a closet royalist through much of the 1648, adopted an intensely pro-Cromwell line" in the latter period.¹⁰ As early as 1643, the authorities, including Parliament, attempted to control the newspaper market, but by 1655 this would only result in temporary changes in the number and size of editorial operations. However, new regulations introduced by Oliver Cromwell in October of that year led to a purge – for most of the late 1650s, there were only two main titles: 'Mercurius Politicus' and 'Public Intelligencer'. They were both published by Marchmont Needham and presented the government-accepted narrative. It was not until the spring of 1659 that a greater variety of newsbooks began to appear.

Originally, newsbooks were mainly concerned with domestic events, publishing continental news only when it related to internal politics, e.g. reporting on the Stuart court in exile, foreign reactions to events in England, etc. Over time, however, foreign news became more common and some titles began to carry it regularly in response to reader demand. Covering a fairly wide range of countries and subjects, the quality of the foreign news service depended on a number of factors, including access to a network of correspondents, the ability of editors to deal with texts in other languages, and even the efficiency of the postal networks.¹¹

⁹ T.C. Eskelson, 'States, Institutions, and Literacy Rates in Early-Modern Western Europe', *Journal of Education and Learning*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2021), pp. 117–119.

¹⁰ J. Raymond, *The Invention...*, p. 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–148.

III. Newsbooks and the place of the Sejm in the political system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

If the interest in the working of the Long Parliament was great enough to act as a catalyst for the emergence of a whole new market for periodicals, it can be assumed that information about parliaments in other countries, such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, also attracted considerable attention from newsbook readers, especially those who were also interested in foreign events.¹²

A comprehensive analysis of newsbook reports on Polish-Lithuanian parliamentarianism leaves no doubt that the Sejm was presented as a key element of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's political system – as the only institution entitled to take decisions on vital issues concerning the functioning of the state. Rarely, however, was the Sejm described in such a way as to emphasise the fact that after 1569 it was a joint institution of Poland and Lithuania. The Sejm most often appeared in reports as a “General Convention or Parliament”, “Dyet”, “Diet for the Kingdom of Poland”, or “Polish Dyet”.¹³ As “Diet of the States of Poland and Lithuania”, it was described only once – in connection with the Diet of Brześć (Brest) in 1653, and this was probably determined by the very place of its deliberations.¹⁴ On the same occasion, another term appeared – “Polish Parliament in Littow [Lithuania]”, which was essentially self-contradictory.¹⁵

There was also a very limited amount of information that would allow the reader to reconstruct the more detailed features of the Polish-Lithuanian parliamentary system. While it was clear that the Sejm was normally convened by the ruler, it was not specified whether the king had complete freedom in this respect, or whether he was bound by some rules as to the frequency of convening sessions.

Similarly, the type of the Sejm held – i.e. whether it was an ordinary (Polish: *zwyyczajny*) or extraordinary (Polish: *nadzwyczajny*) one – was not usually indicated in the reports.¹⁶ Furthermore, the convocation (Polish: *konwokacyjny*) and election (Polish: *elekcyjny*) Sejms were also referred to as either general assemblies, conventions,¹⁷

¹² The Sejm was also discussed in corantos in 1620s and 1630s, cf. A. Kalinowska, “‘Wee have Tidings out of Polonia’: English Corantos, News Networks, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth”, in S.F. Davis, P. Fletcher (eds), *News in Early Modern Europe: Currents and Connections* (Brill, Leiden–Boston, 2014), pp. 48–49.

¹³ ‘Military Actions of Europe’, no. 2, 27 Oct. – 2 Nov. 1646, p. 12.

¹⁴ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 144, 10–17 Mar. 1653, p. 2303.

¹⁵ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 153, 12–19 May 1653, p. 2447.

¹⁶ E. Opaliński, ‘Sejm of the Commonwealth of Two Nations 1572–1668’, *Przegląd Sejmowy*, no. 6(167) (2021), p. 89 ff.; P. Paradowski, *W obliczu „Nagłych potrzeb” Rzeczypospolitej. Sejmy ekstrakordynaryjne za panowania Władysława IV Wazy* (Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń, 2005), pp. 19–33.

¹⁷ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 179, 17–24 Aug. 1648, [1500]; no. 180, 24–31 Aug. 1648, [1506]; no. 183, 14–21 Sep. 1648, 1548; no. 199, 4–11 Jan. 1649, [1831]. On the status of those Sejms, see: E. Opaliński, *Sejm srebrnego wieku 1587–1652. Między głosowaniem większościowym a liberum veto* (Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa, 2001), p. 14.

or Sejms, or simply in a more descriptive way. For example, when ‘Moderate Intelligencer’ reported on the interregnum following the death of Władysław IV, it mentioned that the Primate (Polish: *prymas*) had asked all the nobility and gentry only to “meet together”, but it also mentioned that all “provincial (they tearm small) Assemblies” (apparently the *sejmiki*) should meet before the end of June, clearly referring to preparations for *konwokacja*.¹⁸ But the 1648 election was referred to as “Diet” and “Estates” in some other titles.¹⁹ Surprisingly, this approach did not apply to the coronation (Polish: *koronacyjny*) Sejm to the same extent. That one was clearly identified as part of the parliamentary system.²⁰

In fact, only once, in March 1652, the most important information about the functioning of the Sejm as an institution was presented. The report stated that only representatives of the *szlachta* (nobility) were elected to Parliament and that only that group had the right to send its representatives to the Sejm. This information was also used as a pretext for a long commentary on the position of the other social groups (called the “commonalty”), who had no political rights and were to be treated as “absolute slaves” by the nobility.²¹ The fact that this particular Parliament ended the way it did, without any decisions being confirmed, was described as “so great a change, that it is beyond what wee could imagine”.²² However, it is not until later in the report that we learn that the main reason for this change was that the protest of a single member of the Chamber of Deputies was recognised as valid to stop the proceedings; consequently, the principle of unanimity itself was described as “a strange custom, that it is a wonder that ever anything is agreed on, and which is the cause of dissolving this present Parliament, viz. any person of Parliament hath a liberty to put in a Protest either against part or all concluded on, which is so far nullified hereby, as if it had never bin mentioned, and canot pass as a Law, until that particular person do ascent thereto”.²³ The dissolution of the Sejm in such circumstances was presented as an event with very serious consequences: because of it, the Muscovite ambassador could not present his message, the talks with the Cossack commissioners could not be concluded and, above all, the King did not receive the funds necessary for the war.

Similarly, information that would allow to reconstruct the composition of the Sejm was very rare in newsbooks. Such information was also usually very imprecise – one report printed in ‘Public Intelligencer’ mentioned, for example, that the

¹⁸ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 175, 20–27 Jul. 1648, [1462].

¹⁹ ‘The Moderate’, no. 19, 14–21 Nov. 1648, p. 156; ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 192, 16–23 Nov. 1648, [1743]; no. 198, 28 Dec. 1648 – 4 Jan. 1649, [1815]; ‘Mercurius Pragmaticus’, no. 35, 21–28 Nov. 1648, [s.p.].

²⁰ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 199, 4–11 Jan. 1649, [1831] – *sejm koronacyjny* was described there as “Dyett or Asamblly of States”.

²¹ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 98, 15–22 Apr. 1652, pp. 1544–1545.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1544.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1545.

Sejm was composed of several undefined “Orders”,²⁴ while ‘Moderate Intelligencer’ reported that it comprised “Palatines and other Lords”,²⁵ and ‘Briefe Relation’ mentioned senators arriving “in order to the Diet there, presently to be held”.²⁶ But the description of the conference on the evacuation of Habsburg troops from Little Poland (Małopolska) with the Imperial ambassador, Franz von Lisola, held during the 1659 Sejm, indicated its participants: two bishops, two voivodes, two castellans and the “fifteen of the third order”, i.e. evidently members of the Chamber of Deputies. That means that at least some readers could possibly learn that the Sejm was a bi-cameral body. It is interesting to note that in the reports from Gdańsk, there were repeated references to the journey to and from the Sejm, as well as information from the session sent by representatives of that city. However, there was no information about their status.²⁷ This might have been confusing, at least to some readers, as it would have contradicted the rule that only those of noble birth were eligible to participate in the parliamentary system.

As we have already seen from the reports on the end of the deliberations of the first Sejm in 1652, the readers of the newsbooks were able to get a fairly accurate idea of the scope of the Parliament’s activities, i.e. of the issues on which it had the power to decide. Indeed, it must have been clear to them that it was the key body that took the most important decisions concerning the functioning of the state: from taxation, war, political affairs, religious affairs to diplomacy. In the latter half of the 1640s, for example, the question of a possible war with the Turks and the opposition of the Sejm to the King’s plans (more about which below) featured prominently in the newspaper accounts. Parliament also played a key role in the situation of a likely military threat from neighbours – in the spring of 1648, it was reported that Władysław IV had decided to summon the Sejm in October because of Muscovy’s preparations for war.²⁸ In 1650, it was reported that the Chamber of Deputies was ready to approve the continuation of military actions against the Cossacks and the raising of additional troops, but only under certain conditions – only if the talks on the ratification of the agreement of Zbaraż were unsuccessful.²⁹ However, the very next issue reported the decision to raise a large army – 120,000 men, which with the existing forces would make a total of 200,000 men – and the consequent introduction of new taxes to pay for it, including a Jewish and Scottish poll tax.³⁰ In 1652 and 1653, the question of new taxes to pay for the war was raised again.³¹ But

²⁴ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 181, 13–20 Jun. 1659, p. 506.

²⁵ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 119, 17–24 Jun. 1647, p. 1135.

²⁶ ‘Briefe Relation’, no. 16, 24 Dec. 1649 – 1 Jan. 1650, p. 196.

²⁷ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 174, 16–23 May 1659, p. 387.

²⁸ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 170, 15–22 Jun. 1648, p. 1399.

²⁹ ‘Perfect Diurnall’, no. 60, 3–10 Feb. 1651, p. 798.

³⁰ ‘Perfect Diurnall’, no. 62, 10–17 Feb. 1651, p. 803; no. 58, 13–20 Jan. 1651, p. 766.

³¹ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 118, 2–9 Sep. 1652, p. 1855; no. 152, 5–12 May 1652, p. 2417; no. 153, 12–19 May 1653, p. 2447.

the fact that the Deputies at the Sejm of 1659 declared their will to end the war with Sweden as soon as possible was interpreted as a sign that a peace treaty was likely to be concluded soon.³²

In the second half of the 1650s, there were also reports that the Sejm would consider the question of a future succession. The reports were not precise, but the context suggested that the Polish throne was being secured for the Habsburgs or Romanovs in return for support against Sweden.³³ Another issue that emerged in the reports at that time was related to religious matters, also in the context of the war. According to the newsbooks, one of Jan Kazimierz's promises to the Elector during the talks aimed at securing Brandenburg's support against Charles X Gustav was to raise, in the Sejm, the issue of restoring the privileges that Protestants had enjoyed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the past.³⁴

Finally, diplomacy occupied a prominent place in the reports on the Sejm. They made it clear that the time of the Sejm session was a period when both foreign diplomats had the opportunity to present their demands, and receive answers, as well as Polish diplomats tried to report on their activities, as in 1653, when it was mentioned that the commissioners negotiating in Lübeck made a hasty trip to the Sejm in Brześć.³⁵ Among the diplomats present at individual sessions of the Sejm, or whose plans to go to the Polish Parliament were reported, were representatives of Muscovy, France, the Emperor, Brandenburg, and Venice.³⁶ Descriptions of their activities, however, were rather general and brief – the only exception being the royal election, when they featured prominently in the reports. The Cossack commissioners, however, had a special place in that narrative. The reports generally described them in a similar way to diplomats of sovereign states,³⁷ although at the same time it was made clear that their activities were almost always linked to the internal situation of the Polish-Lithuanian state.

In their case, the Sejm seemed to be the main space for political contacts with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but some reports indicated that the Cossacks preferred their partner to be the ruler rather than the parliament. This seems to be the case if we look at a report from the period of the Coronation Sejm of 1649, according to which the Sejm did not agree that only Jan Kazimierz (as the Cossacks expected) should be a party to a possible agreement. The author of the report interpreted the whole situation as very unfavourable to the nobility (*szlachta*), who, in his opinion,

³² ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 177, 16–23 May 1659, p. 434.

³³ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 429, 12–19 Jun. 1658, p. 754; ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 132, 28 Jun. – 5 Jul. 1658, p. 641.

³⁴ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 430, 19–26 Aug. 1658, p. 772; ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 139, 16–23 Aug. 1658, pp. 760–761.

³⁵ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 144, 10–17 Mar. 1653, p. 2303.

³⁶ Cf. for example: ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 98, 14–21 Jan. 1647, pp. 858–859; ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 168, 14–21 Mar. 1659, p. 290; no. 170, 15–22 Aug. 1659, p. 332; no. 177, 16–23 May 1659, p. 443.

³⁷ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 180, 24–31 Aug. 1648, [s.p.]; ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 185, 11–18 Jul. 1659, p. 584.

was facing a considerable dilemma. If the Sejm had consented to an agreement made only by the King, the ruler might have become too powerful with the support of the Cossacks; if, on the other hand, the Sejm had protested against such an agreement, the continuation of military action was certain.³⁸

Ten years later, however, the involvement of the Sejm was no longer in doubt, as was confirmed by the account, published in 'Public Intelligencer', of the solemn swearing-in of the Hadziacz settlement, which took place on 22 May 1659³⁹ and was closely followed in the newsbooks. The report, entitled 'The Reunion of the Cossacks with the Polish Crown', described in great detail the ceremony held in the Senate Hall (*Sala Senatorska*), including a speech by Chancellor (Polish: *kanclerz*) Prażmowski, followed by the solemn swearing-in of Jan Kazimierz, Primate Wacław Leszczyński, representatives of the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, and the army, as well as Cossack envoys. The report was so detailed that it was possible to learn that the Cossacks had been presented with a Bible and a cross by the Bishop of Kiev, Tomasz Ujejski, and that they had taken their oath on their knees on the floor. The text of the oath they had taken was also included in the report.⁴⁰

Newsbook readers could also learn that the Sejm played an important role in deciding whether to send envoys abroad or to appoint commissioners for talks with the Cossacks,⁴¹ and in determining their instructions, especially when their mission was particularly important, as was the case with the peace talks with Sweden that began in 1659. The report informing about the appointment of commissioners for talks with the Swedes not only gave their names (Lubomirski, Wyżga, and Pac), but also emphasised that "such by the general consent of the Dyet, that what they concluded with the Swedes should be accepted of".⁴² Another report published in the same issue added that the Sejm had decided that the negotiations could not end with the conclusion of a separatist peace by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as the treaty should also include Denmark, the Empire, and Brandenburg.⁴³

IV. The Polish-Lithuanian Parliament as a space of conflict

The picture of the Polish-Lithuanian Parliament that emerges from English press reports is also characterised by the fact that it was very often portrayed as the centre

³⁸ "Thus whatever they may resolve, they as yet hold the Woolf by the ears", 'Moderate Intelligencer', no. 208, 8–15 Mar. 1649, [s.p.].

³⁹ S. Ochmann-Staniszweska, Z. Staniszweski, *Sejm Rzeczypospolitej za panowania Jana Kazimierza Wazy. Prawo – doktryna – praktyka*, vol. 1 (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław, 2000), p. 287.

⁴⁰ 'Public Intelligencer', no. 184, 4–11 Jun. 1659, pp. 568–569.

⁴¹ 'Moderate Intelligencer', no. 98, 14–21 Jan. 1647, pp. 858–859; 'Perfect Diurnall', no. 60, 27 Jan. – 3 Feb. 1651, p. 798.

⁴² 'Mercurius Politicus', no. 574, 30 Jun. – 7 Jul. 1659, p. 563.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

of a dispute, not to say a sharp conflict, between different groups, and only marginally as a space in which agreement could be reached. Reports such as the one published in the ‘Briefe Relation’ on the Sejm of 1649/1650, which stated that “The Diet at Warsaw in Poland continues pretty quietly hitherto”,⁴⁴ are rarely found in newsbooks.

The above is most evident in the way in which tensions between the King and his subjects were reported. Indeed, in at least several instances, the Sejm’s deliberations became an occasion for an open rebellion against the sovereign, if the content of some of the reports is to be believed. In January 1647, ‘Kingdoms Weekly Intelligencer’ reported that, according to letters received from Gdańsk, the Sejm sitting in Warsaw the previous year “[...] have put their King under restraint for raising Forces without their consent, that they had told him he had forfeited his Crown, and thereupon his Subject are discharged of their allegiance. It was also certified that they had commended the Kings Seale to be no longer used, and had raised a guard of twelve hundred men to attend his person [...]. It is most certain that the Parliament of Poland have declared themselves unwilling and adverse to the Kings raising the forces”.⁴⁵

At the same time, another title, ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, reported that, during his meeting with the members of the lower chamber (here referred to as the “Crown Deputies”) at the opening of the session, Władysław IV had been very firm in his position on the war with Turkey, but that the senators had managed to soften his stance and, as a result, an agreement had been reached whereby the troops recruited on the King’s orders would soon be disbanded. The monarch was allowed to keep the guard of 1,200 soldiers, but the nobility (*szlachta*) threatened to take action and remove the rest of the military force from the Polish territory.⁴⁶ By contrast, even before the deliberations began, in the autumn of 1646, another title specialising in foreign news, ‘Military Actions of Europe’, stated that the reason for the reluctance to support the sovereign’s plan was the assumption that, with a sufficiently strong army, he would want to restrict the liberties of his subjects “as Princes use to do”.⁴⁷ It is therefore clear from the narrative that the lack of the Sejm’s consent to war with Turkey was crucial to the demise of the royal plans, which were viewed with suspicion by the nobility, and was an important point in the conflict that had been smouldering on for some time between Władysław and his subjects.

In the summer of 1652, a series of reports published in various titles described the course of another crisis.⁴⁸ According to ‘Mercurius Politicus’, Jan Kazimierz was accused of provoking the Tartars to attack in order to make it easier for him to subjugate his subjects. The report went so far as to suggest that the King had planned to use

⁴⁴ ‘Briefe Relation’, no. 20, 22–29 Jan. 1650, p. 260.

⁴⁵ ‘The Kingdoms Weekly Intelligencer’, no. 184, 19–26 Jan. 1647, p. 403.

⁴⁶ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 98, 14–21 Jan. 1647, pp. 858–859.

⁴⁷ ‘Military Actions of Europe’, no. 2, 27 Oct. – 2 Nov. 1646, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Interestingly, one of the newsbooks contains a story about rumours of possible military support for Jan Kazimierz from Christina of Sweden against his subjects, ‘Faithfull Scout’, no. 76, 25 Jun. – 2 Jul. 1652, p. 59.

the difficult military situation as a pretext to convene an unspecified assembly to push through his political agenda.⁴⁹ However, when his plans (the word “plot” was used in the report) were discovered and met with strong opposition, the King was forced to convene the Sejm in the usual manner and place, i.e. at the Warsaw Castle. As the author of the report had predicted, the whole situation was to be one of the main topics of debates, and the proceedings promised to be very stormy.⁵⁰ However, it was also speculated that, in order to demonstrate their displeasure with the King’s actions, some 20 “nobles dissatisfied with the King” would decide not to appear in Warsaw.⁵¹ But the Sejm could also sometimes be presented as a potential space for conflict resolution. Indeed, one report from the same period, i.e. the spring/summer of 1652, indicated that the frustration resulting from the failure of the March deliberations was responsible for the deepening political differences and tensions in the country and the increasingly pronounced anti-royal sentiments of the *szlachta*.⁵²

However, the parliamentary sessions were also presented as a space of dispute among different groups or factions, although this was usually presented in a rather vague way, when compared to some other issues. In some situations, the divisions were presented as being of a religious nature. During the Sejm of 1658, it was reported that Catholics opposed plans to change the policy towards Protestants.⁵³ Similarly, the following year it was rumoured that the Sejm would break up without taking any decisions because of a dispute between the clergy and the laity, but it was hoped that Jan Kazimierz would still be able to broker an agreement between the warring parties.⁵⁴ The report run by ‘Mercurius Politicus’ describing the conclusion of the deliberations stated that the Catholic clergy – described here as “mighty quarrelsome” – had been unable to get their demands accepted and had been excluded from the peace talks with Sweden in order to increase the chances of a speedy settlement.⁵⁵

Disputes between members of the lower chamber were often presented not only in a very brief form, but also often in a completely erroneous manner. During the first Sejm in 1652, ‘Mercurius Politicus’ reported that it was marked by tensions caused by a “Bokorbi of Lithuania” – a Lithuanian treasurer (Polish: *podskarbi*) having appeared in Warsaw. He was supposedly “condemned by the High Court of Justice for siding

⁴⁹ In June of 1652 some of the Senators from Lithuania suggested calling either – as it is not clear – a “konwokacja litewska”, i.e. an assembly of Lithuanian Deputies and Senators, or another assembly attended by representatives of all provinces. The idea was dismissed by the King. See A. Rachuba, *Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie w systemie parlamentarnym Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1569–1793* (Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa, 2002), p. 268.

⁵⁰ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 113, 29 Jul. – 5 Aug. 1652, p. 1780.

⁵¹ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 117, 26 Aug. – 2 Sep. 1652, p. 1836.

⁵² ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 102, 13–20 May 1652, p. 1598. On the *szlachta*’s attitude towards a monarch: E. Opaliński, *Kultura polityczna szlachty polskiej w latach 1587–1652. System parlamentarny a społeczeństwo obywatelskie* (Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa, 1995), pp. 54–58.

⁵³ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 142, 6–13 Sep. 1658, p. 808.

⁵⁴ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 566, 5–12 May 1659, p. 426.

⁵⁵ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 574, 30 Jun. – 7 Jul. 1659, p. 563.

with the Vice Chancellor [Hieronim Radziejowski]”.⁵⁶ According to that account, the treasurer – clearly Court Treasurer Bogusław Jerzy Słuszką – attended the session, but was ‘cast out’ by the Deputies. His appearance was an obvious provocation and led to such a turbulent debate that the day ended in chaos,⁵⁷ but this was not mentioned in the report. It was also wrong about other details, including the fact that Słuszką was an opponent of Radziejowski, who also happened to be his brother-in-law, and not one of his political allies.⁵⁸ In 1658, by contrast, the debates were said to have been dominated by accusations put forward by Deputies from Greater Poland (Wielkopolska) against their colleagues from Lesser Poland, for favouring the Swedes, and by the case of the ensign of Czernichów (Polish: *chorąży czernichowski*), Gabriel Hulewicz, who had also been accused of treason.⁵⁹

V. Preparations for the Sejm and the parliamentary procedure

The way in which preparations for a session of the Sejm, and the parliamentary procedure in general, were presented was often vague as well. Newsbook readers had no way of finding out how Deputies were elected. Pre-Sejm *sejmiki* (Polish: *sejmiki przedsejmowe*) appeared only once in the reports,⁶⁰ and announcements that the Sejm was about to convene were usually limited to very general mentions of preparations for the sessions (“Great preparations are made for the Polonian States that are to meet there at the next Dyete”)⁶¹ or the date on which the Sejm would open.⁶² It is noteworthy that the latter was usually the subject of regular and accurate reporting. Also, the information on the end of the deliberations was often followed by announcements about the plans for the convocation of the next Sejm. For example, the report on the end of the deliberations of the Coronation Sejm in 1649 stated that the Senators had asked the King to agree to another Sejm to be summoned as early as June or July – i.e. fewer than six months after the dissolution of the previous one – in order to resolve the issues that could not be resolved during the deliberations in Kraków.⁶³ Similarly,

⁵⁶ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 96, 1–8 Apr. 1652, p. 1512.

⁵⁷ W. Czapliński, *Dwa sejmy w 1652 roku. Studium z dziejów rozkładu Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej* (Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1955), pp. 96–97.

⁵⁸ A. Rachuba, ‘Słuszką, Bogusław Jerzy’, in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 39 (IH PAN, Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Warszawa–Kraków, 2000), p. 138.

⁵⁹ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 142, 6–13 Sep. 1658, p. 808; no. 143, 13–20 Sept. 1658, p. 819.

⁶⁰ It was before the convocation Sejm of 1648, ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 175, 20–27 Jul. 1648, [1462].

⁶¹ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 166, 28 Feb. – 7 Mar. 1659, p. 258.

⁶² See, e.g.: ‘The Moderate’, no. 1, 11–18 Jul. 1648, p. 3; ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 30, 26 Dec 1650 – 2 Jan. 1651, p. 489; ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 98, 14–21 Jan. 1647, p. 859; ‘Military Actions of Europe’, no. 2, 27 Oct. – 2 Nov. 1646, p. 112.

⁶³ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 211, 29 Mar. – 5 Apr. 1649, [s.p.]. One more Sejm was indeed summoned that year, but it opened only in November. See J.S. Dąbrowski, ‘Chronologia sejmów z lat 1648–1662’,

a report from April 1645 stated that the Sejm had ended its deliberations without passing any resolutions, so the next one had already been scheduled for the end of September (“Michaelmas next”).⁶⁴ Sometimes, however, this type of information was not very reliable, as in the case of the Sejm of 1658, when it was mentioned that it was to open on 10 July,⁶⁵ but another report published a week later stated, incorrectly, that the date had been postponed because a convention had been held in Vilnius before the Sejm.⁶⁶

Initially, the topics that were to be discussed were rarely mentioned in the reports published before the Sejm. Sometimes – as it was the case before the extraordinary Sejm of 1647 – they simply indicated that the Sejm would deal with matters that had not been resolved by the previous Sejm.⁶⁷ When newsbooks managed to present the points of the document of the royal legation (Polish: *legacja*), which contained the list of topics proposed by the King, such an account was usually a much abbreviated or amended version at first. This was the case, for example, before the extraordinary Sejm of 1650, when two newsbooks mentioned the list of issues to be discussed, including one concerning support for the Moldavian *hospodar*, which had not actually been included in the document of the legation.⁶⁸ Eight years later, however, the situation was quite different, as the two newsbooks published in London at the time recorded practically the entire contents of the document of the legation in detail.⁶⁹

In contrast, it was quite easy to determine the place of a session – it was clear from the reports on various Sejms that the traditional venue (“usual place”) was Warsaw, and only the coronation Sejm, held immediately after the funeral of the previous ruler, was to take place in Kraków.⁷⁰ However, it was not explained why the 1653 Sejm should be held in Brześć, although the circumstances were important as the country faced a pandemic.⁷¹ The plague was mentioned as a reason for the plan to move the deliberations from Warsaw to Poznań in 1658, but in the end the Sejm was held in Warsaw.⁷²

When describing procedural issues, newsbooks would mostly focus on the beginning and end of a session. In reports from the first days of various Sejms, it was noted on several occasions that deliberations had begun even though not all the people who

in D. Kupisz, L.A. Wierzbicki (eds), *Chronologia Sejmów Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów (1596–1783)* (Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa, 2021), p. 153.

⁶⁴ ‘Exchange Intelligencer’, no. 2, 15–22 May 1645, p. 15.

⁶⁵ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 425, 15–22 Jul. 1658, p. 679.

⁶⁶ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 426, 22–29 Jul. 1658, p. 698.

⁶⁷ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 11, 22–29 Apr. 1647, [1042].

⁶⁸ Cf. S. Ochmann-Staniszevska, Z. Staniszevski, *op. cit.*, p. 67; ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 30, 26 Dec. 1650 – 2 Jan. 1651, p. 489.

⁶⁹ In 1659, the document of the legation was presented in detail and with no omissions or additions: ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 173, 18–25 Apr. 1659, pp. 374–375; ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 563, 14–21 Apr. 1659, pp. 379–380.

⁷⁰ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 113, 29 Jul. – 5 Aug. 1652, p. 1780; ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 203, 1–8 Feb. 1649, [s.p.].

⁷¹ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 144, 9–17 Mar. 1653, p. 2303.

⁷² ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 142, 6–13 Sep. 1658, p. 804; no. 143, 13–20 Sep. 1658, p. 819.

should have taken part had arrived: in 1646 the Sejm started even though not all the Deputies had reached Warsaw,⁷³ while in 1659 a large number of Senators were still expected to arrive,⁷⁴ and in 1647 it was confirmed that, precisely because of the Sejm, a great number of them had arrived in Warsaw at the same time.⁷⁵

Other elements appearing in the context of the beginning of the proceedings were the holy mass and the election of the Speaker. For example, in 1659, ‘Public Intelligencer’ reported that “Diyet opened with very great solemnity”. The description specified that the religious service attended by the royal couple had been conducted by the “Bishop of Culm” (Chełmno),⁷⁶ while one of the earlier reports stated that the sermon preached during the holy mass had been based on a passage from the Gospel according to St Luke (“He began to say to them: ‘Today these words of Scripture have been fulfilled which you have heard’”, Lk, 4:21).⁷⁷ What followed was the election of the Speaker. That session, however, was not free from complications, because it was reported that some MPs had entered the House contrary to the “Constitution”, and it was decided that the matter should be addressed first. Clearly, there was a mistake here. In fact, the problem did not concern the *rugi* procedure that was to check the validity of Deputies’ mandates – as would appear from the content of the report – but the problem pertained to errors in the printed version of the constitutions (bills, Polish: *konstytucje*) passed by the 1658 Sejm, the removal of which was demanded by a group of Deputies.⁷⁸ Moreover, although the identity of the Speaker, i.e. the *starosta* of Gniezno, Jan Gniński, was indicated correctly, the spelling of his name and his exact functions were confused. This resulted in the statement that “Lord Guinski was chosen to the Chair; the Guisenser Starost was chosen Marchal”, which clearly referred to two different people, although in fact it was the same person.⁷⁹ Never were *rugi* reported as part of the Sejm procedure, although sometimes events related to them were explicitly mentioned by the reports, such as the aforementioned case of Hulewicz in 1659.⁸⁰

The report that provided readers with the most detailed information on the Sejm procedure was the above-quoted description of the first Sejm of 1652.⁸¹ Its author emphasised that Deputies usually arrived at the Sejm in an ostentatious manner and with a considerable retinue. However, this often meant getting into debt – in fact, some Deputies were still paying back the costs of their participation in the session, which

⁷³ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 94, 17–24 Dec. 1646, p. 814.

⁷⁴ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 170, 15–22 Aug. 1659, p. 332.

⁷⁵ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 115, 20–27 May 1647, p. 1090.

⁷⁶ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 175, 2–9 May 1659, p. 404. It was in fact the bishop of Warmia, Wacław Leszczyński. See S. Ochmann-Staniszevska, Z. Staniszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

⁷⁷ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 173, 18–25 Apr. 1659, p. 375; ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 563, 14–21 Apr. 1659, p. 380.

⁷⁸ S. Ochmann-Staniszevska, Z. Staniszewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 279–280.

⁷⁹ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 170, 28 Mar. – 4 Apr. 1659, [332].

⁸⁰ ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 142, 6–13 Sep. 1659, p. 808.

⁸¹ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 98, 15–22 Apr. 1652, p. 1544.

lasted for several weeks, even ten years after it had ended. Such was also the nature of the session – Deputies and Senators were said to have devoted themselves mainly to feasting during their time at the Sejm, and only shortly before the official end of the deliberations (in the final week or even days of the session) did they start to deal with state affairs in a panic. The final days of deliberations were therefore characterised by the fact that the proceedings lasted continuously for several hours at a time, often long into the night, and only at the last minute decisions were taken. During that time, the servants of Deputies and Senators were supposed to prepare everything for their departure, as if to escape from an approaching enemy, and as a result: “by the afternoon the next day is hardly any left of that multitude”.⁸² Only 7 or 8 people were to remain on the spot, whose task was to write down the decisions of the Sejm and submit them to the King. As the author of the report explained, the abrupt end of the first Sejm of 1652 was thus the result not only of the application of the principle of unanimity, but also, in his opinion, of an evidently pathological practice of the Sejm, since the protest that had triggered the events concerned precisely the prolongation which was necessary to complete the Sejm’s work.⁸³

However, neither that news report nor any other mentioned how laws were actually made by the Sejm and described the law-making process, i.e. separate deliberations of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senators followed by joined sessions concluding the Sejm (Polish: *konkluzja sejmowa*). If the outcome of that process was mentioned, this was usually done in a very general way, as in 1647, when one of the news items mentioning the end of the Sejm’s deliberations indicated that, during the session that had just ended, the Parliament had enacted more than 60 constitutions.⁸⁴

One exception is a very detailed report on the conclusion of the 1649/1650 Sejm’s deliberations, which not only gave the exact date (12 January), but also stated that the final session had lasted until 9 o’clock in the morning, and that the successful ending had come as a surprise, as the differences between the various groups of Deputies had been so great that no one had expected that the closure would be possible. Readers could also learn that “some are of opinion that the late blazing Star [comet] wrought much to pacify all, causing them at last to condescend to any agreement for the preventing of further troubles”, as well as what decisions had been made, since the report included a 16-point long list of laws that had been passed.⁸⁵

Interestingly, the reports regularly included information about the extension of deliberations: readers could learn, for example, that the Coronation Sejm of 1649 had been extended by eight days, and that the 1659 Sejm, despite having been extended by a week,

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 1545.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 121, 1–8 Jul. 1647, p. 1161. In fact this Sejm introduced more than 130 bills, cf. *Volumina Constitutionum*, vol. 4: 1641–1668, part 1: 1641–1658, S. Grodziski, M. Kwiecień, K. Fokt (eds) (Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa, 2015), pp. 89–119.

⁸⁵ S. Ochmann-Staniszevska, Z. Staniszevski, *op. cit.*, p. 57; ‘Briefe Relation’, no. 26, 26 Mar. – 2 Apr. 1650, pp. 349–350. On the comet over Warsaw cf. ‘Briefe Relation’, no. 25, 12–15 Feb. 1650, p. 353.

might not have enough time to deal with all the issues of importance to the state.⁸⁶ It was also noted on several occasions that a Sejm was still in session and it was not entirely clear when its deliberations were expected to end and what its decisions would be, as in 1650 when ‘Briefe Relation’ reported that: “every one longs of the conclusion there, whereof there can be no certainty until the last day of the anciently determine[e]d and Religiously observed six weeks sitting”.⁸⁷ In the case of the Brześć Sejm of 1653, however, it was reported even before it opened that it would last only 14 days, so that the Polish commissioners taking part in the peace talks in Lübeck were forced to make a desperate – albeit ill-fated⁸⁸ – attempt to reach the venue of the session before it ended.⁸⁹ As in the case of pre-Sejm *sejmiki*, newsbooks did not mention what happened after the Sejm’s deliberations had ended and the Deputies and Senators had returned home.

VI. The English domestic context

The institution of the Polish-Lithuanian Parliament did not appear in English newspapers in a purely informative context. On at least a few occasions, their pages contained references to the Sejm that more or less openly alluded to the domestic situation in England.

The clear example of that approach was the way in which newsbooks reported the mission of a royalist diplomat, William Crofts.⁹⁰ His efforts during his stay in Poland-Lithuania contributed to the fact that one of the issues mentioned by the royal legation before the extraordinary Sejm of 1650 was possible financial support for “the son of the murdered King of England”, i.e. Charles II.⁹¹ The subsidy was indeed discussed, and it was decided that a new tax should be paid by the Scots and the English living in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the money collected in that way should be transferred to the exiled Stuart.⁹² The way newsbooks covered this story is really interesting. ‘Mercurius Politicus’ published an excerpt from the document of the legation,

⁸⁶ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 209, 15–22 Mar. 1649, p. 1956; ‘Public Intelligencer’, no. 178, 23–30 May 1659, p. 453.

⁸⁷ ‘Briefe Relation’, no. 22, 29 Jan. – 5 Feb. 1649, p. 298. See also: ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 121, 1–8 Jul. 1647, [1161].

⁸⁸ T. Ciesielski, *Sejm brzeski 1653 r. Studium z dziejów Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1652–1653* (Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń, 2003), p. 79. More on the Sejm’s interest in the diplomats’ report on the Lübeck proceedings: *idem*, ‘Kongresy pokojowe w Lubece w latach 1651–1653’, in M. Nagielski (ed.), *Z dziejów stosunków Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów ze Szwecją w XVII wieku* (Wydawnictwo DiG, Warszawa, 2007), p. 79.

⁸⁹ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 144, 10–17 Mar. 1653, p. 2303.

⁹⁰ There were also mentions of another Stuart representative, John Cochrane, who was active in the Baltic region since mid-1640s, cf. ‘Briefe Relation’, no. 34, 9–16 Apr. 1650, p. 473.

⁹¹ Point 8 of the document of the legation, see: S. Ochmann-Staniszevska, Z. Staniszevska, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁹² J.K. Fedorowicz, *England’s Baltic Trade in the Early Seventeenth Century. A Study in Anglo-Polish Commercial Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980), pp. 252–253.

but mentioned only that the Sejm was to discuss the question of possible assistance to the “King of Scotland”.⁹³ Shortly afterwards, the same title reported that “the King of Poland hath given the tenth part of the Estates of Scotch Merchants, and others that resides in his Dominions, to the king of Scots for supply”.⁹⁴

A very different narrative was offered by ‘Weekly Intelligencer’, which claimed that it was Scottish merchants in Poland who had decided to share some of their wealth with their king. However, the publisher stressed that the distance and the war in Poland made it highly unlikely that the money had actually reached Charles.⁹⁵ The only title that reported that it was the Sejm that had introduced the new tax that the Scots were to pay (and put their number at around 50,000) was ‘A Perfect Diurnall’. However, that newsbook described the new levy as being intended to cover the costs of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s war against the Tartars and Cossacks, not to support the Stuarts.⁹⁶ By contrast, according to a report in the ‘French Intelligencer’, Crofts had gone to Poland-Lithuania as an envoy of Charles II to ask for help, but Jan Kazimierz explained that he could not provide any support because of the ongoing conflict with the Cossacks and Tartars.⁹⁷

These discrepancies are not easy to explain, especially as other sources, such as the Parisian newspaper ‘Nouvelles Ordinaires’ (part of the ‘La Gazette’) made it clear that it was the Parliament that had decided to introduce the so-called Polish Subsidy.⁹⁸ The way in which the newsbooks reported the whole affair suggests that there may have been an attempt by the publishers to minimise the extent and significance of support for the Stuarts on the continent, and the silence about the fact that it was the Polish-Lithuanian Parliament that had introduced a tax from which the Stuarts were to benefit was part of that effort. Sometimes the references to the situation in *Rzeczpospolita* were much more direct. When ‘Moderate Intelligencer’ described events after the death of Władysław IV, it focused on the difficulties the Polish-Lithuanian state had to face: a peasant revolt, a conflict with the Cossacks, and a military threat by Muscovy. The report chose to explain the reasons for this: “[...] and all this by reason the late King of Poland and his States could not agree, nor the Cossacks were allowed to exercise their religion, that kind of restraint having caused more bloodshed than all others: God prevented it in England, Scotland and Ireland”.⁹⁹

There is no doubt, therefore, that the conflict between the Polish King and the Parliament, which was regularly reported in the newsbooks in the second half of the 1640s, was cited here as one of the factors responsible for the weakening of the state

⁹³ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 30, 26 Dec. 1650 – 2 Jan. 1651, p. 489.

⁹⁴ ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 34, 23–30 Jan. 1651, p. 560.

⁹⁵ ‘Weekly Intelligencer’, no. 9, 18–25 Feb. 1650, p. 72.

⁹⁶ ‘Perfect Diurnall’, no. 58, 13–20 Jan. 1651, p. 766.

⁹⁷ ‘French Intelligencer’, no. 3, 2–9 Dec. 1651, p. 18.

⁹⁸ ‘Nouvelles Ordinaires’, no. 11, 11 Feb. 1651, p. 162; A.B. Pernal, R.P. Gasse, ‘The 1651 Polish Subsidy to the Exiled Charles II’, *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, vol. 32 (1999), pp. 1–50.

⁹⁹ ‘Moderate Intelligencer’, no. 187, 12–19 Oct. 1648, p. 1693.

and the threat of internal conflict, which had already been present in the Stuart monarchy for some time and which, according to some of the journalists, had to be avoided at all costs. The timing of the above comment, in October 1648, was probably not insignificant.

Direct references to the Polish parliamentary system can also be found in the introductory articles of some titles, although those were usually devoted primarily to commenting on current domestic events. Although rare, they are undoubtedly of great interest. In November 1648, one of the Leveller-supporting titles, ‘The Moderate’, cited the Polish Sejm as an example of an institution that had exercised its right to dethrone a sovereign. It claimed that Henri de Valois had been deprived of the crown “by the public act of Parliament”, which, as is well known, was not true, since the Convention of Stężyca in May 1575 declared an interregnum but did not formally dethrone Henri. Clearly, such a reference appears to be an attempt to use the Polish example to justify the possible removal of Charles I from the throne.¹⁰⁰ Only a week earlier, a royalist newspaper, ‘Mercurius Pragmaticus’, had reported the results of the royal election conducted by “the Estates of Poland” and used them to warn against the introduction of a similar system in England.¹⁰¹

By contrast, in July 1652, Marchmont Needham, the editor of ‘Mercurius Politicus’, again referred to the Polish parliamentary system in one of his editorials, which was part of a series of texts on political aberrations potentially dangerous to the state (in this case, of course, England). Describing the problem of legislative and executive powers being exercised by the same person or body, he argued that they had to be separated if the state was to enjoy freedom, whereas combining them in the same hand could lead to absolutism. Needham supported his argument with a large number of examples from the ancient world, but also from the modern times (the Italian states, Spain, France). Poland was mentioned as an example of a state that still retained a great deal of freedom, mainly because of the position of the Parliament, which still had strong legislative powers, while the King had only executive powers and was not “[...] no more than all kings should be, mere elective officers in Trust for that end”. According to Needham, however, Poland was in great danger of losing its freedom owing to increasing French interference.¹⁰²

Interestingly, such references do not appear in the later period. This may be due, on the one hand, to a change in the situation of the English Parliament, which by 1653 – and according to some historians even earlier – had been reduced almost to the role of a façade institution, symbolically legitimising the decisions of other political actors, and, on the other hand, to changes in the press market. As already mentioned, a considerable number of titles published between 1652 and 1655, even if their editors

¹⁰⁰ ‘The Moderate’, no. 21, 28 Nov. – 5 Dec. 1648, pp. 178–179; cf. J. Raymond, *The Invention...*, pp. 60, 65–69.

¹⁰¹ ‘Mercurius Pragmaticus’, no. 35, 21–28 Nov. 1648, [s.p.].

¹⁰² ‘Mercurius Politicus’, no. 109, 1–8 Jul. 1652, p. 1709.

held political views different from those of the authorities, were rather reluctant to comment on current events.

VII. Conclusions

The analysis of the news items dealing with the Polish-Lithuanian Sejm published in the newsbooks reveals that the Sejm was the subject of various reports and a point of reference in the narrative about domestic issues. Similarly to other topics related to *Rzeczpospolita* covered by the English press, information about the Parliament appeared quite regularly, i.e. on the occasion of all successive Sejms, although often – especially in the case of more detailed reports – there was a high risk of errors in the details. However, it seems that the misrepresentation of facts was usually not the outcome of a desire to manipulate them (such cases, e.g. the problem of the Polish subsidy, occurred incidentally), but rather the result of errors in the sources or omissions in the publishing process. The limited editorial capacity and design that did not allow for the positioning of news items meant that readers were forced to find items of importance or interest to them. This was typical of the press of the period,¹⁰³ but in that particular context, one may assume that this might have actually increased readers' exposure to the content of news items dealing with the Sejm, which otherwise could have been overlooked.

The reports usually came from Gdańsk, which was still one of the main hubs for information about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth sent to Western Europe, but increasingly they also came directly from Poland, although there were still reports that reached England via Vienna or Paris. Over time, mainly as a result of the greater availability of correspondents and the development of the system of disseminating information in Europe, the way in which the Polish-Lithuanian Parliament was described became more detailed. Interestingly, until the early 1650s (and certainly until 1652), the Sejm was treated as an element that could also be referred to in English domestic discourse. Then, with the change in the role of Parliament in England, reports on the Sejm were mainly limited to the presentation of facts, albeit more detailed than before.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent inconsistencies and certain errors in the way the Polish-Lithuanian parliamentary system was presented in the periodicals, and in comparison with the way other aspects of the functioning of *Rzeczpospolita* were described in them, the Sejm seems to be an important element in the overall picture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth created by the press in England. Moreover, given the role of the press in informing and forming the opinions of its readers, it is reasonable to assume that information about the Polish Sejm was much more widespread in seventeenth-century England than has hitherto been believed, since, thanks to the newsbooks, such information was accessible not only to representatives of the elite but also to the reading public in general.

¹⁰³ A. Pettegree, *The Invention of News* (Yale University Press, New Haven–London, 2015), p. 366.

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Note: In the footnotes, newsbooks have been identified by their short titles, numbers and dates of publication, followed by (a) page number(s), whereas in the bibliography, their full titles have been provided, together with the number in C. Nelson, M. Seccombe (eds), *British Newspapers and Periodicals, 1641–1700: A Short-Title Catalogue of Serials Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, and British America* (Modern Language Association of America, New York, 1988) – marked as N&S.

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