

Electoral
History of
Poland
(Sixteenth
Century to
the Early
Twentieth
Century)



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Table of contents

Foreword 5

Joanna Górską-Szymczak

 Early Administrative Divisions in the Piast State
 and the Reorganisation of State Administration under the Reign of Casimir the Great 7

Stanisław Górski

 The Development of the County Network in the Kingdom of Poland from the Fourteenth Century 15

Michał Z. Dankowski, Grzegorz Górski

 Political Life in the Kingdom of Poland and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Sixteenth and
 Seventeenth Centuries..... 33

Grzegorz Górski, Stanisław Górski

 The Emergence of Modern Political Parties in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century
 41

Grzegorz Górski, Witold Mazurek

 County-Level Administrative Units in Other European States..... 49

Joanna Górską-Szymczak, Stanisław Górski

 Counties in the Polish Lands in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries 63

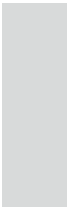
Joanna Górską-Szymczak, Stanisław Górski

 Counties in the Second Polish Republic and the Polish People’s Republic..... 73

Grzegorz Górski, Stanisław Górski

 Methodology for the Selection of Counties for Research Purposes by the Centre for Electoral Studies..... 81

Bibliography..... 97



Foreword

In 2022, the Jagiellonian Academy in Toruń established the Centre for Electoral Studies. As a research institution, the Centre pursues two complementary strands of inquiry: a comprehensive examination of Poland's electoral history and the analysis of contemporary electoral cycles, including the preparation of forecasts for forthcoming elections.

During the initial phase of its activities, the Centre focused on compiling an extensive database encompassing all elections held in Poland since 1989. This work culminated in the creation of the Electoral Geoportal, which presents uniquely processed and systematically organised data. In parallel, a book-length publication was produced, bringing together studies and analyses by leading specialists. These contributions examine individual electoral contests and outline the legal and institutional frameworks governing successive elections.

The project has since been expanded to include data on parliamentary elections in the Second Polish Republic during the interwar period, thereby significantly broadening the scope of analysis. In subsequent stages, the Geoportal is to be supplemented with data from elections conducted in the Polish lands under the rule of the partitioning powers, and ultimately with information on electoral practices in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century. The principal aim of this undertaking is to shed light on the persistence of political attitudes among Poles over the course of several centuries.

The present volume, devoted to the electoral history of Poland, serves as an introduction to this broader enquiry. It addresses key issues whose origins extend back to the medieval period and which, in our view, form the foundations of political processes in the Polish lands from the eighteenth century onwards.

We hope that this initiative will attract wide interest and make a meaningful contribution not only to a deeper understanding of Poland's political past, but also to the historical factors shaping contemporary electoral choices made by Poles in democratic elections.

Early Administrative Divisions in the Piast State and the Reorganisation of State Administration under the Reign of Casimir the Great

Despite decades of scholarly debate, there is still no definitive consensus on the precise shape of the administrative structure of the Piast state during its formative phase in the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹ Nevertheless, notwithstanding the diversity of interpretations and theoretical approaches, scholars broadly agree on the existence of a territorial unit known as the *opole*, whose origins can be traced back to the pre-state period.² Over time, alongside the development of a network of newly established fortified settlements (*gords*) founded by successive Piast rulers, larger territorial units emerged in the form of *gord districts*. These units were subsequently transformed into *castellanies* as a result of the widespread introduction of a new administrative office of the *castellan*. These structures merit closer examination.

The *opole* originated in the tribal era and functioned as a territorial community encompassing several, or occasionally more than a dozen, settlements situated in close proximity. The primary bond uniting this community was kinship, as *opola* were inhabited by clans linked by ties of blood. As a rule, these units lacked clearly defined or fixed geographical boundaries.³ Their territorial extent was therefore determined by the settlement range of the clans that constituted them.

The principal purpose of establishing such communities was, above all, defensive. Initially, they served to protect against raids or attacks by external adversaries of the tribal or clan group to which the *opole* belonged. Equally significant was the need to safeguard members of the community from threats posed by other groups within the same tribe or clan. The prevailing principle of collective responsibility, together with the associated notion of retaliation as a cornerstone of contemporary ideas of justice, generated a strong demand for collective protection within the *opole*.⁴

¹ The most recent and highly insightful findings are presented in the monograph: J. Osiński, *Podział dzielnicowy państwa polskiego według Statutu Bolesława Krzywoustego*, Kraków 2024. The author examines this issue as a crucial element for the proper interpretation of the so-called “division of the state” carried out by this ruler.

² A more extensive discussion of this problem may be found, inter alia, in: Z. Wojciechowski, *Ustrój polityczny ziem polskich w czasach przedpiastowskich*, Lwów 1927; idem: *O ustroju szczepowym ziem polskich: uwagi krytyczne*, Poznań 1927.

³ The issue is analysed in greater detail by J. S. Matuszewski in *Vicina id est... Poszukiwania alternatywnej koncepcji staropolskiego opola*, Łódź 1991.

⁴ A broader discussion of the conditions shaping early law and the administration of justice is provided by H.J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Harvard 1983. Although his observations focus primarily on Germanic communities, similar principles applied to Slavic societies.

For this reason, the organisation of collective defence constituted the paramount task of the community inhabiting the territory of an opole. The principal fortified settlement (gord), constructed through collective effort, served as a refuge in times of serious danger and gradually emerged as the central organisational hub of the opole. The council of elders, which stood at its head, together with the leader (opolanin), was responsible for logistical preparations for the defence of the gord (most importantly, securing food supplies) as well as for military readiness, including the provision of weapons and the training of members of the opole for combat. In addition, it oversaw the collection of levies adopted at democratic assemblies (wiece), namely the tributes paid by the population of the opole to finance these activities⁵.

Another important function performed by the council of elders was the administration of justice within the opole community. Judicial authority was exercised several times a year during court sessions held in opole strongholds⁶.

As the administrative structures of early Piast statehood became increasingly consolidated, particularly with the strengthening of central princely, and later royal, authority, territorial branches of governance also developed. This process was closely linked to the emergence of a new administrative office within the expanding princely–royal administration: that of the castellan (*castellanus*)⁷.

Appointed by the prince, the castellan acted as a direct representative of princely authority and was typically based in strongholds that had previously served as important opole centres. The establishment of this new administrative framework reflected a profound transformation of the prevailing constitutional order. In the early phase of Piast statehood, the constitutional order rested on strongly democratic structures and procedures that had already taken shape in the tribal period. The central institution in this system was the popular assembly (wiece), while a traditionally dominant role was played by tribal or clan elders bound together by ties of kinship. Under the influence of impulses arriving from the west, particularly the Empire, and from the south (Bohemia, Hungary and Italy), both Mieszko I and Bolesław Chrobry gradually and deliberately undermined these democratic foundations.

The office of castellan was clearly designed to displace the autonomous and self-governing authority of the opole elders, assuming responsibility for the execution of their former functions and tasks⁸. In consequence, the role and political significance of tribal leadership steadily declined.

Gord districts and the officials who governed them in their new institutional form (castellans or comites) thus took over the competencies previously exercised by opole elders. While military and defensive responsibilities were retained, fiscal duties expanded rapidly, reflecting the growing importance of taxation and tribute levies imposed for the benefit of the ruler. Judicial functions continued to be exercised within these communities, and former elders still participated in the administration of justice. A significant change in this sphere, however, was that judicial

⁵ A more detailed discussion of this issue is provided in the classic study by: K. Tymieniecki, *Organizacja grodowa w Polsce wczesnofeudalnej*, Poznań 1961.

⁶ M. Kowalski, *Administracja i sądownictwo w Polsce Piastów i Jagiellonów*, Wrocław 2010.

⁷ Alongside the castellan, there existed a closely related office, that of the comes. Both offices were modelled on analogous institutions characteristic of the dominant administrative system of the period, shaped under the rule of Charlemagne and his successors. For a broader discussion, see Chapter V — “Jednostki administracyjne odpowiadające powiatom w innych krajach europejskich”.

⁸ These processes are discussed in greater detail by G. Górski, *Historia administracji*, Toruń 2011. They are also examined in: J. Górski- Szymczak, *Miedzy demokracją a absolutyzmem. U źródeł nowoczesnej monarchii konstytucyjnej w XI i XII wieku*, Toruń 2025. An alternative perspective is offered by: J. Bardach, B. Leśnodorski, M. Pietrzak, *Historia ustroju i prawa polskiego*, Warsaw 1998, as well as: J.A. Gierowski, *Historia Polski: średniowiecze*, Kraków 2001.

decisions were increasingly issued in the name of the ruler, who to a certain extent delegated these prerogatives to castellans or comites⁹.

The growing importance of the castellan's office, accompanied by the gradual disappearance of the post of comes, led to the emergence of the concept of the castellany as a territorial-administrative unit. At the same time, the fiscal competences of castellans were further strengthened. During the thirteenth century, in the context of the weakening position of Piast princes during the period known as the fragmentation of the realm, the role of castellans increased markedly. A significant shift occurred at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Following the accession of Wenceslaus II of Bohemia to the Polish throne, a new administrative office was introduced – that of the starosta (*capitaneus*)¹⁰.

Modelled on Bohemian administrative practices, this institution was intended to weaken the entrenched position of castellans by establishing a new network of officials more closely subordinated to the central authority. However, the relatively short reign of Wenceslaus II of Bohemia, and of Wenceslaus III¹¹, who continued his political vision, did not favour either the consolidation of this institution or the fulfilment of the objectives that had originally motivated its creation. Similarly, the numerous political difficulties associated with the reign of Ladislaus the Short were not conducive to strengthening this office. It was only within the framework of the broader programme of administrative modernisation undertaken by Casimir the Great that the office of the starosta was finally and firmly embedded within the state's administrative system.

A significant innovation accompanying the consolidation of this institution was the deliberate principle that the appointment of a starosta should be independent of the opinion or advice of the local community. It was precisely this right of local (provincial or territorial) communities to co-decide matters alongside the weakened Piast princes, a practice that had developed during the course of the thirteenth century, that in later periods placed substantial constraints on royal authority¹². Thus, although starosts were intended to strengthen the monarch's influence over the functioning of local communities, in practice they quickly came to act as representatives of local interests vis-à-vis the ruler.

Within the Piast state there also existed, certainly from the reign of Mieszko I¹³, a division into districts or provinces, although the very terminology used to describe these territorial units remains a matter of scholarly uncertainty¹⁴. The prevailing view in the literature is that these units broadly corresponded to territories inhabited by the so-called major tribes. Without engaging in the long-standing debates on this subject, let alone disputes concerning the precise number of such units or, above all, their territorial extent, it may be assumed that they included Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Silesia, Masovia and Pomerania. Even so, serious difficulties arise when attempts are made to reconstruct the principles of this district division on the basis of the Statute of Bolesław III Wrymouth of 1136.

⁹ The evolution of this process is discussed in greater detail, inter alia, by: S. Kutrzeba, *Dawne polskie prawo sądowe w zarysie*, Lviv 1921.

¹⁰ A broader discussion is provided by: S. Górka, *Administracja i prawo w średniowiecznej Polsce*, Kraków 2007 and T. Żmudzki, *System administracyjny Polski średniowiecznej*, Wrocław 2009. See also the remarks by: G. Górski, op. cit.

¹¹ Wenceslaus II of Bohemia was Duke of Kraków from 1291 and King of Poland from 1300. He died in 1305, and his son, Wenceslaus III, remained on the Polish throne for only just under fourteen months.

¹² This issue is discussed in greater detail by J. Górka-Szymczak, op. cit. See also the remarks by G. Górski, *Rzeczpospolita polska-litewska. Historia pierwszej monarchii konstytucyjnej*, Toruń 2017.

¹³ The existence of larger territorial units in the time of Mieszko I is already noted in the chronicles of both Gallus Anonymus and Wincenty Kadłubek.

¹⁴ A more detailed analysis of this issue is provided by J. Osiński, *Z dziejów Polski wczesnopiastowskiej*, Kraków 2018, as well as *Podział...*

In particular, it remains problematic to establish conclusively the existence of clearly delineated and stable territorial units at this stage.

What is crucial in this context is that these units, regardless of their precise form, were created primarily in response to the need to satisfy legal claims stemming from contemporary concepts of inheritance law and the absence of a distinct notion of public law. Under the constraints imposed by these legal norms, successive rulers appear to have allocated specific domains to their brothers or sons. Over time, these domains gradually developed into more structured territorial entities¹⁵.

It should be emphasised, however, that until the mid-twelfth century the administration of such units was not associated with the establishment of separate offices endowed with clearly defined competences. As a rule, they were governed directly by members of the ruling dynasty. Their courts, organised on the model of the ruler's own entourage, thus functioned as the administrative centres of the provinces entrusted to them. The scope of authority exercised by such provincial governors was generally determined on an ad hoc basis, shaped by immediate circumstances and current political needs.

In summary, given the still limited state of research on this issue, it may be concluded that until the end of the thirteenth century the territorial division of the state and, by extension, concrete institutions of territorial administration, remained in an early stage of formation. It was only during the reign of Casimir the Great that a decisive reorganisation of this system was achieved over the course of the fourteenth century.

The thirteenth century itself was marked by a profound weakening of princely authority within the Piast polity. The progressive fragmentation of the state into smaller territorial units constituted only one, and by no means the most significant, cause of this process. Far more consequential was the intensifying phenomenon of immunisation, which from the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries increasingly affected both entire social groups and individual landholders outside the extended princely family.

Immunisation led to a substantial curtailment of princely authority, above all in the spheres of judicial power and fiscal control. At the same time, it encouraged the development of self-government within newly emerging territorial units – villages and towns. These communities represented a new, classical form of collective organisation, based not on ties of kinship but on legal bonds. As such, they acquired a considerable degree of autonomy and freedom in shaping the internal foundations of their functioning¹⁶. The earliest impetus for this process came from the Catholic Church and its emerging territorial structures, dioceses and parishes, as well as from the expanding network of monasteries and abbeys. As a result, a distinct social estate began to take shape: the clergy. Comparable processes of formation, based on so-called location charters, also affected towns and villages. This, in turn, led to the rapid development of new self-governing territorial units, whose inhabitants constituted new social estates – the burghers and the peasantry. During the period under consideration, similar processes also began to affect aristocratic circles and the wealthier strata of the knighthood. In this case, however, development proceeded primarily through individual privileges

¹⁵ We share the observations and conclusions formulated by J. Osieński.

¹⁶ This process is discussed in greater detail in the classic study by R. Grodecki, *Początki immunitetu w Polsce*, Lviv 1930. A more recent treatment of this issue, set within a broad comparative framework, is provided in J. Górską-Szymczak, op. cit.

granted to specific persons¹⁷. It was only in the second half of the fourteenth century, as a result of privileges issued by Casimir the Great's successor, King Louis I of Hungary, that the noble estate was effectively and legally constituted as a distinct social group¹⁸.

These transformations were accompanied by extensive grants of landed property to a variety of beneficiaries, as well as by the conferral of economic privileges that granted selected individuals or groups exclusive advantages. This distinct form of privatisation of the former princely domain constituted an additional factor weakening the previously broad powers of local centres of princely authority and the position of local governors¹⁹.

It was against this broader background that Casimir the Great, seeking to restore and strengthen royal authority, embarked on a series of measures designed to give concrete institutional form to this objective. One of the most important spheres of his activity was royal administration. Within this framework, Casimir undertook both a reorganisation of the previously rather chaotic territorial division of the realm and a reform of the territorial offices operating within it. These measures were intended, above all, to gradually break the dominance of entrenched elites within individual duchies and territorial domains.

Casimir first strengthened and legally sanctioned (inter alia through the promulgation of ordered and separate collections of law²⁰) the division of the kingdom into two fundamental provinces: Lesser Poland and Greater Poland. He then unified the previously amorphous territorial entities: districts, duchies, castellanies, and magnate lordships. In their place, a coherent, two-tier territorial structure was introduced, comprising lands and voivodeships, as well as counties. Within these units functioned towns and villages distinguished by their legal foundations based on location privileges.

It should be emphasised that the basic territorial framework of the Polish state thus established endured, with only minor later modifications and additions, until the end of its existence in the late eighteenth century.

Alongside the introduction of a new and unified territorial division, Casimir the Great also restructured the administration of these units. He made systematic use of the institution of the starosta, which had been initiated earlier under Wenceslaus II of Bohemia. This office was universalised and its position significantly strengthened.

As a result, the starosta became the most important royal official at the local level, acting as the representative of central authority within a given land or county. His competences encompassed administrative, judicial, policing, and military responsibilities within the territory under his jurisdiction. Starosts administered royal estates (the so-called

¹⁷ Although the privileges issued at Cienia and Lutomyśl were, in principle, of a general nature, they referred primarily to the political rights of the *barones*. Their main purpose was to guarantee a group of the most important ecclesiastical and secular lords the right to offer "advice and opinion" to the ruler.

¹⁸ Of decisive importance in this respect were the royal privileges issued in Buda in 1355 and in Košice in 1374. For a broader discussion of the significance of these general privileges for the formation of the noble estate, see: J. Dąbrowski, *Ostatnie lata Ludwika Wielkiego*, Kraków 2009, as well as O. Halecki, *O genezie i znaczeniu rządów andegawerskich w Polsce*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1921, vol. 35.

¹⁹ This process is discussed in greater detail by R. Grodecki, *Studia nad dziejami gospodarczymi Polski w XII wieku*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1915, vol. 29. The issue is also addressed by J. Górską-Szymczak, op. cit.

²⁰ Reference is made here to the so-called Statutes of Casimir the Great—the Greater Poland Statute (finally approved in 1362) and the Lesser Poland Statute (1362). The text in a modern critical edition is available in: *Statuty Kazimierza Wielkiego*, ed. T.K. Kubicki, Łódź 1995. For a broader discussion of the role and significance of the Statutes, see: W. Uruszczak, *Statuty Kazimierza Wielkiego jako źródło prawa polskiego*, "Studia z dziejów Państwa i Prawa Polskiego" 1999, no. 3, p. 97–115.

królewsczyzny²¹) within their districts and supervised the collection of taxes for the royal treasury. They also exercised criminal jurisdiction in the most serious cases, particularly within the framework of the so-called gord courts²².

The reforms relating to the office of starosta, whose holders were appointed and dismissed at the monarch's discretion, made it possible to impose genuine limits on the arbitrariness of local magnates and to achieve a greater degree of administrative uniformity across the state. As a consequence, the former office of castellan lost its earlier substantive powers. The role of castellans was reduced primarily to military and honorary functions. In the former capacity, this included command over castle garrisons and leadership of territorial banners in wartime; in the latter, the honorary status of the office would later be reflected in the attribution to castellans of the right to hold seats in the emerging Senate.

Concurrently with these institutional changes, Casimir the Great began, within the framework of lands and counties, the systematic creation of new territorial units in the form of counties (powiaty), in place of the castellany districts that had developed in a largely ad hoc manner over earlier centuries. The starosts appointed under the new system now exercised authority over clearly defined territorial-administrative units, explicitly designated as counties. It was at this level, under the supervision of the starosta, that the state's fundamental defensive responsibilities and fiscal functions were concentrated. As a rule, counties became the basic judicial districts within which civil and criminal justice was administered in the name of the king, in accordance with the legal norms systematised in the aforementioned Statutes.

Over time, two distinct categories of the starosta's office emerged: the gord starosta (starosta grodowy), who exercised authority over a judicial district and was responsible for internal security, and the non-gord starosta (starosta niegrodowy), whose primary duties involved the administration of royal landed estates (królewsczyzny).

It should be emphasised that the institution of the territorial starosta, as a representative of royal authority in the local sphere, endured throughout the entire Middle Ages and well into the early modern period. Within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, starosts continued to administer royal estates, maintain public order, and preside over gord courts, remaining among the most important local officials until the eighteenth century. Although the office gradually underwent a degree of degeneration, being leased by magnates as a source of additional income, its origins and original purpose lay firmly in the reforms introduced by Casimir the Great.

It is also worth noting that assemblies (wiece) – gatherings of magnates, knights, and representatives of towns – continued to be convened during Casimir's reign. Their functions, however, evolved over time. Gradually, they developed into sejmiki ziemskie (local assemblies of the nobility) and, in the course of further institutional evolution, gave rise to the nationwide Sejm. Assemblies held during Casimir's reign, which brought together dignitaries, territorial officials, and municipal delegates, may therefore be regarded as direct precursors of later noble parliamentarism. Similarly, the royal council, expanded by Casimir as a permanent advisory body, was transformed during the Jagiellonian period into the permanent Crown Senate²³.

²¹ The "royal domain," commonly referred to as królewsczyzna, was in fact the property of the Crown (and, in Lithuania, of the Grand Duchy), and thus constituted public property. For a broader discussion of its development, see: J. Luciński, *Rozwój królewsczyzny w Koronie od schyłku XIV wieku do XVII wieku*, Poznań 1970.

²² For a more detailed discussion, see the remarks by: S. Górka, op. cit., and T. Żmudzki, op. cit.

²³ For a broader treatment, see the important study by: J. Dąbrowski, *Kazimierz Wielki: Twórca Korony Królestwa Polskiego*, Kraków 2007.

It may thus be concluded that Casimir's domestic policy, grounded in cooperation with the nobility and the burghers, while at the same time restraining the arbitrariness of the magnates, established a model of governance that would reach fuller maturity during the Golden Age under the Jagiellonians²⁴.



Figure 1. The Kingdom of Poland during the reign of Casimir the Great. Wikimedia Commons, *The Kingdom of Poland during the reign of Casimir the Great*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazimierz_III_Wielki#/media/Plik:Polska_1333-1370.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

²⁴ On the role of Casimir the Great and his reforms, in addition to the fundamental studies by R. Grodecki, see also the important observations in: J. Wyrozumski, *Kazimierz Wielki*. Wrocław 1986.

The Establishment and Development of the Network of Counties from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Century

As indicated above, the administrative reforms implemented during the reign of Casimir the Great proved exceptionally durable. The fundamental territorial division into two provinces – Lesser Poland and Greater Poland – acquired a significance extending beyond the history of the medieval Kingdom of Poland and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. Notably, many of the territorial units established at that time, organised around local administrative centres, survived the period of the partitions following the collapse of Polish statehood. Subsequently, these units continued to function in the reborn Second Polish Republic after 1918. They also persisted during the period of the Polish People's Republic until the administrative reform of 1975. Finally, they were re-established within the Third Polish Republic as a result of the comprehensive reorganisation of the state's administrative structure carried out in 1998.

According to the definition proposed by the pioneer of research into the history of Polish administration, Zygmunt Gloger, the term *powiat* (county) denotes

“a group of *opola* (i.e. neighbouring villages and agricultural settlements, surrounded and interconnected by fields – author's note), which jointly held assemblies and courts, and were notified and convened to deal with matters of common concern.” The etymology of the term is linked to the words *wiec* (assembly), *powiecać* (to summon), and *powiadamiać się* (to notify one another). In their original form, counties performed administrative, judicial, and defensive functions¹.

It is therefore appropriate to examine the process by which the original network of counties took shape. The analysis begins with the two principal provinces of the Kingdom – Greater Poland and Lesser Poland – and then turns to those territories that were later incorporated into the Kingdom and subsequently into the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, namely Masovia and Royal Prussia², as well as to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in its territorial configuration following the Union of Lublin. As an illustrative point of departure, the territorial configuration of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1619 has been adopted. This date marks the recovery of the Smolensk lands following the Truce of Deulino with the Tsardom of Russia³. At that time, the Commonwealth also encompassed Livonia and the territory of Courland⁴.

¹ Z. Gloger, *Geografia historyczna ziem dawnej Polski*, Kraków 1903, p. 131–132.

² As a consequence of the resolutions of the Lublin Sejm of 1569, both regions were customarily classified as part of the Greater Poland Province. Cf.: Z. Gloger, *op. cit.*, p. 81–82.

³ For a detailed discussion, see: A. Małow, *Dokumenty polsko-rosyjskiego rozejmu zawartego 11 (1) XII 1618 r. we wsi Dywilino*, “Wschodni Rocznik Humanistyczny” 2020, vol. XVII, no. 2, p. 7–100.

⁴ Both territories were incorporated into the Commonwealth following the secularisation of the Order of the Sword Brothers in 1561. Livonia (excluding its northern part – Estonia) became joint property of Poland and Lithuania under the Treaty of Stettin of 1570, which ended the First Northern War. The southern part of the former monastic state became a fief of the Commonwealth known as the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia. The region's administrative system was established by the constitution “*Ordynacya Ziemie Inflantckiey*” at the Sejm of 1598 (*Volumina Legum*, vol. 2 [1550–1609], ed. J. Ohryzko, St Petersburg 1859, pp. 377–378), later amended by the constitution “*Ordynacya Xięstwa Inflantskiego*” of 1677, following the loss of much of the territory after 1620 and the creation of a single Livonian voivodeship from its south-eastern part (so-called Polish Livonia; *Volumina Legum*, vol. 5 [1669–1696], ed. J. Ohryzko, St Petersburg 1860, p. 237).



Figure 1. The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the early seventeenth century, showing the contemporary administrative division into voivodeships, lands, and counties. Source: Wikimedia Commons, The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1619, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_I_Rzeczypospolitej [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

An additional map illustrates the division of the Polish–Lithuanian state during this period into provinces, with voivodeships and lands indicated.



Figure 2. Division of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth into provinces. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative provinces of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Prowincje_I_RP.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Counties in Lesser Poland

In Lesser Poland, during the initial phase of the province's existence, up to the incorporation of Red Ruthenia by Casimir the Great, three voivodeships were established: Kraków Voivodeship, Sandomierz Voivodeship, and Lublin Voivodeship.

In the Kraków Voivodeship, at the close of the fourteenth century, only three counties were in operation: Kraków, Proszowice, and Żarnowiec. During the sixteenth century, however, a series of administrative changes led to a significant reorganisation of the county network. As a result, the following counties were in existence: Proszowice, Łelów, Szczyrzyc, Książ, Sącz, Biecz, and the so-called Silesian County, which encompassed the Duchies of Zator and Oświęcim. In addition, two ecclesiastical territorial units were situated within the boundaries of the voivodeship: the Muszyna Starosty (also referred to as the Muszyna State) and the Sławków Starosty. Ultimately, by the second half of the seventeenth century, a stable administrative structure had emerged, comprising the following counties: Proszowice, Łelów, Książ, Szczyrzyc, Sącz, Biecz, and Silesian County.



Figure 3. Kraków Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa krakowskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-krakowskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The Sandomierz Voivodeship comprised territories divided into the following counties: Sandomierz, Wiślica, Pilzno, Radom, Opoczno, Chęciny, Szydłów (until 1465), and Tarnów (until 1465), as well as the Stężyca Land. The latter, although administratively part of the Sandomierz Voivodeship, was not subdivided into counties and functioned as a separate territorial unit.

⁵ For an analysis of the formation of the political system of this region, see: A. Nowakowski, *Dzieje ustroju i prawa księstw Oświęcimskiego i Zatorskiego*, Białystok 1988.



Figure 4. Sandomierz Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa sandomierskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-sandomierskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 13.12.2025].



Figure 5. Lublin Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa lubelskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-lubelskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The Lublin Voivodeship was established in 1474, when King Casimir IV Jagiellon separated it from the Sandomierz Voivodeships. It comprised the following counties: Lublin, Urzędów, Kurów (in existence until 1465), and Parczew (in existence until 1465), as well as the Łuków Land.

In the mid-fourteenth century, additional voivodeships created by King Casimir the Great in Red Ruthenia – territories incorporated into the Crown – were also included within the Province of Lesser Poland. As a result of their constitutional and administrative organisation, three principal units were initially formed: the Ruthenian Voivodeship, the Bełz Voivodeship, and the Chełm Land (voivodeship).

The Ruthenian Voivodeship initially consisted of four territorial units with the status of lands: Sanok, Przemyśl, Halych, and Lviv. In the seventeenth century, these units formally acquired the designation of counties.

« Cf. K. Myśliński, *Geneza i znaczenie powołania woj. lubelskiego w 1474 r.*, „Rocznik Lubelski” 1973, vol. 16, p. 9-25.

» A broader analysis of these divisions and their evolution is provided in: K. Chłapowski, *Granice i podziały administracyjne Królestwa Polskiego i Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów w XV–XVIII wieku*, „Studia Geohistorica” 2019, no. 7, p. 165–189 and Z. Gloger, op. cit., p. 172–200.

» J. Szyszka, *Kształtowanie się podziałów terytorialnych Rusi Czerwonej na przykładzie ziemi lwowskiej*, „Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechne” 2011, no. 3 (7), p. 120–140.

» Z. Gloger, op. cit., p. 211–220.



Figure 6. Ruthenian Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *The Ruthenian Voivodeship in the seventeenth century*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-ruskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The Belz Voivodeship was incorporated into the Crown in 1462, having previously existed as a fief of the Masovian dukes¹⁰. Within its boundaries, the following counties were established: Belz, Grabowiec, Horodło, Lubaczów, and the Busk Land.



Figure 7. Belz Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa bełskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regiony-historyczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-belskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

¹⁰ For a broader discussion of the origins and organisation of the Belz Voivodeship, see: A. Janeczek, *Osadnictwo pogranicza polsko-ruskiego. Województwo bełskie od schyłku XIV do początku XVII w.*, Warsaw 1993, p. 21–34.

Finally, within the Chełm Land, five counties were initially created: Chełm, Krasnystaw, Hrubieszów, Lubomł, and Ratno. After 1465, only two counties remained: Chełm and Krasnystaw¹¹. Over time, Chełm Land came to be referred to in official documents as a voivodeship, as it functioned as an autonomous administrative unit vis-à-vis the Ruthenian Voivodeship and possessed, inter alia, its own regional assembly (sejmik). Only in the early sixteenth century was Chełm Land definitively incorporated into the Ruthenian Voivodeship, under circumstances that remain only partially clarified¹².



Figure 8. Chełm Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa chełmskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/ziemia-chełmska-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

After a series of conflicts with Vytautas's successor, Švitrigaila, the region was definitively integrated into the Crown in 1437. Three years earlier, the Podolian Voivodeship had already been established¹³. This voivodeship comprised three counties: Kamieniec, Latyczów, and Czerwonogród.

As a result of the resolutions adopted at the Union of Lublin in 1569, several territories were transferred from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Crown. These included the Kyiv Duchy, where the Kyiv Voivodeship was created, as well as the Volhynian Land, which was organised into the Volhynian and Braclaw Voivodeships. Until the mid-seventeenth century, the Chernihiv Voivodeship also existed. At the same Lublin Sejm, Podlasie was likewise incorporated into the Crown; this region is discussed separately below¹⁴.

¹¹ Z. Gloger, op. cit., p. 220–223.

¹² W. Ćwik, J. Reder, *Rozwój administracyjno-terytorialny ziemi chełmskiej*, [in:] J. Willaume (ed.), *Ziemia chełmska. Materiały z sesji naukowej historyków odbytej w Chełmie 21 VI 1959 r.*, Lublin 1961.

¹³ A broader treatment is provided in the monumental classic study by: O. Halecki, *Dzieje Unii Jagiellońskiej*, vol. 1: *W wiekach średnich*, Kraków 1919, p. 294–330.

¹⁴ *O ziemi podlaskiej. Przywilej przywrócenia ziemi podlaskiej do Korony Polskiej*, VL 2, p. 77–80.

The Volhynian Voivodeship was divided into three counties: Łuck, Włodzimierz, and Krzemieniec.

The Braclaw Voivodeship, established in 1566 and incorporated into the Crown three years later¹⁵, comprised two counties: Braclaw and Winnica.

The extensive Kyiv Voivodeship was similarly divided into three counties: Kyiv, Żytomierz, and Owrucz¹⁶.



Figure 9. Division of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth into voivodeships in 1619, showing the Volhynian, Podolian, Braclaw, and Kyiv Voivodeships. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Administrative division*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_I_Rzeczypospolitej#/media/Plik:Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_I_RP.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Greater Poland – the cradle of Polish statehood – initially comprised two historically principal lands: Poznań and Kalisz. As early as the first half of the fourteenth century, both acquired the status of voivodeships. In 1768, at the request of King Stanisław August Poniatowski, the Gniezno Voivodeship was separated from the northern part of the Kalisz Voivodeship.

Within the Poznań Voivodeship, the following counties functioned: Poznań, Kościan, Wałcz, and the Wschowa Land.

¹⁵ As stated in the act of incorporation of the Volhynian Land into the Crown. VL 2, p. 81.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the administrative divisions of the Ukrainian voivodeships, see: W. Bobiński, *Województwo kijowskie w czasach Zygmunta III Wazy: studium osadnictwa i stosunków własności ziemskiej*, Warsaw 2000.



Figure 10. Poznań Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa poznańskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-poznanskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].



Figure 11. Kalisz Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa kaliskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-kaliskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

For most of the period under consideration, the Kalisz Voivodeship was divided into six counties: Kalisz, Konin, Pyzdry, Gniezno, Kcynia, and Nakło. From the latter three, the Gniezno Voivodeship was subsequently formed. In the final years of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Środa County was additionally established (from 1791)¹⁷.

Over time, the Greater Poland Province also came to include the voivodeships of Sieradz, Łęczyca, Brześć Kujawski, and Inowrocław. These lands – remnants of former Piast duchies from the period of territorial fragmentation – formed a natural link between core Greater Poland and Lesser Poland. Their transformation into voivodeships took place during the reign of Casimir the Great.

Within the Łęczyca Voivodeship, the counties of Łęczyca, Orłów, Brzozów, and (from 1791) Inowłódz were established.



Figure 12. Łęczyca Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa łęczyckiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-łeczyckie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The Sieradz Voivodeship comprised four counties: Sieradz, Szadek, Piotrków, and Radomsko. The Wieluń Land, which formed part of this voivodeship, was further divided into the Wieluń and Ostrzeszów Counties¹⁸.

Finally, the Brześć Kujawski Voivodeship was subdivided into five counties: Brześć, Kowal, Kruszwica, Przedecz, and Radziejów.

¹⁷ Z. Gloger, op. cit., s. 80 ff.

¹⁸ H. Rutkowski, *Podziały administracyjne. Granice państwowych jednostek terytorialnych*, in: H. Rutkowski (ed.), *Atlas historyczny Polski. Województwo sieradzkie i województwo łęczyckie w drugiej połowie XVI wieku. Część II. Komentarz. Indeksy*, Warsaw 1998, p. 26.



Figure 13. Sieradz Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa sieradzkiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-sieradzkie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].



Figure 14. Brześć Kujawski Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa brzesko-kujawskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-brzesko-kujawskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

In the Inowrocław Voivodeship, the territorial division comprised the Bydgoszcz County and the Inowrocław County, as well as the Dobrzyń Land. The latter was subdivided into three counties: Rypin, Lipno, and Dobrzyń¹⁹.

¹⁹ For a broader discussion of these issues, see: A. Gąsiorowski, *Powiat w Wielkopolsce XIV–XVI wieku: z zagadnień zarządu terytorialnego i podziałów Polski późnośredniowiecznej*, Poznań 1965.



The Development of the County Network in the

Figure 15. Inowrocław Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa inowrocławskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-inowroclawskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Counties in Masovia

From the period of territorial fragmentation onwards, Masovia long remained outside the borders of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland. As successive branches of the Masovian Piast dynasty became extinct, individual lands were gradually incorporated into the Polish state. The process was completed in 1526²⁰. Following the administrative changes introduced by the Union of Lublin in 1569, Masovia was assigned to the Greater Poland Province. In the form shaped by earlier structural developments within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the region comprised three voivodeships: Masovia, Płock, and Rawa, encompassing a total of thirty-three counties.

Within the Masovian Voivodeship, ten lands functioned as intermediate administrative units between the voivodeship and the county: Ciechanów, Czersk, Liw, Łomża, Nur, Różan, Warsaw, Wizna, Wyszogród, and Zakroczym.

²⁰ For a broader discussion of the administrative division of Masovia prior to its incorporation into the Crown, see: B. Sobol, *Sejm i sejmiki ziemskie na Mazowszu książęcym*, Warsaw 1968.

The Ciechanów Land consisted of three counties: Ciechanów, Przasnysz, and Sączok.

The Czersk Land likewise comprised three counties: Czersk (also known as Garwolin), Grójec, and Warka.

The Łomża Land included four counties: Łomża, Kolno, Ostrołęka, and Zambrów. The Nur Land was divided into three counties: Nur, Kamieńczyk, and Ostrów.

The Różan Land comprised two counties: Różan and Maków. The Warsaw Land included three counties:

Warsaw, Błonie, and Tarczyn.

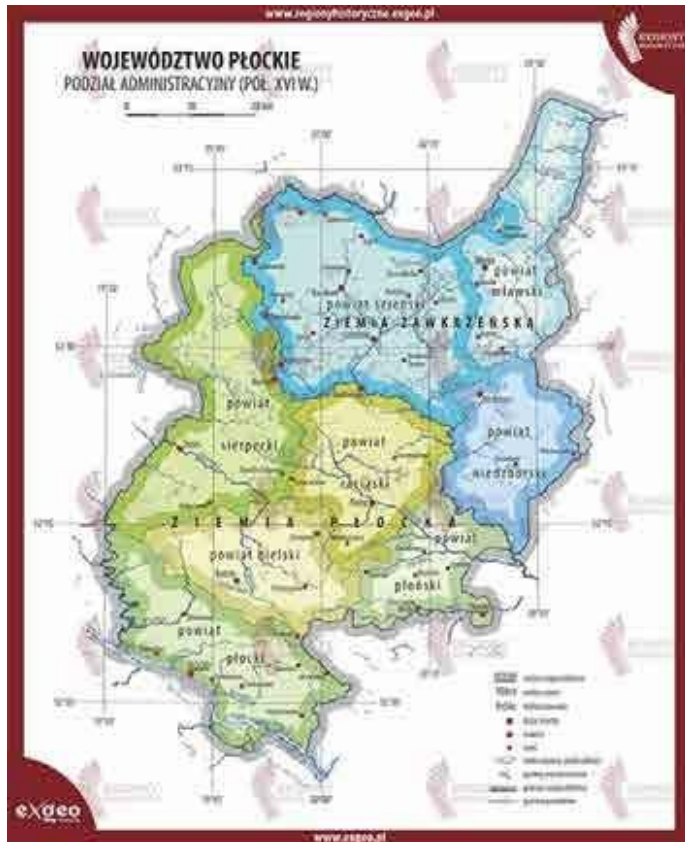
A similar number of counties existed in the Wizna Land: Wizna, Radziłów, and Wąsosz. The Zakroczym

Land consisted of two counties: Zakroczym and Nowe Miasto.

Finally, the Liw Land and the Wyszogród Land were not subdivided into counties.



Figure 16. Masovian Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa mazo-wieckiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.re-gionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/woje-wodztwo-mazowieckie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 12.2025].



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Figure 17. Płock Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa płockiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-plockie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Within the Płock Voivodeship, the following counties were established: Płock, Bielsk, Raciąż, Sierpc, Płoński, Szczyński, Niedźborz, and Mława.

It should be noted that the counties of Szczyński, Niedźborz, and Mława together formed the so-called Zawkrze Land.

The Rawa Voivodeship exhibited a more complex territorial structure. It was divided into three lands, each further subdivided into two counties.

The Rawa Land comprised the Rawa and Biała counties. The Gostynin Land consisted of the Gostynin and Gąbin counties. The Sochaczew Land was divided into the Sochaczew and Mszczonów counties.



Figure 18. Rawa Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *The Rawa Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziemia_rawska [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Counties in Royal Prussia

Like Masovia, Royal Prussia was incorporated into the Greater Poland Province under the provisions of the Union of Lublin. It was divided into three voivodeships: Pomeranian, Chełmno, and Malbork²¹. In addition, Warmia constituted a separate ecclesiastical territory, known as the Dominion of Warmia, administered by Catholic bishops²².

The Pomeranian Voivodeship comprised the following counties: Tczew, Czluchów, Tuchola, Świecie, Mirachowo, Puck, Nowe, and Gdańsk. In addition, certain territories, particularly in the Vistula delta, were administered directly by the city of Gdańsk²³.

²¹ Numerous valuable observations on the territorial structure of Royal Prussia are provided in: S. Gierszewski, *Badania nad zaludnieniem Prus Królewskich*, "Roczniki Humanistyczne", 1987 no. 35 (2), p. 289–300.

²² For a more detailed discussion of the administration of Warmia in the pre-partition period, see: A. Kopiczko, *Ustrój i organizacja diecezji warmińskiej w latach 1525–1772*, Olsztyn 1993.

²³ See E. Cieślak (ed.), *Historia Gdańska*, vol. 2 and 3/1, Gdańsk 1982–1993. This work also contains an extensive bibliography on the subject.



Figure 19. Pomeranian Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa pomorskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-pomorskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The Chełmno Voivodeship comprised only two counties—Chełmno and Michałowo—as well as territories administered directly by the city of Toruń²⁴.



Figure 20. Pomeranian Voivodeship in the seventeenth century. Source: Regiony historyczne, *Mapa województwa pomorskiego w XVII wieku*, <https://www.regionyhistoryczne.exgeo.pl/korona/wojewodztwo-chelminskie-xvi-xviii-w-mapy> [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Z komentarzem [JO1]: Mamy tu 2 razy mapę województwa pomorskiego - czy nie ma tu błędu?

²⁴ Cf. M. Superczyński, *Administracja i sądownictwo dawnego Torunia w świetle źródeł z XIV–XVIII wieku*, “Rocznik Toruński” 2015, vol. 42.

Finally, the Malbork Voivodeship likewise consisted of two counties: Malbork and Sztum.



Figure 21. Malbork Voivodeship and the Duchy of Warmia in the seventeenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *The Malbork Voivodeship and the Prince-Bishopric of Warmia in the seventeenth century*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojew%C3%B3dztwo_malborskie [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

3, did not possess an internal county structure (the territory of the Duchy is visible on the map above).

Counties in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

Over successive periods, a varying number of voivodeships formed part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Throughout the entire existence of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, these included the voivodeships of Vilnius, Trakai, Nowogródek, Brześć Litewski, Podlasie, Samogitia, Minsk, Mstislav, Vitebsk, and Polotsk. Until 1569, the Duchy also comprised the Volhynian, Kyiv, and Braclaw Voivodeships, while the Chernihiv and Smolensk Voivodeships formed part of its territory for limited periods.

The voivodeships permanently incorporated into the Commonwealth contained the following counties and lands:

- Vilnius Voivodeship: Vilnius, Ashmyany, Lida, and Braslaw;
- Trakai Voivodeship: Trakai, Kaunas, Upytė, and Ukmergė;
- Novogrudok Voivodeship: Novogrudok, Slonim, and Volkovysk;
- Brest Voivodeship: Brest, Kobryn, and Pinsk;
- Podlasie Voivodeship: Drohiczyn, Mielnik, and Bielsk;



Figure 22. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the mid-seventeenth century, showing the voivodeships then forming part of the province. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *The Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the mid-seventeenth century*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojew%C3%B3dztwo_brzeskolitewskie#/media/Plik:Brest-Litovsk_Voivodeship_within_Lithuania_in_the_17th_century.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

- Samogitian Voivodeship: the lands of Raseiniai, Šiauliai, and Telšiai;
- Minsk Voivodeship: Minsk, Rechitsa, and Mozyr;
- Mstislav Voivodeship: Mstislav and Krychev;
- Vitebsk Voivodeship: Vitebsk and Orsha;
- Polotsk Voivodeship: Polotsk and Dzisna²⁵.

Overall, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, more than 150 counties and lands functioned within the voivodeships permanently forming part of the Commonwealth. These units differed markedly in terms of territorial size, population, and internal administrative organisation.

²⁵ The functioning of counties in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is discussed in greater detail in the multi-volume work edited by A. Rachuba, *Urządnicy Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego: Spisy*.

Political Life in the Kingdom of Poland and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

The development of constitutional institutions based on democratic mechanisms led to a marked intensification of political activity, primarily among the so-called noble nation. Until the early fifteenth century, participation in political life was largely confined to narrow circles of magnates and the higher clergy. From that point onwards, however, increasingly broad strata of the emerging noble estate became politically engaged.

In the first half of the fifteenth century, the nobility succeeded in securing from successive monarchs, most notably Ladislaus Jagiella, a series of general privileges¹. These culminated in the Nieszawa Privilege of 1454, issued by Casimir IV Jagiellon. This negotiated act formally recognised the constitutional role of territorial assemblies (sejmiki),

thereby entrusting the noble nation with a significant degree of co-responsibility for the governance of the state².

The territorial assemblies, which evolved from earlier provincial gatherings (wiece), became representative bodies of the nobility residing within a given voivodeship³. It is important to stress that the Cerekwica–Nieszawa Privileges did not grant the nobility the right to participate in sejmiki, since this right derived from much older, pre-state traditions. Rather, the monarch confirmed and substantially strengthened the political role and representative function of the nobility in the public life of the Kingdom.

A detailed examination of the institutional foundations, organisation, and constitutional evolution of the sejmiki lies beyond the scope of the present discussion. These issues have been addressed extensively in the scholarly literature, both in synthetic studies and in specialised analyses⁴. For the purposes of this study, however, it is essential to identify,

¹ These consisted of three royal acts: the Czerwińsk Privilege of 1422, the Warta Statute of 1423, and the Jedlnia–Kraków Privilege of 1430–1433. For the texts of these privileges, see: S. Kutrzeba, *Historja źródeł dawnego prawa polskiego*, vol. 1, Lviv–Warsaw–Kraków 1925, p. 79–82.

² Seeking to encourage the nobility to participate in the war against the Teutonic Order, Casimir IV Jagiellon undertook not to summon the *pospolite ruszenie* (noble levy), impose new taxes, or enact new laws without the consent of the territorial assemblies (sejmiki). This commitment was made to the nobility of Greater Poland at Cerekwica and to the nobility of Lesser Poland at Nieszawa. For a broader discussion of the origins of these privileges, see: M. Biskup, *Trzynastoletnia wojna z Zakonem Krzyżackim 1454–1466*, Warsaw 1967.

³ On the institution of the territorial assemblies (sejmiki), see above all the synthesis by W. Kriegseisen, *Sejmiki Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej w XVII i XVIII wieku*, Warsaw 1991, as well as numerous monographs published over the past three decades devoted to the activity of individual assemblies. Still of fundamental importance are the classic works by A. Pawiński: *Rządy sejmikowe w Polsce 1572–1795: na tle stosunków województw kujawskich*, Warsaw 1888; and *Sejmiki ziemskie: początek ich i rozwój aż do ustalenia się udziału posłów ziemskich w ustawodawstwie sejmiku walnego 1374–1505*, Warsaw 1895.

⁴ An extensive overview of the scholarly literature is provided, inter alia, in: R. Kozyrski, *Sejmiki województw Małopolski właściwej 1572–1648 – stan badań, organizacja, specyfika sejmikowa, propozycje badawcze*, "Miscellanea Historico-Iuridica" 2022, vol. 21, issue 1 https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/14756/1/MHI_21_1_R_Kozyrski_Sejmiki_województw_Malopolski.pdf [accessed on: 16.08. 2025]. Among recent works, notable examples include: R. Kozyrski, *Sejmiki szlacheckie ziemi chełmskiej 1648–1717*, Lublin

within the broader processes shaping the development of the sejmiki, the emergence of forms of political life that may be regarded as approximating modern democracy. From this perspective, a crucial issue is the appearance of political groupings whose activity extended beyond individual sejmik sessions and beyond matters strictly limited to local concerns.

This development was closely connected with the formation of the Sejm of the Kingdom, and later the Sejm of the Commonwealth, within which, alongside the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies emerged. The latter was composed of representatives elected by individual voivodeship (territorial) sejmiki⁵, rendering the selection of deputies a matter of statewide political significance.

Broadly speaking, three distinct phases may be identified in this process. During the sixteenth century, a series of developments significantly accelerated the political organisation of society in the Kingdom of Poland.⁶

Prior to this, during the initial phase of the emergence of noble democracy⁷, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the principal axis of political division lay in the divergent interests of the Kingdom's two main provinces: Greater Poland and Lesser Poland. This constituted the earliest and most natural framework for articulating shared political interests within the noble nation, centred primarily on the preservation of provincial distinctiveness⁸.

2006; A. Król, *Sejmik ziem lwowskiej, przemyskiej i sanockiej w Sądowej Wiszni za panowania Wazów (1587–1668)*, Przemyśl 2023; K. Mazur, *W stronę integracji z Koroną. Sejmiki Wołynia i Ukrainy w latach 1569–1648*, Warsaw 2006; J. Stoliczka, *Sejmiki województw ukraińskich podczas wygnania 1648–1700*, Kraków 2023; J. Ternes, *Sejmik chełmski za Wazów (1587–1668)*, Lublin 2004; M. Ujma, *Sejmik lubelski 1572–1696*, Warsaw 2003; Zwierzykowski M., *Samorząd sejmikowy województw poznańskiego i kaliskiego w latach 1696–1732*, Poznań 2010, as well as the somewhat earlier study by S. Achremczyk, *Życie sejmikowe Prus Królewskich w latach 1647–1772*, Olsztyn 1999; J. Chojińska-Mika, *Sejmiki mazowieckie doby Wazów*, Warsaw 1998; A. Filipczak-Kocur, *Sejmik sieradzki za Wazów (1587–1668)*, Opole 1989; Z. Naworski, *Sejmik generalny Prus Królewskich 1569–1772. Organizacja i funkcjonowanie na tle zgrupowań stanowych prowincji*, Toruń 1992; S. Plaza, *Sejmiki i zjazdy szlacheckie województw poznańskiego i kaliskiego. Ustrój i funkcjonowanie (1572–1632)*, Warsaw–Kraków 1984; S. Plaza, *Sejmiki i zjazdy szlacheckie województwa sieradzkiego. Ustrój i funkcjonowanie (1572–1632)*, Warsaw–Kraków 1987; A.B. Zakrzewski, *Sejmiki Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego XVI–XVIII w. Ustrój i funkcjonowanie: sejmik trocki*, Warsaw 2000.

⁵ Individual voivodeships and lands customarily sent a fixed number of deputies, generally from one to six. Initially, this had little practical significance, since the Chamber adopted its positions by the consent of individual voivodeships (lands) rather than by counting individual votes. Only in the seventeenth century did the role of individual deputies increase, as a result of the pathological evolution of the institution of *liberum veto*. A detailed discussion of this process is provided by

M.Z. Dankowski, *Liberum Veto – chluba czy przekleństwo*, Toruń 2019. Formally, the number of deputies amounted to 204, although in practice approximately 190 attended parliamentary sessions, as some deputies from Royal Prussia were merely titular and remained at home. Cf.: S. Ochmann-Staniszevska, Z. Staniszevska, *Sejm Rzeczypospolitej za panowania Jana Kazimierza Wazy. Prawo – doktryna – praktyka*, vol. 2, Wrocław 2000, p. 25–27.

⁶ To a lesser extent and with some delay, this process also occurred in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This situation resulted from the far greater influence exerted on political life in the Grand Duchy by powerful aristocratic families, which clearly dominated the Lithuanian nobility. Only after the Union of Lublin did a partial revival and activation of the broader Lithuanian noble estate occur; even then, however, political life in the Grand Duchy remained markedly less developed than in the Crown. Cf.: J. Bardach, *Studia z ustroju i prawa Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego XIV–XVII w.*, Białystok 1970, p. 11–67.

⁷ The revival of political activity associated with the war against the Teutonic Order in 1409–1411 already transcended the previously established framework of political participation. Until that point, political processes had been shaped almost exclusively by secular and ecclesiastical magnates. In this respect, the magnate elites of Lesser Poland had exercised particularly strong influence, a situation that had persisted since the thirteenth century. The early fifteenth century, however, brought about a fundamental change. Through the growing activity of local assemblies (sejmiki), institutionally reinforced by the privileges granted by Ladislaus Jogaila and Casimir IV Jagiellon, broad segments of the emerging noble nation were drawn into co-decision-making in public affairs. Cf.: W. Kriesgeisen, op. cit., p. 17–25.

⁸ This affected not only internal political relations, most notably the maintenance of a relative balance of influence between the elites of the two principal provinces, but also the sphere of foreign policy. It shaped divergent perceptions of external threats and differing orientations in the search for international alliances. On the origins of this division, see: G. Labuda, *W sprawie pochodzenia nazw: Wielkopolska i Małopolska*, „Przegląd Zachodni” 1954, no. 5–6, p. 114–119.

After 1505, when the constitution *Nihil novi* guaranteed the decisive participation of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies in the enactment of generally binding law within the Kingdom⁹, the selection of representatives for individual voivodeships became a matter of fundamental political importance for local communities. As a result of this far-reaching constitutional change, it became natural for voivodeship delegations to form supra-regional political groupings in order more effectively to defend their interests¹⁰.

The first phase of this process occurred at the end of the sixteenth century and was closely linked to political developments surrounding the first three royal elections. Political rivalry focused on the elections that brought Henry of Valois to the throne in 1574, Stephen Báthory in 1576, and Sigismund III Vasa in 1587. This period, spanning more than a decade, was marked by the intensive formation of political groupings advocating particular royal candidates. On one side stood the royalist and so-called “democratic” camp, led by Jan Zamoyski, who simultaneously held the two highest offices in the state: that of Grand Chancellor of the Crown and Grand Hetman of the Crown. Opposing them was the faction supporting the candidacy of a Habsburg for the Polish throne, commonly referred to as the Austrian (or Rakuszenie) party. These political alignments continued to operate, albeit with changing personal configurations, under subsequent monarchs. In practice, a degree of continuity in this pattern can also be observed during the reigns of Ladislaus IV Vasa and John II Casimir. Although the elections of the later Vasa kings did not serve, unlike the earlier interregna, as major catalysts for the emergence of new political divisions, their reigns were nevertheless characterised by tensions that generated dynamic political transformations.

A second major axis of political division, along which voivodeship delegations tended to coalesce, concerned attitudes towards the monarch and the demands of royal policy, particularly in the spheres of foreign affairs and military organisation. Here, the principal source of tension was taxation. Decisions in this area were, in many cases, directly linked to the state’s military requirements and, more specifically, to the directions of foreign policy pursued by the king. Since the financing of military campaigns depended decisively on the position adopted by the Sejm, it was within both of its chambers that increasingly distinct political divisions emerged¹².

⁹ For a recent interpretation of the significance of the *Nihil novi* constitution, see: W. Uruszczak, “*Sejm walny wszystkich państw naszych*”: konstytucja *Nihil novi* i sejm w Radomiu w 1505 roku, Radom 2005.

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that, at the same time, the so-called general assemblies (sejmiki generalne), which had previously served as forums for coordinating the political positions of individual provinces, also entered a period of decline. This development constituted a significant consequence of the constitutional transformation brought about by the legislation of 1505. The sole enduring exception was the general assembly of Royal Prussia. Cf.: Z. Naworski, op. cit. In exceptional circumstances, the general assembly of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was also revived prior to the general Sejm of 1685. Cf. R. Kołodziej, *Litewski sejmik generalny w Słonimiu na tle sytuacji w Rzeczypospolitej przed sejmem 1685 roku*, “Res Historica” 2015, no. 40, p. 97–113.

¹¹ Among the extensive scholarly literature on this subject, particular attention should be drawn to the following works: S. Grzybowski, *Jan Zamoyski*, Warszawa 1994 and W. Sokolowski, *Politycy schyłku złotego wieku. Małopolscy przywódcy szlachty i parlamentarzyści w latach 1574–1605*, Warsaw 1997.

¹² Fiscal issues in this period are discussed, inter alia, in: A. Filipczak-Kocur, *Skarb litewski za pierwszych dwóch Wazów 1587–1648*, Wrocław 1994.

A particularly important issue during the reigns of both Sigismunds was the so-called execution of the laws¹³. This question constituted the principal axis of political confrontation for several decades and strongly influenced the formation of more durable political groupings.

A key factor shaping the executionist movement and the associated political divide was the religious question. The spread of Protestantism among the Polish nobility in the mid-sixteenth century led to the predominance of Protestants within the faction advocating the execution of the laws. At the same time, the programme of this movement included far-reaching proposals for reforming various elements of the political and social order of the Kingdom. Opposing this faction was a political camp based primarily on the higher clergy, who formed a substantial component of the upper chamber of the Sejm – the Senate, together with a growing number of Catholic deputies. This group perceived the demands of the executionist movement as a threat that could lead to Protestant domination of the state.

Another significant factor contributing to the early formation of political factions was attitudes towards preferred alliance orientations for the Kingdom. In this sphere, a phenomenon of political corruption began to intensify at a relatively early stage. Numerous members of both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies succumbed to the temptation to accept various forms of financial inducements from foreign powers. The Habsburg dynasty pursued particularly active policies in this regard, successfully recruiting a considerable number of parliamentarians into the so-called imperial party. Less powerful, though at times influential, was the faction associated with the House of Brandenburg, which was primarily concerned with securing its succession in Ducal Prussia. This option proved especially attractive to Protestant deputies from Greater Poland and Lithuania. At various times, a French party also played a role in public life. French diplomacy consistently sought opportunities to draw the Commonwealth into its broader anti-Habsburg strategies¹⁴.

An additional catalyst for political division was the attitude towards royal marriages, both those of reigning monarchs and those of their offspring. There is little doubt that Queen Bona's energetic efforts to build her own political faction exerted a profound influence on the emergence of anti-royalist opposition during the reign of Sigismund the Old. A similar dynamic can be observed in connection with the marriage of Sigismund Augustus to Barbara Radziwiłł, as well as his subsequent matrimonial choices. In much the same way, this issue played a major role in mobilising opponents of the throne during the reigns of Ladislaus IV, John II Casimir, and John Sobieski. It must be emphasised that these questions were closely intertwined with political divisions arising from rivalry between Habsburg, French, and Brandenburg interests.

Finally, and no less importantly, a further factor shaping successive compositions of the Chamber of Deputies and influencing the character of the Senate was the persistent demand for constitutional reform. In this context, particular attention focused on problems of royal succession, as well as on attempts to establish clearer formal frameworks for parliamentary procedure, especially within the Chamber of Deputies, and for defining the mutual

¹³ A synthetic overview of the significance of the executionist movement for the development of political life, particularly within the Crown, is provided by W. Konopczyński, *Dzieje Polski Nowożytnej*. Volume 1: 1506–1648, Warsaw–Kraków–Łódź–Poznań–Wilnius–Zakopane 1936. Among more recent studies, see E. Nowak-Jamróz, *Naprawić Rzeczypospolitą. Postulaty szlacheckie z lat 1533–1570*, Piotrków Trybunalski 2021. This work also contains an extensive bibliography on the subject.

¹⁴ To date, no comprehensive monograph has been devoted to the activities of political factions in the Commonwealth connected with foreign courts. Fragmentary information on this topic may be found in studies devoted to particular sessions of the general Sejm, as well as in partial analyses of court and opposition factions operating within specific regions of the state.

relations of the three estates of parliament: the King, the Senate, and the Chamber of Deputies. An important strand of these debates consisted of efforts to systematise the law and to reform the judicial system and existing court procedures.

One concept that gradually emerged from these constitutional disputes and gained increasing prominence was that of *absolutum dominium*¹⁵. The defence of established liberties and privileges against perceived attempts by the throne to strengthen royal authority led to growing political polarisation within both chambers of parliament. A crucial factor reinforcing this line of division was a process observable throughout the sixteenth century in almost all European states: the progressive marginalisation of representative bodies (parliamentary assemblies)¹⁶ in co-decision-making on matters of general state importance. This tendency ultimately resulted in the emergence of absolutist models of government across much of Europe¹⁷. Seen in this broader context, the anxieties expressed by Polish political circles were by no means unfounded. It should also be noted that the most significant perceived threat associated with *absolutum dominium* was linked to Habsburg – or more broadly, German – influence. It is striking that opponents of these absolutist tendencies readily aligned themselves with French policy and, for reasons that are not entirely clear, failed to perceive a comparable danger emanating from that direction.

Until the death of Sigismund II Augustus, these tensions gave rise to two relatively stable political camps: the court party and the anti-court party. A third grouping of comparable durability may be identified in the supporters of the execution of the laws. Each of these groupings articulated a distinct political programme, which it sought to implement by securing majority support in both chambers of the Sejm. At this stage, however, these factions possessed no permanent organisational structures, generally did not formulate written political programmes (although the executionist movement maintained a systematically revised list of demands), and were characterised, owing to a variety of factors, by considerable fluidity in their personal composition. Leadership within these camps was likewise unstable. In this sense, they may be described as largely improvised and formed on an ad hoc basis. At the same time, this distinctive flexibility facilitated the achievement, especially in moments of crisis, of the so-called “general consensus”¹⁸, without which effective decision-making by the estates represented in the Sejm was impossible.

The decisive turning point that dramatically intensified political life and accelerated the formation of political factions was the death of Sigismund II Augustus. As a consequence, the principle of the elective monarchy

¹⁵ *Absolutum dominium* was an abstract concept, encompassing in essence everything that was regarded as contrary to the apologetically construed “noble liberty”. In its initial phase, this perceived threat was identified with the model of authority exercised by the Habsburgs and, in effect, carried a strong anti-German undertone. Cf.: M.Z. Dankowski, *Strach przed absolutum dominium przyczyną destabilizacji parlamentarnej Rzeczypospolitej w drugiej połowie XVII wieku*, in: A. Korytko, B. Krysztopa-Czupryńska (ed.), *W Rzeczypospolitej Wazów i Królów Rodaków*, Warsaw 2025, p. 227–248.

¹⁶ The process of the “extinguishing” of representative assemblies in practice affected nearly all European states. For a broader discussion of this process, see G. Górski, *Historia ustrojów państw*, Warsaw 2001.

¹⁷ The deeper causes of these processes, reaching back to institutional solutions that emerged as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are examined in an insightful study by J. Górski-Szymczak, op. cit.

¹⁸ At the time, deliberations in the Chamber of Deputies were dominated by the practice of “forging a consensus”, which consisted in securing an overwhelming majority in support of a given issue while marginalising small minorities. For a broader discussion, see I. Lewandowska-Malec, *Sejm walny koronny Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów i jego dorobek ustawodawczy*, Kraków 2009.

became an unquestioned constitutional foundation of the state¹⁹. What is particularly significant is that, already at the first election, it was established that the king would be chosen through a *viritim* election²⁰. This meant that every member of the noble nation was entitled to participate personally in the election of the monarch. Since three royal elections followed in relatively rapid succession, these events became a powerful catalyst for political polarisation.

The key factor shaping the first election and the choice of Henry of Valois was the issue of religious tolerance. The early decades of the second half of the sixteenth century witnessed decisive advances by the Catholic Reformation, while internal conflicts and doctrinal divisions within the Protestant camp significantly weakened its political position. The incorporation of the Ruthenian voivodeships into the Crown in 1569 further intensified discontent among the Orthodox population, who feared an aggressive Catholic campaign in those territories²¹. Disputes surrounding these issues crystallised into two principal political camps: Catholic and non-Catholic. The outcome of this confrontation was the Sandomierz Agreement²² and, subsequently, the Warsaw Confederation²³. An additional factor influencing Henry's election was the widespread conviction that Habsburg candidates embodied, on the one hand, a pronounced inclination towards *absolutum dominium* and, on the other, an overtly hostile attitude towards religious dissenters. It is noteworthy that those dissenters who supported Henry failed to perceive any comparable danger in his experience of operating within a political system no less centralised than that of the Habsburgs²⁴. Even more strikingly, they did not interpret his involvement in the violent religious conflicts in France, including the recent massacre of Protestants during the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, as a threat to their own interests.

The political alignments formed during this election survived largely unchanged until the subsequent election of Stephen Báthory. By that time, the undisputed leader of the anti-Habsburg (or "Austrian") camp had become the hetman and chancellor Jan Zamoyski. It was Zamoyski's energetic intervention

¹⁹ In fact, the elective character of the Kraków throne had already been in operation since the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Cf.: K. Baczkowski, "Panowie przyrodzeni" a elekcyjność tronu w Polsce średniowiecznej, "Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego" 2008, MCCXCI, Prace Historyczne

no. 135, p. 53-63. This principle was subsequently consolidated, although initially it was limited to elections conducted within the Piast dynasty and later the Jagiellonian dynasty. Crucially, however, the act of election remained confined to a narrow circle of the magnate elite, particularly that of Lesser Poland. A fundamental constitutional transformation occurred only after the death of Sigismund II Augustus, when the right of every free nobleman to participate in the election of the king was formally recognised.

²⁰ The *viritim* election denoted precisely this universality of active suffrage exercised by the entire nobility in the royal election. For a broader discussion, see I. Lewandowska-Malec, *Wolna elekcja króla Rzeczypospolitej Obajga Narodów*, "Z dziejów Prawa" 2019, vol. 12 (20), p. 147-162.

²¹ This issue had, in principle, been regulated following the incorporation of Red Ruthenia into the Kingdom of Poland by Casimir the Great in the mid-fourteenth century. Owing to his decisions, the Kingdom of Poland became, on a European scale, a unique bi-confessional state, in which two state religions were de facto accepted, alongside an unprecedented level of tolerance toward Jews. Cf.: A. Mironowicz, *Kościół prawosławny w dziejach Rzeczypospolitej*, "Elpis" 1999, no. 1 (14), p. 90-91.

²² The Sandomierz Agreement of 1570 constituted an accord among Lutherans, Calvinists, and the Bohemian Brethren. It provided for the mutual recognition of sacraments and for coordinated action against the Catholic Reformation. For a detailed analysis, see K. Długosz-Kurczabowa, *Konfesja Sandomierska*. Warsaw 2001.

²³ The Act of the Warsaw Confederation of 1573 guaranteed unconditional and perpetual peace within the Commonwealth among those "divided by religion" (*dissidentes in religione*), prohibited the initiation of conflict under any religious pretext, and granted the nobility the right to determine the confession of their subjects. On the significance of this act, see *Konfederacja warszawska 1573 roku wielka karta polskiej tolerancji*, ed. M. Korolko, J. Tazbir, Warsaw 1980.

²⁴ See the remarks on this issue in: G. Górski, *Historia ustrojów państw...*

that led to the proclamation of the Transylvanian prince, initially regarded as an unlikely candidate, as King of Poland. The political camp constructed by Zamoyski played a decisive role during the reign of King Stephen.

Following the king's unexpected death, Jan Zamoyski undertook vigorous efforts to secure his own election to the throne. These ambitions, however, were thwarted by the prevailing political climate, which proved unfavourable both to the idea of electing a so-called "Piast" (the contemporary term for a domestic candidate) and, in particular, to Zamoyski himself. This situation brought about a profound reconfiguration of the political landscape. Zamoyski was pushed into deep political defensiveness, and his death in 1605 further accelerated the disintegration of the so-called "chancellery" faction²⁵.

Against this background, a major factor shaping the dynamics of political life in this period was the so-called Zborowski affair²⁶. As a result of the prolonged conflict between King Sigismund III and Jan Zamoyski, together with their respective political camps, a serious political crisis erupted after the chancellor's death in the form of the Zebrzydowski rebellion²⁷, which proved to be a pivotal event, exerting a lasting influence on the practical functioning of political life in both the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the first half of the seventeenth century²⁸.

As noted above, the elections of Władysław IV and John II Casimir attracted intense interest from foreign courts, most notably those of the Habsburgs, France, Russia, and Prussia, but did not give rise to durable political factions. Instead, what emerged were temporary cliques rather than stable political formations. A leading role in shaping these groupings was played by the reigning monarchs themselves, in conjunction with a small number of increasingly powerful magnate families. The scale of external interference in the political life of the Commonwealth led, following the abdication of John II Casimir, to a pronounced tendency to favour the election of "national" Piast rulers. Nevertheless, the circles promoting, successively, the candidacies of Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki, John III Sobieski, and Stanisław Leszczyński arose on an ad hoc basis and lacked any durability comparable to that of the political groupings that had existed a century earlier.

An additional factor contributing to the deterioration of political life during this period was the increasingly pathological use of the *liberum veto*²⁹. It should be noted that its entrenchment was significantly facilitated by its repeated exploitation under both John II Casimir and John III Sobieski, who, through their supporters, also resorted to the deliberate disruption of parliamentary sessions.

²⁵ For a broader discussion, see: V. Urbaniak, *Zamoyszczycy bez Zamoyskiego. Studium dekompozycji ugrupowania politycznego*, Warsaw 1995.

²⁶ Samuel Zborowski, a member of one of the most powerful magnate families of the period, killed the nobleman Wapowski during a brawl. Owing to the involvement of King Stephen Báthory and Jan Zamoyski, he was sentenced to death, and the sentence was carried out as a result of Zamoyski's determination. The case became the focal point of political conflict in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth during the 1580s. Cf.: S. Grzybowski, op. cit., p. 161–178.

²⁷ The initiator of the rebellion was Mikołaj Zebrzydowski, Voivode of Kraków, around whom opponents of King Sigismund III rallied. The rebels' principal slogan was resistance to the aforementioned *absolutum dominium*. The king was accused of seeking to centralise power on a model inspired by Habsburg practices. Insightful observations on this issue may be found in: H. Wisner, *Rokosz Zebrzydowski albo sandomierski: cezura epizod z dziejów walk politycznych początki XVII wieku*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1983, vol. 90, no. 3.

²⁸ One consequence of the Zebrzydowski rebellion was the clarification of the formal conditions governing the exercise of the right of resistance against the ruler, that is, the so-called privilege of *de non praestanda oboedientia*, in the constitution adopted in 1609 (VL 2, p. 462–463). This act specified the principles under which the lawful withdrawal of obedience to the reigning monarch would henceforth be permissible. Cf.: E. Opaliński, *Kultura polityczna szlachty polskiej w latach 1587–1652*, Warsaw 1995, p. 43 ff.

²⁹ A broader discussion of this issue is provided in the previously cited study by: M. Z. Dankowski, *Liberum Veto – chluba czy przekleństwo*.

The Emergence of Modern Political Parties in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century.

The beginning of the eighteenth century brought developments that profoundly altered the existing model of political life in the Commonwealth. These changes resulted from a combination of internal factors and shifts in the international environment surrounding Poland. Unsurprisingly, they were accompanied by a range of pathologies, among which the most destructive was the open involvement of foreign powers in domestic political processes. This interference was closely linked to widespread corruption, practised by both foreign agents and domestic elites.

The processes under consideration were set in motion by two principal factors. The first was the political turmoil surrounding the election that followed the death of John III Sobieski¹. The second was the course, and consequences, of the Great Northern War, which proved catastrophic for the Commonwealth, particularly in its social and economic dimensions².

To this must be added the devastating effects of the major plague epidemic at the end of the first decade of the eighteenth century. Combined with the destruction caused by warfare and the prolonged, systematic pillaging carried out by Russian, Swedish, and Saxon armies, the epidemic resulted in widespread devastation, above all in economic terms³.

During the struggle for the throne at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, three principal political camps emerged within the Commonwealth. Much as in the preceding two centuries, however, their structure largely followed patterns already described above. What is particularly important is that, on the basis of these divisions,

¹ For a detailed discussion of the interregnum following the death of John III Sobieski, see: M. Komarzyński, *Księcia Contirgo niefortunna wyprawa po koronę Sobieskiego*, Warsaw 1971.

² A classic study that continues to retain substantial scholarly value is: J. Feldman, *Polska w dobie Wielkiej Wojny Północnej 1704–1709*, Kraków 1925.

³ The plague epidemic lasted from 1708 to 1714, reaching its greatest intensity between 1708 and 1712. It primarily affected the countries of the Baltic Sea basin, causing particularly severe devastation in coastal cities. It is estimated, for example, that Gdańsk lost more than 50 per cent of its population, Königsberg and Szczecin approximately 20 per cent each, Riga, Pärnu, and Tallinn around 70 per cent, and Stralsund, Stockholm, Malmö, and Copenhagen roughly 40 per cent of their inhabitants. The origins of the epidemic are commonly associated with Podolia and Volhynia, where Swedish troops were operating. Their movements across Polish territories from 1706 onwards significantly contributed to the spread of the plague in these regions and in Ruthenia. During this period, Lviv lost approximately 40 per cent of its population, while even greater losses were recorded in Stanisławów, Przemyśl, Jarosław, Stryi, and Kolomyja. In rural areas, where losses are more difficult to quantify, mortality is estimated at between 40 and 50 per cent of the population. As it advanced

further westward, the plague devastated Kraków (approximately 20,000 victims), followed by Warsaw (around 30,000) and Poznań (about 9,000), before spreading into Ducal Prussia and Warmia. From there it reached Lithuania and, together with the troops of J. Potocki, passed through Silesia into the Habsburg lands and southern Germany. For a broader discussion of this phenomenon, see: K.E. Frandsen, *The Last Plague In Baltic Region 1709–1713*, Copenhagen 2009; R.I. Frost, *The Northern Wars. War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe 1558–1721*, London 2000; J. Zapnik, *Pest und Krieg im Ostseeraum. Der „Schwarze Tod“ in Stralsund während des Großen Nordischen Krieges (1700–1721)*, Hamburg 2007; K. F. Helleiner, *The Population of Europe from the Black Death to the Eve of Vital Revolution* [in:] Rich E. E., Wilson C. H., (eds.) *The Economy of Expanding Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 4, Cambridge. 1967. It should be noted, however, that Polish historiography still lacks comprehensive studies of the course of this catastrophe and, above all, of its long-term social and economic consequences for the lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

political groupings of a fundamentally different character were to emerge in the decades that followed. It is therefore worth examining the factions that took shape at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Around the Saxon ruling house there emerged the so-called Wettin faction, which supported the candidacy of Augustus II. Prominent roles within this group were played by members of the Flemming, Ożarowski, Denhoff, and Morsztyn families. Although the faction viewed Russia as an ally of the Commonwealth, it would be misleading to describe it, at least at this stage, as unequivocally pro-Russian.

The principal rival of the Saxon camp was the pro-French faction, which backed Stanisław Leszczyński. Its leading figures came from the Lubomirski, Sapieha, Potocki, and Radziwiłł families. In military affairs, this group consistently favoured Sweden. It was largely through the initiatives of its leaders that, at the end of 1715, the General Confederation, known as the Tarnogród Confederation, was formed⁴.

Alongside the struggle for the throne, a third political alignment took shape: the so-called republican faction. This group generally positioned itself in opposition to the Saxon camp, since the candidacy in question was associated with efforts to centralise royal authority and was therefore perceived as a direct threat to noble liberties. The defence of the so-called “Golden Liberty” formed the core ideological bond uniting this faction. Its leadership was drawn primarily from the Branicki, Rzewuski, Wiśniowiecki, and Sieniawski families. Ideologically, the republican faction stood close to the pro-French camp, while simultaneously sharing with the Wettin faction a broadly favourable attitude towards Russia. What ultimately united its adherents was opposition to the consequences of the predatory presence of Swedish and Russian troops on the territory of the Commonwealth. In the context of the devastating plague epidemic described above, the exploitation of Polish and Lithuanian lands by foreign armies became intolerable. Notably, the scale of destruction inflicted by Swedish forces was such that Russian troops, and their practices of plunder, came to be regarded as the “lesser evil”.

The combined effects of economic collapse, depopulation, and extreme exploitation, caused by foreign armies and compounded by the epidemic, led to a profound destabilisation of the Commonwealth’s social and economic fabric, which had only recently begun to recover from the military and social catastrophes of 1648–1660. These developments hit the petty and middle nobility particularly hard. Beyond the immediate material hardships faced by these broad strata, the crisis fundamentally reshaped the nature of their participation in political life.

As a result, the defining characteristic of this period became the erosion, among large segments of the nobility, of political independence – a feature that had been central to noble democracy until the mid-seventeenth century. From that time onward, and with particular intensity in the eighteenth century, clientelism and political corruption became widespread phenomena, as magnate leaders of emerging factions increasingly constituted the principal – if not the sole – source of financial support for the average noble household⁵. Impoverished nobles responded in various ways: some entered service on magnate estates (more often in private military formations than in civilian roles); others incurred debt in an effort to restore

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the circumstances and political-constitutional consequences of the Tarnogród Confederation, see: A.A. Witusik, *Przywódcy konfederacji tarnogrodzkiej*, [in:] *Konfederacja tarnogrodzka i jej tradycje*, Tarnogród 1995.

⁵ A broader analysis of this problem is offered by M. Kowalski, *Księstwa Rzeczypospolitej. Państwo magnackie jako region polityczny*, Warsaw 2013..

their own productive activity; but most commonly they sold their political support at local assemblies (sejmiki) and, if elected, in the national parliament (the Sejm).⁶

The scale of this practice was unprecedented in the history of Polish political life. Yet, when viewed in comparative perspective, against developments in Great Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or in the United States in the nineteenth century, it becomes clear that such mechanisms were characteristic of a particular stage in the evolution of democratic systems.⁷ Nevertheless, whereas elsewhere this phenomenon represented a step beyond earlier, more exclusive forms of political mobilisation, within the constitutional framework of the Polish–Lithuanian state, especially in its Polish component, it marked, in comparison with the late sixteenth century, a significant deterioration in the quality of political life. These tendencies continued to intensify in subsequent decades. Only in the final quarter of the seventeenth century, owing to a temporary improvement in the social and economic position of the nobility, did this model of political organisation experience a brief slowdown.

It should also be noted that the principal political factions possessed clearly defined territorial bases of influence. The Wettin faction was strongest in western Lesser Poland and Mazovia; the pro-French faction exerted its greatest influence in Greater Poland and in Lithuania; while the republican faction enjoyed its broadest support in eastern Lesser Poland and in the Ruthenian lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

A decisive turning point in the political life of this period came with the so-called Silent Sejm and its resolutions, which resulted, inter alia, in the dissolution of the Tarnogród Confederation.⁸ The proceedings of the Sejm of 1717, regardless of their most detrimental consequences (including the effective confirmation of a Russian protectorate over the Commonwealth), marked a breakthrough in the further evolution of political factions, which from this point onward began to form according to new principles. A central role in this transformation was played by the Czartoryski family, whose political activity led to the emergence of the so-called Familia.

This faction retained a dominant position in Polish public life until the end of the eighteenth century and, in a broader sense, survived in exile, carrying the idea of Polish independence until the restoration of the state. Although the Czartoryski family exercised a pre-eminent influence within it and came to personify the faction as a whole, the Familia already displayed features characteristic of a modern political party. Viewed through the lens of modern party typologies, the Familia can unquestionably be described as a voluntary political organisation of a committee-based type (one oriented towards the pursuit of electoral objectives), democratic in structure, governed through collective leadership, and, above all,

⁶ For a broader discussion of these phenomena, see, inter alia: J. Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century 1697–1795*. London 1991; Zielińska Z., *Walka stronnictw w Polsce w XVIII wieku*. Warsaw 1997.

⁷ For a broader discussion of this phenomenon, see the remarks in: G. Górski, *Metoda Johnsa. Demokratyczny przełom, czyli o przemianach prawa wyborczego w USA i Wielkiej Brytanii w XIX wieku*, "Znaki Nowych Czasów", Warsaw 2003, no. 5–6, p. 181–187.

⁸ Formally, on 3 November 1716, the Treaty of Warsaw was concluded. Among other provisions, it introduced fiscal and military reforms, fixed the permanent strength of the army at 18,000 troops in the Crown and 6,000 in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (the so-called komput), curtailed the prerogatives of chancellors, hetmans, and other senior officials by subjecting them to strict parliamentary oversight, stipulated the withdrawal of Saxon troops from the Commonwealth, prohibited Saxon ministers from interfering in Polish and Lithuanian internal affairs, and limited the authority to levy taxes and raise troops. The treaty was subsequently confirmed in 1717 by the so-called Silent Sejm (Sejm Niemy). For a broader discussion, see: Z. Wójcik (ed.), *Historia Dyplomacji Polskiej*, vol. 2 1572–1795 Warsaw 1982.

distinguished by a clearly articulated political programme. It should, of course, be stressed that the Familia acquired the defining features of a modern political formation only gradually.

The Czartoryski family traced its lineage to the grand-ducal Gediminid dynasty; its political prominence, however, was largely the achievement of Kazimierz Czartoryski. He skilfully preserved the family's economic base during the turmoil of the Great Northern War and the devastation wrought by the plague. After Augustus II was restored to the Polish-Lithuanian throne, Kazimierz strongly supported the king's temporary anti-Russian orientation and, on this foundation, began to assemble broader social backing for his political initiatives. His efforts were supported by his three sons – Fryderyk Michał, August Aleksander, and Teodor – who stood out among their contemporaries for their intellectual abilities and level of education. The true driving force behind the Familia's political advance, and its informal leader, however, was Stanisław Poniatowski, who married Kazimierz's daughter, Konstancja. Taking advantage of a temporary alignment with Augustus II, the Czartoryskis focused on consolidating both their own economic position and that of their supporters. The central arena of their political activity soon became the struggle for dominance in local assemblies (sejmiki) across individual voivodeships. Even greater importance, however, was attached to securing control over the Crown Tribunal and the Lithuanian Tribunal.

At this juncture, it is worth addressing the significance of political competition over the Tribunals. After 1720, rivalry for seats in these bodies became, given the chronic inefficiency and frequent paralysis of other state institutions, especially the Sejm, and the near-total inertia of the executive under both Wettin monarchs, the principal arena of political confrontation⁹.

Despite their many shortcomings¹⁰, the Tribunals adjudicated matters of fundamental economic importance¹¹. For the Czartoryski family, whose economic position was expanding rapidly, judicial protection of newly acquired estates was essential. This, in turn, required dominance in the sejmiki, which elected lay judges to the Tribunals. As judicial mandates had to be renewed annually, securing re-election could not rely solely on corruption. It therefore necessitated the construction of a durable political base across a sufficiently wide network of local assemblies – an objective that, in practice, required the creation of a political faction organised on new principles. An inevitable consequence of this activity was the Familia's growing influence over the election of deputies to the Sejm. Although, during the later years of Augustus II's reign and almost throughout that of Augustus III, Sejms were frequently dissolved without enacting legislation, the Familia's dominance, established in the vast majority of sejmiki and, consequently, within both the Sejm and the Tribunals, persisted at least until the early years of Stanisław August's reign. It should be recalled that one outcome of this intensified political mobilisation was the second mass election of a "Piast" candidate – Stanisław Leszczyński in 1733 – in which the Familia temporarily cooperated with a reconfigured pro-French faction¹². This alliance, which sought to

⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see W. Bednaruk, *Trybunał Koronny. Szlachecki sąd najwyższy w latach 1578–1794*, Lublin 2008.

¹⁰ The composition of the Tribunals (including the Lithuanian Tribunal) comprised both clerical and lay deputies. Lay deputies were elected annually at so-called deputational sejmiki, usually in the number of one or two per voivodeship. Owing to legal differences between Greater Poland and Lesser Poland, Tribunal sessions were held separately for each province (in Lublin and Piotrków respectively, and later also in Lutsk for the eastern voivodeships). This issue is examined in greater depth in the still seminal study by O. Balzer, *Geneza Trybunału Koronnego; studium z dziejów sądownictwa polskiego XVI wieku*, Warsaw 1886.

¹¹ Of particular importance in this context was the long-standing dispute over the division of the Ostrogski entail. This controversy became one of the principal catalysts of political division in the mid-eighteenth century. The events in question are described in greater detail, albeit in a vivid and not entirely impartial manner, in the memoirs of J. Kitowicz, *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III*, Poznań 1840.

¹² For a broader discussion, see: J. Feldman, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, Warsaw 1984.

salvage this candidacy through the Confederation of Dzików, ultimately failed¹³. The Familia's subsequent withdrawal from this venture enabled it gradually to consolidate its position around King Augustus III. As a result of its wide-ranging political activity, the Familia reached the height of its influence in the 1740s¹⁴.

In both Tribunals, the political predominance achieved at the level of the sejmiki in the Crown and in Lithuania culminated in a resolution favourable to the Czartoryskis, particularly to their Lubomirski allies, in the dispute over the division of the Ostrogski entail in 1754.

The success of the Familia, rooted in the creation of a political organisation that was modern by contemporary standards, prompted the consolidation of its opponents. This occurred around the former republican faction, which, owing to the leading role of families holding hetman offices, notably the Branickis, Potockis, and Rzewuskis, came to be known as the Hetman faction. Combining its forces with a significant segment of the pro-French camp and partly imitating the organisational methods of the Familia, this grouping emerged as the second major force in political life during the reign of Augustus III. Political life until the accession of Stanisław August unfolded largely under the sign of rivalry between these two camps, with the Wettin "court party" playing a more limited role than before.

It should be emphasised that this rivalry was actively exploited by foreign powers, particularly Russia. Nevertheless, the period also reveals that attitudes towards Russia – whether sympathetic or dependent – were no longer fixed. On both sides, cooperation with St Petersburg was accompanied by efforts to cultivate alternative foreign alliances capable of counterbalancing Russian influence.

A further watershed in the evolution of political life was provided by the reform period of 1764–1766 and the conflict over the rights of religious dissidents, culminating in the Bar Confederation. During the confederation, both major political camps, as well as the faction formed by Stanisław Poniatowski after his break with the Familia, assumed a highly fluid character, particularly in terms of personal alignments¹⁵. Following the collapse of the confederation, a new configuration of the political scene emerged which retained its core stability until the final collapse of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

It should be emphasised that, during the election of Stanisław August, the Familia entered into cooperation with Russia. As a result, it once again secured control (this time for an extended period) over the decisive majority of local sejmiki and consequently came to dominate the political profile of the Sejm. With Russian backing, the Familia was able, with relative ease, to ensure the election of Stanisław Poniatowski¹⁶ and to initiate a series of reforms that were significant for the modernisation of the state apparatus. The subsequent rupture between the king and his "uncles", encouraged by Russia, which was unwilling to support the Familia's reformist agenda, set in motion processes that led to the emergence of a new political grouping, later known as the Patriotic Party. Stanisław August believed that he could persuade Catherine II to accept the modernisation of the Commonwealth in return for his unconditional loyalty. He also assumed (naively, as events would show) that the programme of reform developed by Prince Stanisław Konarski and Ignacy Potocki would meet with Russian approval.

¹³ On the role and significance of the Dzików Confederation, see S. Truchim, *Konfederacja dzikowska*, Poznań 1921.

¹⁴ A broader discussion of this issue is provided by W. Konopczyński, *Dzieje Polski nowożytnej*, vol. 2.

¹⁵ A comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon is offered in W. Konopczyński's monumental work, *Konfederacja barska*, vol. 1–2, Warsaw 1991.

¹⁶ It should nevertheless be noted that, until the very end, the Familia sought to secure the throne for August Czartoryski. Ultimately, however, Catherine II dictated the election of Stanisław Poniatowski, whom she regarded as the most reliable guarantor of Russian interests in the Commonwealth. Cf.: K. Zienkowska, *Stanisław August Poniatowski*, Wrocław 2004, p. 132 ff.

Although the modernising ambitions of the Patriotic Party overlapped in many respects with those of the Familia, attitudes towards Russia became the decisive line of division between the two camps. The Czartoryskis, following their negative experiences with their former protégé and, subsequently, Russian pressure during the Bar Confederation, adopted a clearly anti-Russian stance. Completing this political constellation was the anti-modernisation hetmanic party, whose leaders argued that the preservation of all traditional “liberties” under Russian protection constituted the very foundation of the Commonwealth.

After 1772, this cleavage became the principal axis of political conflict, shaping the structure of the political scene. The political struggles of the 1770s and 1780s, including the gradual accumulation of influence through contests over sejmiki, thus became the main driving force behind the evolution of political life. The culmination of these processes during the Four-Year Sejm was therefore not an accidental outcome of circumstance, but the result of developments that had been unfolding for several decades. Notably, the fundamental political divisions outlined in the introduction persisted from the early 1720s until the fall of the state.

Against this background, it is important to consider, in broad outline, the influence of individual political groupings in selected voivodeships after 1772¹⁷. This perspective allows for a clearer understanding of the distribution of support for the three principal political currents, particularly during the period of the Great Sejm. It should also be borne in mind that, in most legislative initiatives between 1788 and 1792 (especially in the adoption of the Constitution of 3 May) the Patriotic Party generally cooperated with the Familia.

The Ruthenian, Podolian, and Volhynian voivodeships, together with the more easterly frontier regions, became arenas of intense rivalry between the Familia and the hetmanic party. In Ruthenia itself, as well as in Podolia and Volhynia, the Familia predominated. In the remaining voivodeships of this zone, however, the influence of the hetmanic camp steadily increased. This was particularly evident in the Kyiv voivodeship, which gradually came under the dominance of the Potocki family and, through them, the hetmanic party.

In the Lublin voivodeship, a relative balance between the Familia and the hetmanic camp persisted, although after 1772 the influence of the Patriotic Party expanded rapidly. Lublin emerged as one of the key political and intellectual centres supporting reform, including initiatives in the military, administrative, and educational spheres. In the Kraków voivodeship, the Familia retained dominance while the hetmanic party remained largely on the defensive. During the Great Sejm, the Patriotic Party quickly strengthened its position there, benefiting from Kraków's role as a hub of reformist thought.

In the Mazovian voivodeships, the Familia predominated, later sharing influence with the Patriotic Party, particularly in the eastern parts of the region. The hetmanic camp, by contrast, remained relatively weak in Mazovia.

In Greater Poland, the hetmanic party found support among the Leszczyński and Opaliński families, with its principal base in the Poznań voivodeship, while the Familia dominated eastern Greater Poland, especially the Kalisz voivodeship. At the same time, the Patriotic Party gradually increased its influence in the region by mobilising sections of the nobility that had previously remained politically passive.

¹⁷ This overview is based on the findings presented in the following studies: M. Kosman, *Reformy w Polsce XVIII wieku*. Warsaw 1993; S. Kieniewicz, *Dzieje Polski do 1795 roku*. Warsaw 1992; T. Korzon, *Wewnętrzne dzieje Polski za Stanisława Augusta (1764–1794)*, vol. 1–6, Warsaw 1897; J. Lukowski, op. cit.; Z. Zielińska, op. cit.; W. Konopczyński, *Pisarze polityczni XVIII wieku*, Warsaw 1966.

Within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the hetmanic party drew its main support from the Radziwiłł family and its extensive client networks. Its strongest influence was exercised in the Vilnius and Kaunas voivodeships, in eastern Novogrudok, and in the Smolensk voivodeship. The Familia, by contrast, concentrated its efforts primarily in the Vitebsk voivodeship and western Novogrudok. The Patriotic Party, meanwhile, never became deeply rooted in Lithuania. Instead, explicitly pro-Russian (and in practice quasi-agent-based) circles exercised considerable influence there. These groups, however, lacked the organisational coherence of the main political camps and relied on a narrow circle of magnate families closely tied to Russia.

The political climate of 1788–1792 proved particularly favourable to the expansion of the Patriotic Party, largely through close cooperation with the Familia. This alliance was broken when King Stanisław August acceded to the Targowica Confederation. The brief rule of the Targowica leaders following the defeat of the Kościuszko Uprising, together with the repression carried out by the Russian occupying authorities, led to the destruction of both political formations. In effect, this also marked the collapse of Polish political life itself – a process ultimately sealed by the Third Partition and the final destruction of the first Polish state.

County-Level Administrative Units in Other European States

As noted in the introductory remarks, the powiaty (or ziemie) that emerged in the Kingdom of Poland during the reign of Casimir the Great generally developed out of territorial units that had already existed in the pre-state period. Across Europe, the formation of early administrative divisions followed broadly comparable trajectories; a decisive factor shaping their evolution, however, was the legacy of the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire – Byzantium

In Western Europe, the earlier political collapse of the Empire, together with extensive migratory movements, meant that the territorial structures taking shape towards the end of the first millennium constituted a distinctive synthesis of Roman institutions and tribal, primarily Germanic, arrangements. In Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, the survival of the Roman Empire in its Byzantine form and its prolonged influence in the region meant that the interaction between Roman administrative models and tribal (mainly Slavic) structures likewise produced distinctive institutional solutions. Nevertheless, it was the administrative arrangements adopted and refined within Byzantium that exerted the most profound and lasting influence on the evolution of territorial structures across Europe as a whole. It is therefore useful to consider these developments in general terms, with particular attention to identifying territorial units that were functionally comparable to the Polish powiat.

A suitable point of departure is the administrative reorganisation of the Empire introduced at the turn of the third and fourth centuries CE by Emperor Diocletian. The new system of government he established – the Tetrarchy¹ – was accompanied by a division of the Empire into four major units, the Praetorian Prefectures of Gaul, Italy, Illyricum, and the East, each placed under the authority of one of the tetrarchs. These prefectures were initially subdivided into twelve dioceses: Britain, Gaul, the Seven Provinces, Spain, Africa, Italy, Pannonia, Moesia, Thrace, Asia, Pontus, and the East. Each diocese was headed by a *Vicarius*. The dioceses were further divided into provinces, whose total number rose to approximately one hundred, ranging from four to sixteen within a single diocese. At both the diocesan and provincial levels, civil and military administrations were institutionally separated – a measure intended to improve the efficiency of the Empire’s defensive system.

¹ These conclusions are based on the findings presented by the previously cited J. Osirski,

² Without entering into broader discussion, it should be recalled that Diocletian initially effected a distinctive division of the Empire into eastern and western parts, establishing a dual rule of two *Augusti*; at a later stage, one *Caesar* was appointed to each part. The resulting administrative system thus reflected a fourfold structure of imperial authority.



Figure 1. Administrative division of the Roman Empire introduced by Diocletian. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of the Roman Empire*, https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Roman_Tetrarchy_map_-_RU.svg#/media/Bestand:R%C3%B6mische_Tetrarchie-es.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

In subsequent centuries, within the eastern part of the Empire, which continued to exist without interruption, new territorial units emerged, most notably praetorian prefectures and themes. Alongside these, a range of extraordinary institutional arrangements appeared, including the *quaestura exercitus*, exarchates, *kleisourai*, *archontates*, *tourmai*, *banda*, and *katepanika*. These units were frequently created on an ad hoc basis in response to complex local conditions. In most cases, they took the form of combined civil–military structures designed to strengthen the Empire’s defensive capacity³. From the perspective most relevant to the present discussion, it is important to note that at lower administrative levels there existed territorial units known as *pagi*. These encompassed rural areas together with the villages (*vici*) and settlements located within them, often including fortified local centres (*oppida*)⁴.

At this point, one further concept that emerged within the still undivided Empire merits attention: the *comes*. Without entering into questions of etymology, the term came to denote a category of high-ranking officials within the imperial chancellery, a development that dates to approximately the reign of Emperor Diocletian⁵.

³ For a broader discussion of issues concerning the organisation of the state apparatus and the territorial structures of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire, see G. Ostrogorsky, *History of Byzantine State*, Oxford 1956. See also: L. Maksimović, *The Byzantine Provincial Administration under the Palaiologoi*, Amsterdam 1988.

⁴ For a discussion of these units, see: O. Nicholson, *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press 2018. s.v. *pagus* and *pagarch*; see also: S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, E. Eidinow, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press 2012, p. 1062.

⁵ On the institution of the *comes*, see: H. Chisholm, *Encyclopædia Britannica*. vol. 7 (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press 1911, p. 312–314.



Figure 2. Part of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire at the end of the eighth century, showing the administrative division into *themes*. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Asia_Minor_ca_780_AD.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The most prominent official bearing this title was the deputy of the *magister officiorum* (the highest-ranking civil official of the imperial administration), known as the *comes dispositionum*. Other offices carrying the same designation included the *comes domesticorum*, *comes privatae largitionis*, *comes rerum privatarum*, *comes sacrarum largitionum*, *comes auri*, *comes sacrae vestis*, and, of particular significance, the *comes rei militaris*. Several of these offices survived into the period of the Ostrogothic and Visigothic kingdoms established in Italy and Spain. Within the administrative structures of these successor states, one encounters offices such as *comes cubiculariorum*, *comes scanciorum*, *comes stabulorum*, *comes notariorum*, and *comes thesaurorum*.

There can be little doubt that both the *pagus* as a territorial unit and the *comes* as a type of official also persisted in Gaul, where the Frankish Kingdom emerged from the fifth century onward. It is therefore unsurprising that these institutions reappeared in a modified form within the Carolingian Empire and spread from there across much of Europe.

Drawing on the pre-existing *pagi*, Charlemagne introduced a new territorial unit known as the *comitatus* (Old French *comté*). Each was headed by an official appointed by the ruler, initially designated as a *comes*. These districts were subdivided into *centenae*, which were administered by *vicarii*. The responsibilities of the *comites* included oversight of the *vicarii*, the administration of justice, the enforcement of capitularies, the levying of troops, the collection of tolls and dues, and the maintenance of roads and bridges. Although, in principle, they could be dismissed by the king, many of these offices gradually became hereditary.

«For a more detailed discussion of these solutions, see: M. Costambeys, *The Carolingian World*. Cambridge University Press 2011.



Figure 3. Map illustrating the territorial expansion of Charlemagne's Empire. It shows how, on the basis of his conquests, the later major territorial units emerged, with *pagi* forming their lower-level subdivisions. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Frankish_Empire_481_to_814-pl.svgf [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The Carolingian model of territorial administration (much like the Carolingian conception of the state itself) came to function as a civilisational benchmark in Europe around the turn of the first millennium⁷. It should be emphasised that the reception of these institutional solutions was accompanied by a pronounced tendency towards the hereditary transmission of offices. This phenomenon was already visible within the Carolingian Empire itself. An attempt to counteract its consequences, above all, the erosion of the original purpose of these offices as instruments for transmitting the ruler's will at the local level, was the parallel institution of the *missi dominici*. These royal envoys were tasked with supervising the implementation of royal law and authority within the districts. Comparable processes can be observed elsewhere; for example, the establishment of the office of *starosta* in the Kingdom of Poland was inspired by similar concerns, particularly in response to the growing autonomy of castellans.

⁷ For a broader discussion of this issue, see: J. Górski-Szymczak, op. cit. and G. Górski, *Historia administracji*, Toruń 2002.

The Kingdom of France

Within the Kingdom of France, territorial divisions long displayed a striking degree of diversity. This reflected deeply entrenched traditions whose roots extended back to the Celtic (Gallic) period. In his still-influential classical study, Fustel de Coulanges emphasised that Gallic legacies were preserved not only in the names of French provinces, but also in lower-level territorial units.⁸ According to his analysis, subsequent Roman domination, followed by Germanic rule, later transformations of the French monarchy, and even the upheavals of the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, failed to bring about fundamental changes to these original divisions. The smallest territorial units of the Gallic period functioned as continuations of the Roman *pagi* and survived (largely unchanged) through the Frankish era, becoming the basic units of territorial administration in the Kingdom of France. Today, they find their modern counterpart in the *arrondissement*.⁹

During the Roman period in Gaul, prior to its reorganisation under Diocletian, divisions into provinces developed, eventually numbering eleven. These were subdivided into lower units known as *civitates*, whose number had risen to 113 by the fifth century. These units corresponded closely to the *pagi* and later became components of the Carolingian administrative system. They functioned either within, or alongside, divisions into duchies, marches, or larger *comtés*.

As the Frankish realm fragmented between the ninth and twelfth centuries, the institutional structures of the Catholic Church (dioceses, parishes, and abbeys) assumed an increasingly prominent role. In the context of the growing weakness of secular administration, ecclesiastical institutions often took on functions normally associated with the state.

This weakness was especially evident in the administration of justice (where officials were appointed to adjudicate in the king's name), fiscal management, and, over time, military organisation. In response, parallel administrative offices were created whose territorial scope did not correspond to existing divisions.

In the judicial sphere, the principal criteria shaping these new units were language and legal custom. Given the extraordinary diversity in both respects, new territorial jurisdictions emerged in the form of *bailliages* and *sénéchaussées*, headed respectively by *baillis* and *sénéchaux*. At the apex of this judicial system stood more than a dozen *parlements*, which functioned as supreme courts for territorially defined legal and linguistic regions.

For fiscal purposes, *généralités* were established. Their territorial extent was fluid and lacked permanence. In addition, *gouvernements généraux* were created as military districts forming the basis of army organisation. Ultimately, around forty such units emerged, nearly all of which have counterparts in territorial divisions that persist to this day.

⁸ F. de Coulanges, *Histoire des institutions politiques de l'ancienne France*. Paris 1875, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k61706f>. textelimage [accessed on: 23.07.2025].

⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see: N. Verdier, *La réforme des arrondissements de 1926*, https://shs.hal.science/file/index/docid/467770/filename/Verdier_La_reforme_des_arrondissements.pdf [accessed on: 23.07.2025].



Figure 4. Map illustrating the division of the Kingdom of France into general governorships (shown in different colours); red lines indicate the boundaries of the present-day departments. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1789_%2B_2022_France_noms_des_r%C3%A9gions.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The advance of absolutism in France did not favour the survival of county-type structures. This tendency was reinforced by the centralising and bureaucratic reforms of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, which definitively consolidated this model of territorial administration¹⁰.

The Kingdom of England

Most *counties* in the Kingdom of England were established between the sixth and eleventh centuries¹¹. They were territorial units created primarily to facilitate the administration of justice and the organisation of military obligations within defined areas. Each county was headed by a *sheriff*, who was usually appointed by the monarch, although in certain cases the appointment was made by powerful secular magnates, such as palatines or earls, or by ecclesiastical authorities, including bishops. The territorial configuration of these units represented a distinctive synthesis of residual Roman administrative structures (notably the *pagi*) and arrangements introduced by successive waves of Germanic settlers, which often reflected ethnic composition and linguistic boundaries. Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, the institution of the sheriff was extensively employed to strengthen royal authority. For a considerable period, these offices were held almost exclusively by members of the Norman elite, who were entrusted with wide-ranging fiscal and enforcement powers. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,

¹⁰ For a broader discussion of these issues (though not without controversial interpretations) see: M.L. Legay, *Le fin de pouvoir provincial (4 août 1789 – 21 septembre 1791)*, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 2003 (332), p. 25–53.

¹¹ For a broader treatment of this subject, see: *Aspects of Britain: Local Government*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 1996. See also the more comprehensive study: F. Youngs, *Guide to the Local Administrative Units of England: Volume II*. London 1991.

the emergence of Parliament led to *counties* acquiring the right to elect representatives to the developing *House of Commons*. Urban representatives formed the so-called *parliamentary boroughs*, while counties functioned as *county constituencies*. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the military role of sheriffs was gradually curtailed with the establishment of the office of *lord lieutenant*, who assumed responsibility for organising and commanding the county militia.

Both the number of counties and their boundaries, as well as the basic functions of administration at this level, remained largely unchanged until the mid-nineteenth century. More substantial alterations were associated with electoral reforms, which included the disfranchisement of certain *boroughs* and, under conditions of rapid demographic change, the adjustment of *county* boundaries or the creation of a limited number of new administrative units¹². As a result, *counties* gradually evolved into standard units of local self-government. *County councils* were established as representative bodies of the local population, and sheriffs became subordinate to these councils rather than remaining directly accountable to central government. These changes were accompanied by a systematic expansion of the competences of local authorities.

Notably, despite these reforms, the number of counties increased only marginally, and since 1974 England has comprised forty-five counties¹³.



Figure 5. Map of English counties in the mid-nineteenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historic_counties_of_England [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

¹³ An insightful discussion of these processes can be found in: B. Keith-Lucas, *Government of the County in England*, *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 9, No. 1. (March 1956), p. 44–55.

The German Kingdom

In the eastern part of the Carolingian realm – *Francia orientalis* or *Regnum Francorum orientalium* – the formation of the German Kingdom began in the tenth century. In territories inhabited by Germanic peoples and previously incorporated by Charlemagne, so-called “older stem duchies” (*ältere Stammesherzogtümer*) initially emerged, notably Bavaria, Swabia, and Saxony. These were later joined by Franconia, Thuringia, and Lotharingia, often described as “younger stem duchies” (*jüngere Stammesherzogtümer*). Following the incorporation of Thuringia into Saxony, five principal stem duchies remained, which went on to play a leading role in the political life of the kingdom¹⁴. This interpretation, however, is no longer universally accepted¹⁵.

As recent Polish scholarship has emphasised¹⁶, irrespective of ongoing debates concerning the hierarchy and classification of territorial units in *Francia orientalis*, it may be assumed that five duchies – Swabia (Alemannia), Lotharingia, Bavaria, Saxony, and Franconia – held a dominant political position in the period under consideration. It was the rulers of these polities who played a decisive role in the early functioning of the realm.

As a rule, these territories preserved administrative systems derived from the Carolingian period. By the end of the first millennium, the emerging German Empire (*Römisches Reich*), in addition to the principal duchies, also encompassed Thuringia, Frisia, the Eastern March, the nascent Northern March, the Duchy of Bohemia, and substantial portions of Lotharingia¹⁷.



Figure 6. Map illustrating the territory of the German Empire at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Holy_Roman_Empire_11th_century_map-en.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

¹⁴ Such a view is proposed, inter alia, by P. J. Geary, *Fruits of War: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 44 ff.

¹⁵ It should be noted that the thesis concerning the existence of “older” and “younger” stem duchies formed part of a strongly nationalist strand of German historiography, particularly in the period following unification in 1871 and later during the interwar years. An alternative interpretation is offered by H. Wolfram, *The Shaping of the Early Medieval Principality as a Type of Non-royal Rulership*, *Viator* 1971, vol. 2, p. 41 ff.

¹⁶ J. Górska-Szymczak, *Miedzy demokracją a absolutyzmem*.

¹⁷ For a broader discussion, see: P. Collins, *The Birth of the West: Rome, Germany, France, and the Creation of Europe in the Tenth Century*, New York 2014.

In the following two centuries, the Empire both expanded through the incorporation of additional polities and underwent increasing territorial fragmentation, resulting in the emergence of a growing number of highly diverse political entities. This process is illustrated in the map below.



Figure 7. Central Europe during the period of the Hohenstaufen dynasty. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mittleuropa_zur_Zeit_der_Staufer.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

By the fourteenth

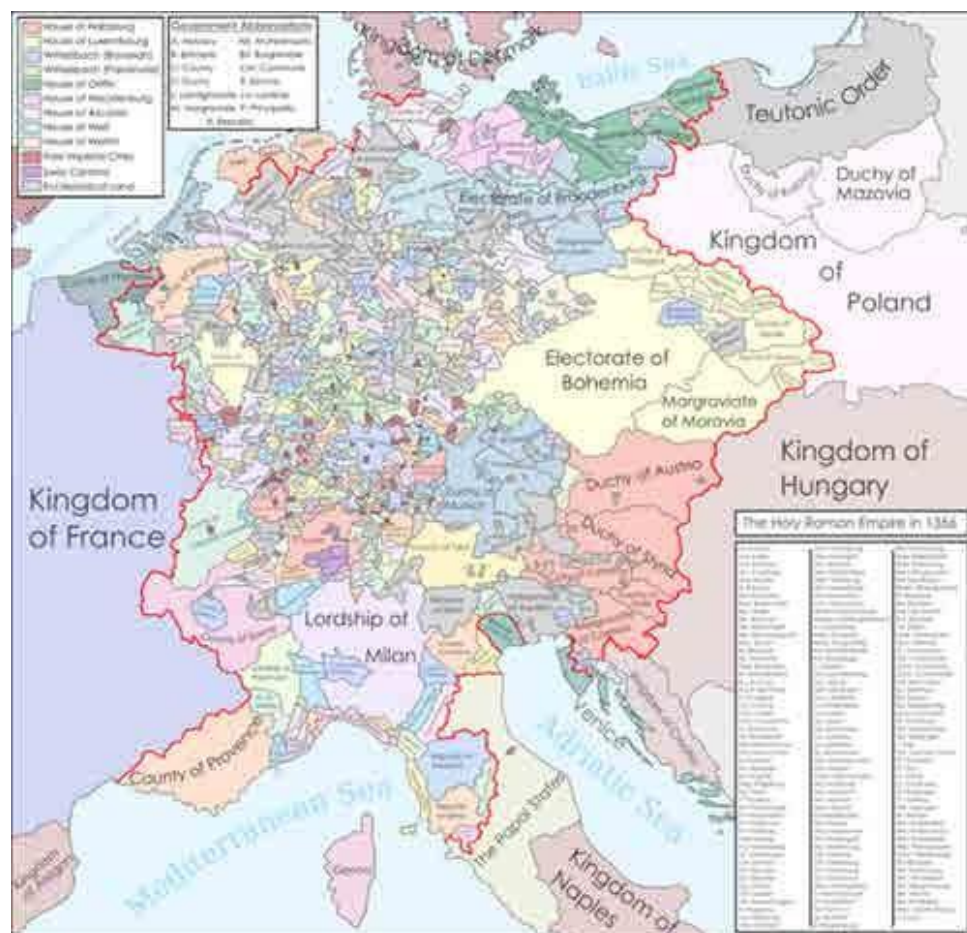


Figure 8. Map of territorial units within the Holy Roman Empire in 1356. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Golden_Bull_of_1356.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Ultimately, the Reformation of the sixteenth century, together with the religious and political conflicts associated with it, followed by the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and its conclusion in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), decisively shaped the territorial structure of the Holy Roman Empire. This period marked the point of greatest internal territorial fragmentation among the German states. In the decades that followed, processes of partial reintegration began to take place within the Empire.



Figure 9. Map of the Holy Roman Empire after the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:HRR_1648.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Among the territorial units of the Empire were:

- territories ruled by bishops as secular princes (*Hochstifte*),
- imperial abbeys governed by abbots (*Reichsabteien*),
- imperial circles established for purposes of collective defence (*Reichskreis*),
- imperial estates (*Reichsstand*),
- free imperial cities (*freie Reichsstadt*),
- states of the Empire (*Reichsstände*),
- numerous small polities – *Kleinstaaterlei*.¹⁸

¹⁸ For a broader discussion of the Empire's complex territorial structure, see: *The German Hereditary Territorial Rulers (History, territorial possession, chronology, titles)*, <http://grmrulers.altervista.org/> [accessed on: 16.08.2025].

The Kingdom of Hungary

Close dynastic ties between the Piast dynasty and the Hungarian rulers of the Árpád house, and later the Angevins, facilitated the transfer of various constitutional and administrative solutions from the Kingdom of Hungary to the Kingdom of Poland. In this context, it is worth examining the formation of administrative divisions in the early stages of Hungarian statehood.

The territories occupied by the Magyars at the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries had previously formed part of Great Moravia. Within this polity, territorial units known as *župa* were widespread. These units were probably associated with larger tribal groupings among the Slavic population. Similar structures also existed in Croatia and Bulgaria. The term likewise appeared in southern Poland, where it survived in the Polish language, although it was eventually replaced by the term *opole*.

Following their arrival in the Carpathian Basin, the Magyars adopted this administrative unit, referring to it as *vármegye*, *megye*, or *várispánság*. Under the influence of contacts with the Carolingian Empire, and owing to the functional similarity between this unit and the Carolingian *comitatus*, the Latin term *comitatus* became widely used. This was especially the case in regions of the kingdom with a strong Slavic presence. Over time, the *župa*, or *megye*, came to be headed by officials known as *župans* or *ispáns* (*várispáns*).



Figure 10. Map of the Kingdom of Hungary divided between Habsburg and Ottoman rule, with the counties of Transylvania and Wallachia, vassals of the Ottoman Sultan, also shown. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Territories of the Kingdom of Hungary*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_administrative_divisions_of_the_Kingdom_of_Hungary#/media/File:Central_europe_1572.png [accessed on: 27.07.2025].

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, nearly fifty counties had been established within the Kingdom of Hungary. On the eve of the Ottoman conquest at the beginning of the sixteenth century, their number had risen to approximately seventy. Following the partition of Hungarian territories between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire, these administrative units were largely retained by the occupying powers.

During the reconstruction of the Kingdom of Hungary as an equal component of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after 1866, the county structure was essentially preserved. Ultimately, the Kingdom comprised more than seventy counties, the overwhelming majority of which retained boundaries dating back to the medieval period.

Figure 11. Counties of the Kingdom of Hungary after 1880. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Counties of the Kingdom of Hungary after 1880*,



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_administrative_divisions_of_the_Kingdom_of_Hungary#/media/File:Kingdom_of_Hungary_counties.svg [accessed on: 28.07.2025].

It is also noteworthy that in the seventeenth century territorial units corresponding to counties appeared in both Denmark and Sweden.

In Denmark, they were introduced in 1660 under the name *amter*. Initially numbering twenty-four, their number was gradually reduced in subsequent centuries, and today sixteen such units remain.



Figure 12. Present-day counties of Denmark. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Counties of Denmark*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counties_of_Denmark#/media/File:DenmarkNumbered.png [accessed on: 28.07.2025].

In Sweden, a major administrative reform was enacted in 1634 by Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna through the so-called Instrument of Government. This reform established territorial units known as *län*. Numbering twenty-one, these units have survived to the present day with only minor modifications.



Figure 13. Counties of Sweden. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Counties of Sweden*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County#/media/File:SWE-Map_L%C3%A4n.svg [accessed on: 28.07.2025].

Counties in the Polish Lands in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The successive partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth carried out by Russia, Prussia, and Austria from 1772 onward led to the gradual dismantling of the constitutional order previously in force in the annexed territories. It should be emphasised that all three partitioning powers possessed political systems characterised by a high degree of centralisation¹. Operating within so-called absolutist systems², the new rulers introduced administrative arrangements fundamentally incompatible with the freedom-based constitutional model of the former Commonwealth. Moreover, the overt drive to exert strict control over the Polish population, often accompanied by policies of Germanisation or Russification, motivated by fears of restorationist aspirations, resulted in sustained and systematic pressure. One of the principal instruments of this pressure consisted precisely in the new administrative structures and institutions imposed by the partitioning powers in the annexed territories.

It hardly needs to be added that, in practice, the constitutional frameworks of these states offered no meaningful forms of social representation, let alone genuine participation in governance. Their highly centralised and powerful state administrations, operating through local agencies, relentlessly implemented imperial policy. From the standpoint of the present analysis, however, these issues lie outside the core subject of inquiry and will therefore not be pursued further here.

Genuine changes in a proto-constitutional direction³ in these states (Austria and Prussia) began only in the early decades of the second half of the nineteenth century. Even then, it was only in practice, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

¹ In Austria, the process of intensifying the centralisation of the state apparatus, accompanied by the weakening of representative institutions and the restriction of territorial autonomy, began as early as the sixteenth century, initially in the Spanish Habsburg possessions and later across the remaining Habsburg lands. This tendency accelerated markedly after the Thirty Years' War (1648). Similar processes occurred in Brandenburg, where a rapid intensification of centralisation can likewise be observed after 1648. By the eighteenth century, Prussian constitutional arrangements were characterised by an even higher degree of centralisation than those of the Habsburg Monarchy. The autocratic tradition of the Grand Duchy of Moscow was an inherent feature of its political system, shaped during the period of Mongol domination. Ivan the Terrible played a major role in consolidating this extremely centralised order. Its modern institutional form, however, was established in the early eighteenth century by Peter I, whose reforms defined the Russian Empire as an autocratic monarchy. For a broader discussion, see: G. Górski, *Historia ustrojów państw*, Warsaw 2001. For a fuller treatment of the administrative systems of these states, see: G. Górski, *Historia administracji*, 2nd ed., Toruń 2011.

² There is little doubt that by the end of the eighteenth century all three partitioning powers of Poland represented some of the most advanced yet simultaneously most primitive and brutal absolutist systems in Europe. It is therefore striking that Polish historiography has often sought to minimise this reality, or even to suggest that these systems might have served as models for reform within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

³ The substance of this concept is discussed in greater detail, with reference to an earlier period, in: J. Górską-Szymczak, *Miedzy...*. The observations made there are, however, fully applicable to the nineteenth-century context considered here.

that one may speak of the emergence of rudimentary forms of democratic political life⁴. In Russia, by contrast, only weak and highly limited attempts to introduce para-democratic solutions can be identified, and these occurred solely in the final decade preceding the outbreak of the First World War in 1914⁵.

From the perspective of the present study, however, the processes initiated in the occupied Polish lands at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are of particular importance. This is so primarily because the county-level territorial structures introduced by the partitioning powers were, as a rule, retained in the reborn Polish state after 1918. Above all, the analysis will seek to determine whether political preferences revealed in electoral processes at the county level within the partitioning states bore any relationship to later political sympathies in the Second Polish Republic.

These considerations must therefore begin with an examination of the development of county-level territorial structures in the Polish lands at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The focus will be on those counties that later lay within the borders of the Second Polish Republic and, subsequently, within the post-1945 Polish state.

In the Austrian partition, constitutional reforms implemented in the 1860s led to the establishment, within the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire, of the autonomous Crown Land of Galicia⁶. As part of this reform, the earlier division of crown lands into districts (obwody), headed by district governors, and counties (cyrkuły), headed by county governors, was replaced by a uniform system of new territorial units known as counties (*Bezirk*). It should be emphasised that Galicia was one of only four crown lands in Austria in which, following empire-wide administrative reforms, county-level self-government was introduced⁷.

At this level, a distinctive relationship developed between the organs of state administration and local self-government. On the one hand stood the county governors (starostowie powiatowi), who were subordinate, through the provincial governor (namiestnik), to the central authorities in Vienna. On the other hand were the self-governing bodies elected by the local population: the county council and the county executive board (wydział powiatowy), the latter elected by the council itself. The county executive board served as the executive organ of self-government. It was headed by a president (the county marshal) and composed of six members. In practice, the board operated in close cooperation with the county governor, jointly carrying out the administrative tasks assigned to the county level by statute. The county council was initially elected under a curial electoral system, with curiae corresponding to those used in elections to the Provincial Diet. Elections were held every six years. Over time, however, this system was replaced by universal and equal suffrage at the county level.

⁴ A concise discussion of this issue is provided in the analyses of the repeatedly cited work by G. Górski, *Historia ustrojów państw*.

⁵ Following Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and the revolutionary upheavals of 1905–1907, limited attempts can be observed to democratise electoral law, to modify the constitutional position of the State Duma, and to expand the competences of territorial self-government.

⁶ Formally, in accordance with the imperial titulature of the Austrian emperor, the official designation of this crown land was the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria with the Grand Duchy of Cracow and the Duchies of Oświęcim and Zator (German: *Königreich Galizien und Lodomerien mit dem Grossherzogtum Krakau und den Herzogtümern Auschwitz und Zator*).

⁷ Provincial Act of 12 August 1866 on county representation. Provincial Law Gazette No. 21. See also: J. Piwocki (ed.), *Zbiór ustaw i rozporządzeń administracyjnych*, Lwiv 1909, vol. I, p. 464.

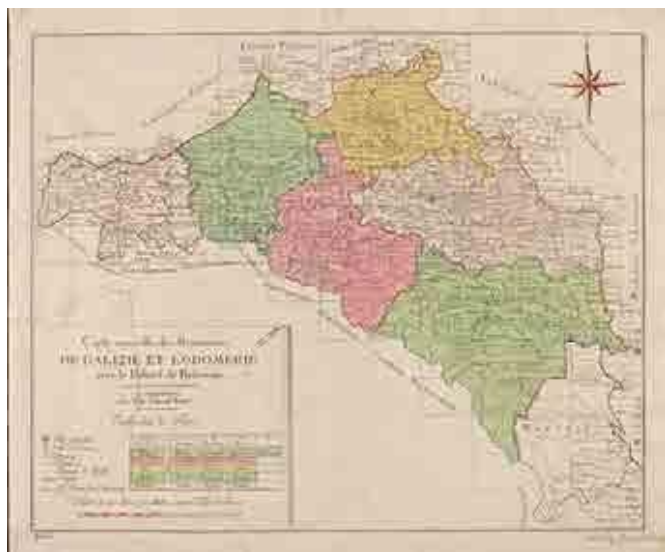


Figure 1. Map of the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, showing the original division into six districts (cyrkuły). Source: Wikimedia Commons, *The Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kr%C3%B3lestwo_Galicji_i_Lodomerii [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

During the period of state reconstruction, the Polish Liquidation Committee⁸ issued, on 23 November 1918, a regulation democratising the electoral system for the deliberative bodies of municipal and county self-governments⁹. At the same time (for obvious reasons), the institution of provincial self-government was abolished.

Following the administrative reforms of the 1860s, the crown land of Galicia comprised seventy-four counties (powiaty). Subsequent changes to the territorial administrative system, introduced in 1900, increased their number to eighty-two.

Of the Galician counties, thirty-two ultimately remained within the borders of Poland after 1945. These were: Kraków, Chrzanów, Wieliczka, Bochnia, Brzesko, Wadowice, Biała, Żywiec, Myślenice, Nowy Sącz, Nowy Targ, Limanowa, Grybów, Gorlice, Tarnów, Dąbrowa, Ropczyce, Mielec, Piłzno, Jasło, Rzeszów, Kolbuszowa, Tarnobrzeg, Nisko, Łańcut, Sanok, Lesko, Bircza, Brzozów, Krosno, Przemyśl, and Jarosław.

In the Prussian partition, self-government, similarly to the Austrian model, was organised on three levels: provincial, county, and municipal (both rural and urban).

⁸ On 24 October 1918, representatives of Polish political parties operating in Galicia adopted a resolution calling for the immediate initiation of measures aimed at terminating the relationship of dependence on Austria. Four days later, the Polish Liquidation Committee was established and entrusted with the implementation of this objective. The political core of the Commission consisted of the Polish People's Party "Piast", the National Democratic Party, and the Polish Social Democratic Party of Galicia and Silesia. The Commission was chaired by Wincenty Witos. For a more detailed discussion, see: M. Przeniosło, *Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna 1918–1919*, Kielce 2010.

⁹ Regulation of the Polish Liquidation Committee of 23 November 1918 on the extension of electoral rights to municipal councils. Official Gazette of the Polish Liquidation Commission, no. 2.



Figure 2. Map of counties in Galicia at the end of the nineteenth century (prior to the administrative changes introduced in the early twentieth century). Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_powiat%C3%B3w_Kr%C3%B3lestwa_Galicji_i_Lodomerii_w_latach_1850%E2%80%931918 [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The legal position of county self-government was regulated by the Act of 13 December 1872 on the county system¹⁰. Under this statute, the deliberative body at the county level became the county assembly (sejmik powiatowy). Its members were elected through a relatively complex electoral procedure combining direct and indirect elements and subject to high property-based suffrage qualifications. Initially, county assemblies possessed only limited competences (the so-called “own powers”), but these were gradually expanded.

Executive authority was exercised by the county board (wydział powiatowy), which was elected by the assembly. Both the county assembly and the county board were headed by the county governor (starosta powiatowy), appointed by the king. In this capacity, the starosta combined the functions of state administration with those of local self-government.

The framework of county self-government was further refined by two statutes adopted a decade later: the Act of 30 July 1883 on general state administration¹¹ and the Act of 1 August 1883 on the jurisdiction of administrative and administrative-judicial authorities¹².

The harmonisation of administrative structures across the German Empire was completed by 1900. Until the fall of the Second Reich, no significant changes were introduced either to the internal territorial division of the Kingdom of Prussia, which encompassed all Polish lands annexed by Prussia, or to that of the Empire as a whole.

¹⁰ County Ordinance for the Eastern Provinces of 13 December 1872. Prussian Law Gazette, p. 661; amended by the Act of 19 March 1881. Prussian Law Gazette, p. 233;

¹¹ Act of 30 July 1883 on general state administration. Prussian Law Gazette, p. 155;

¹² Act of 1 August 1883 on the jurisdiction of administrative and administrative-judicial authorities. Prussian Law Gazette, p. 237.

As a consequence of these reforms, and following subsequent territorial adjustments, the following counties from the former Prussian partition were incorporated into the Second Polish Republic.

- Within the Pomeranian Voivodeship were the counties of: Puck (Maritime), Kartuzy, Kościerzyna, Tczew, Starogard, Chojnice, Tuchola, Świecie, Grudziądz, Lubawa, Brodnica, Chełmno, Wąbrzeźno, Toruń, and Sępólno, together with the urban (municipal) counties of Toruń and Grudziądz.
- Within the Poznań Voivodeship were the counties of: Wyrzysk, Wągrowiec, Gniezno, Witkowo, Mogilno, Strzelno, Żnin, Inowrocław, Szubin, Bydgoszcz, Leszno, Śmigiel, Grodzisk, Nowy Tomyśl, Szamotuły, Oborniki, Poznań, Środa, Września, Śrem, Jarocin, Pleszew, Gostyń, Rawicz, Kościan, Krotoszyn, Ostrów, Kępno, Odolanów, and Ostrzeszów, as well as the urban counties of Bydgoszcz and Poznań.
- Within the Silesian Voivodeship were the counties of: Rybnik, Pszczyna, Lubliniec, and Katowice, together with the urban counties of Katowice and Królewska Huta (later Chorzów).



Figure 3. Administrative map of the German Empire in 1900, illustrating provincial and county divisions. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Empire#/media/File:Karte_Deutsches_Reich_Verwaltungsgliederung_1900-01-01.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

By contrast, in the former Russian partition, self-government existed only at the level of rural municipalities. In addition, municipal self-government institutions operated in towns located in the territories of the so-called Eastern Borderlands – Volhynia, the Białystok region, Polesie, the Vilnius region, and Nowogródek.

The municipal system itself was highly complex. It was introduced in 1864¹³ as part of the imperial authorities' strategy to secure the loyalty of the peasantry during the January Uprising.

Four types of lower-level administrative units were established: peasant communes; mixed urban–rural communes; non-peasant communes (in privately owned villages); and manorial districts.



Figure 4. Administrative division into gubernias in the western part of the Russian Empire, c. 1900. Source: *History of the administrative division of Russia*, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/History_of_the_administrative_division_of_Russia [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

At the remaining administrative levels, Russian administrative models continued to operate, both at county and gubernial level. These arrangements were formally adapted to the specific conditions of the Kingdom of Poland in 1892¹⁴.

¹³ Act of 19 February / 2 March 1864 on the organisation of rural communes in the Kingdom of Poland. Digest of the Laws of the Russian Empire (1892), vol. II, arts. 194–313.

¹⁴ Gubernial and county administration in the Kingdom of Poland was regulated by a tsarist decree of 19/31 December 1866. Digest of the Laws of the Russian Empire (1892), vol. II, arts. 1–125

Further changes to the territorial organisation of the Kingdom of Poland occurred with notable frequency. On the one hand, they reflected broader transformations within the administrative structure of the Russian Empire; on the other, they constituted deliberate responses to successive Polish national uprisings. Each reorganization was intended to facilitate more effective control over territories regarded by the imperial authorities as politically unstable.

The original territory of the Kingdom largely corresponded to that of the former Duchy of Warsaw. The Duchy had been established on territories taken during the Third and Second Partitions by Prussia and the Third Partition by Austria¹⁵. In 1807, with the establishment of the Duchy, a French-style division into eight departments was introduced; these were further subdivided into counties. In the vast majority of cases, these counties constituted a continuation of territorial units that had existed prior to 1795.

Following the creation of the Kingdom of Poland in 1815, the territory was divided into eight voivodeships, subdivided into districts and then into counties. In 1837, the voivodeships were renamed gubernias, while the three-tier administrative structure was retained. A further reform in 1842 reversed earlier terminology: districts were again designated as counties, while the former counties became judicial districts. In 1845 the number of gubernias was reduced to five, only to be increased again to ten in 1867. Throughout these changes, the overall number of counties remained relatively stable. Additional reforms were introduced in 1893 and 1912.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the final county network of what was then known as the Vistula Land had taken shape.



Figure 5. Administrative divisions of the Kingdom of Poland in 1907. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of the Kingdom of Poland*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Kr%C3%B3lestwa_Polskiego [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

in perspektywie historyczno-prawnej, in: *Historia Integra. Księga pamiątkowa ofiarowana S. Salmonowiczowi w 70-lecie urodzin*, Toruń 2001, p. 357–368 and *O znaczeniu Aktu 5 listopada*. Na marginesie artykułu Dariusza Makitły, *Przegląd Sejmowy* 2018, vol. 4, p. 7-17.

As illustrated by the above map, the essentially final county network in the Kingdom of Poland on the eve of the First World War comprised:

- in the Kalisz Governorate: Kalisz, Koło, Konin, Łęczyca, Sieradz, Słupca, Turek, and Wieluń counties;
- in the Kielce Governorate: Jędrzejów, Miechów, Kielce, Olkusz, Pińczów, Stopnica, and Włoszczowa counties;
- in the Lublin Governorate: Janów, Krasnystaw, Lubartów, Lublin, Łuków, Nowa Aleksandria (Puławy), Garwolin, Siedlce, Sokołów, and Radzyń counties;
- in the Łomża Governorate: Kolno, Łomża, Maków, Mazovia, Ostrołęka, Ostrów, Szczuczyn, and Węgrów counties;
- in the Piotrków Governorate: Będzin, Brzeziny, Częstochowa, Łask, Łódź, Noworadomsk (Radomsko), Piotrków, and Rawa counties;
- in the Płock Governorate: Ciechanów, Lipno, Mława, Płock, Przasnysz, Rypin, and Sierpc counties;
- in the Radom Governorate: Iłża, Końskie, Kozienice, Opatów, Opoczno, Radom, and Sandomierz counties;
- in the Siedlce Governorate (later renamed the Chełm Governorate): Biała, Konstantynów, Włodawa, Tomaszów, Zamość, Biłgoraj, Chełm, and Hrubieszów counties;
- in the Suwałki Governorate: Augustów, Kalwaria, Mariampol, Sejny, Suwałki, Władysławów, and Wołkowysk counties;
- in the Warsaw Governorate: Błonie, Gostynin, Grójec, Kutno, Łowicz, Nieśawa, Nowy Mińsk, Płońsk, Pułtusk, Radzymin, Skierniewice, Sochaczew, Warsaw, and Włocławek counties.

The county network that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries across the Polish lands was transferred almost unchanged to the reborn Polish Republic after November 1918. This continuity resulted primarily from the fact that, in most cases, counties in their then territorial form represented a direct continuation of administrative units that had existed in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth prior to 1795.

In the remaining so-called Eastern Lands (that is, territories formerly under Russian rule outside the Kingdom of Poland), Russian regulations governing rural communal self-government were initially retained. At the same time, the legal framework governing municipal and county self-government in central Poland was gradually extended to these areas. These regulations were introduced by regulations issued by the General Commissioner for the Eastern Lands¹⁶. This authority exercised civil administration over the territories in question until their affiliation with Poland was settled by treaty.

Ultimately, five voivodeships were established in these territories: Vilnius, Nowogródek, Białystok, Polesie, and Volhynia. Within them, county structures were created that broadly corresponded to the territorial divisions that had existed prior to the partitions.

¹⁶ Regulation of the General Commissioner for the Eastern Lands of 27 June 1919 on the Provisional Municipal Act. Official Gazette of the Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands, no. 7, item 46; Regulation of the General Commissioner for the Eastern Lands of 16 August 1919 on the Organisation of Small Towns, Official Gazette of the Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands, no. 13, item 112; Regulation of the General Commissioner for the Eastern Lands of 7 November 1919 extending the Provisional Municipal Act to cities and towns with more than 2,000 inhabitants; Official Gazette of the Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands, no. 13, item 112.

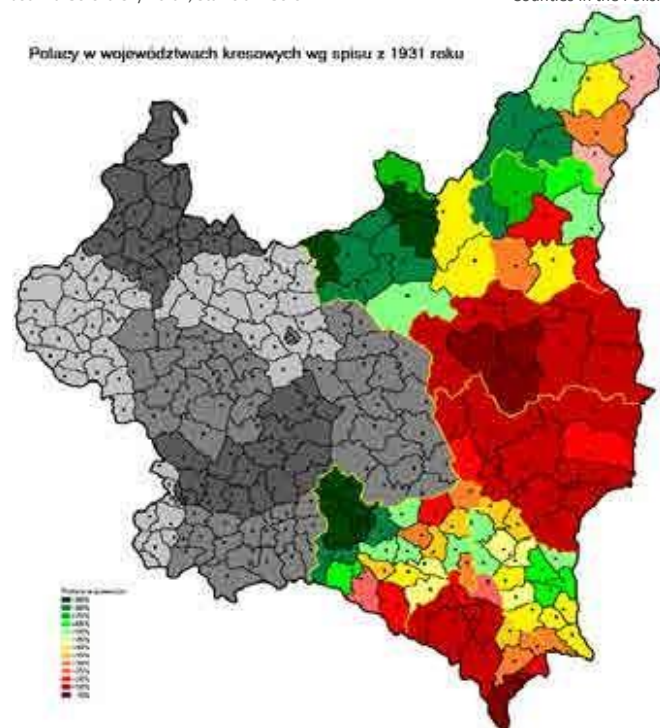


Figure 6. Map illustrating the share of the Polish population in the total population of the eastern borderland counties (Kresy) in 1931. The eastern voivodeships are indicated by yellow outlines (including those established in the eastern territories of Galicia—Lesser Poland), while county boundaries are marked in black. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth before 1660*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kresy_Wschodnie [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Counties in the Second Polish Republic and the Polish People's Republic

During the nearly two decades of the Second Polish Republic's existence, only a limited number of changes were made to the number of counties (powiaty), although their territorial boundaries were modified somewhat more frequently. Ultimately, following adjustments to the administrative division of the state (including extensive changes to voivodeship boundaries introduced in early 1939), the Republic of Poland comprised 264 rural counties (powiaty ziemskie) and 23 municipal counties (powiaty grodzkie).

The reborn Polish state inherited not only a network of county-level territorial units whose origins dated back to the First Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, but also, at least initially, the models of county administration developed under the partitioning powers. As discussed in the previous chapter, in those states the fundamental institutions of county authority were governmental in character, although in Prussia and Austria they were complemented by elements of local self-government. These arrangements exerted a significant influence on the institutional shape of county administration in the Second Republic. Drawing on these inherited models, the authorities of the Republic introduced new regulations governing governmental administration at the county level. Similarly, the legal foundations and institutional position of county self-government were initially based on the legislation of the partitioning states¹.

Only after several years was the system of territorial governmental administration unified under a single legal framework. These definitive arrangements were introduced by the Regulation of the President of the Republic of Poland of 19 January 1928 on the Organisation and Scope of Operation of the General Administrative Authorities².

Under its provisions, the county governor (starosta) became the first-instance authority of governmental administration. Like the voivode, the starosta served as a representative of the central government and as the head of the general governmental administration within the county. Among his responsibilities was the coordination of governmental administrative activity at the county level in accordance with policies set by the central authorities. To this end, he was empowered to convene regular meetings of officials heading both integrated and non-integrated branches of administration operating within the county³.

The starosta also exercised supervisory authority⁴ over the administrations of municipalities and communes located within his jurisdiction. A central duty of the starosta was the maintenance of public order and security. Accordingly, he was authorised to issue binding instructions and orders to units of the State Police in matters relating to public safety.

¹ The regulations previously in force in the former Kingdom of Poland were extended to the territories of the former Russian partition. In the former Prussian partition, the office of Landrat was replaced by that of starosta, while analogous solutions were adopted in the territories of the former Austrian partition.

² Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, No. 11, item 86. It should be recalled that, pursuant to the so-called August Amendment of 1926, the constitutional position of the executive authorities was substantially altered.

³ These issues are discussed in greater detail in: J. Górską-Szymczak, G. Górski, *Administracja publiczna w II Rzeczypospolitej*, Toruń 2021.

⁴ The term was understood as a specific form of legal supervision rather than hierarchical or service-based subordination.



Figure 1. Administrative division of the Second Polish Republic in 1930. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of the Second Polish Republic*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:II_RP_adm.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

The starosta was appointed by the Minister of the Interior and was subordinated, in the performance of his duties, to the voivode.

His administrative apparatus was the county office (starostwo powiatowe). Its internal organisation was determined by the Minister of the Interior, in consultation with other ministers, and on this basis the voivode granted the office its statutes.

To facilitate access for the population, the Minister of the Interior could also establish branch offices of the county administration outside the seat of the starostwo. Within such branches, operating under the supervision of the starosta, specified administrative tasks could be carried out, including the issuance of decisions in the starosta's name. This solution was applied in particular in the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy Wschodnie), where counties covered extensive territories with relatively low population density.

⁵ Regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs of 30 June 1930 concerning the internal organisation of county offices and the rules governing their operation. Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, No. 55, item 464.

Cities with more than 75,000 inhabitants constituted municipal (urban) counties (powiaty grodzkie). In exceptional cases, municipal counties could also be created (by regulation of the Council of Ministers) in cities with smaller populations⁶.

The legal position of the municipal governor (starosta grodzki), who headed the governmental administration in such counties, was identical to that of a rural starosta. Municipal governors were appointed by the Minister of the Interior, who simultaneously conferred upon them, by regulation, the powers of a government representative.

In cities forming separate counties, these powers were transferred to the presidents (mayors) of the cities. Decisions of this kind were taken by the Council of Ministers, which also determined the scope of governmental administrative functions to be entrusted to the city president. This arrangement was intended to avoid a duplication of authority within urban centres.

In certain cases, the functions of a municipal governor were entrusted to the rural starosta whose seat was located in the same city⁷.

A distinct legal status was also granted to the rapidly developing port city of Gdynia, which was organised along lines similar to those applied in the capital, Warsaw, effectively enjoying the status of a separate voivodeship. In Gdynia, instead of a municipal governor, the office of Government Commissioner (Komisarz Rządu) was established⁸. His constitutional position closely resembled that of municipal governors in other large cities.

Until 1933, the organisation and functioning of county self-government continued to be governed by regulations inherited from the partitioning powers. In that year, as part of the first stage of a broader reform of local self-government, a new statute introduced fundamentally new solutions for county administration⁹.

Under this legislation, county self-government associations (powiatowe związki samorządowe) were established. These associations were endowed with deliberative bodies – the county councils (rady powiatowe) – and executive bodies – the county boards (wydziały powiatowe). County councils consisted of members of the county boards and councillors elected by electoral colleges. These colleges were composed of councillors and members of municipal and communal executive bodies operating within rural and urban communes not separated from the county. This institutional design effectively transformed the county into a self-governing association of the communes comprising it, since a substantial part of its composition resulted from indirect elections conducted by communal authorities.

Moreover, within the executive body – the county board – a specific fusion of governmental and self-governmental functions took place. The starosta and his deputy, who directed the board's work, were appointed by the Minister of the Interior, while the remaining members were elected by the county council. In cities separated from counties, the functions of county authorities, otherwise exercised by county offices, were performed by municipal self-government bodies¹⁰.

⁶ Urban counties (powiaty miejskie) were established in the following cities: Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Częstochowa, Gdynia, Gniezno, Grudziądz, Inowrocław, Kraków, Lublin, Lviv, Łódź, Poznań, Radom, Sosnowiec, Toruń, and Vilnius.

⁷ In the cases of Toruń, Bydgoszcz, Inowrocław, Gniezno, Grudziądz, Poznań, Kraków, and Lviv, certain responsibilities within the scope of general governmental administration were entrusted to the presidents (mayors) of these cities, while the remaining tasks continued to be carried out by the starosts of the surrounding rural counties (powiaty ziemskie).

⁸ Regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs of 3 September 1932. Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, No. 95, item 823.

⁹ Act of 23 March 1933 on the partial reform of the system of territorial self-government. Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, No. 35, item 294.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see: J. Górską-Szymczak, G. Górski, *Administracja publiczna II RP*.

As a result of a complex set of legislative measures redefining the legal foundations of public administration at the voivodeship and county levels, the boundaries of several voivodeships were revised and a number of counties reassigned. These changes were implemented at the turn of 1938 and 1939 and entered into force at the beginning of 1939. At that point, the final territorial structure of the Second Polish Republic was established (see the map below). This administrative arrangement, however, proved short-lived. Following the outbreak of the Second World War and the occupation of Polish territory by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the existing division was rapidly dismantled through unlawful regulations imposed by the occupying powers¹¹.

After the establishment in 1944 of communist authorities dependent on the Soviet Union and installed under the auspices of the Red Army¹², one of the first decisions taken by the so-called Polish Committee of National Liberation was to restore the pre-war administrative division of the state.



Figure 2. Administrative division of the Second Polish Republic in August 1939. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of the Second Polish Republic*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_II_Rzeczypospolitej#/media/Plik:RzeczpospolitaPolska1939.png [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

central voivodeships the German authorities, acting in violation of international law, established a protectorate-type para-state entity known as the General Government. Similarly, on the eastern part of Poland, which was incorporated into the USSR. By contrast, in the

¹² This issue, together with its constitutional and legal dimensions, is examined in detail in G. Górski, *Polonia Restituta. Ustrój Państwa Polskiego w XX wieku*, Toruń 2018.



Figure 3. Administrative division of "Lublin Poland" in March 1945. The territories of the so-called Recovered Territories are marked on the map as "districts".
Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of Poland as of 14 March 1945*, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Polski_\(1944%E2%80%931975\)#/media/Plik:POLSKA_14-03-1945.png](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Polski_(1944%E2%80%931975)#/media/Plik:POLSKA_14-03-1945.png) [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

This restoration applied both to the modified number and territorial extent of voivodeships and to the structure of counties and municipalities. Accordingly, in areas gradually liberated from German control, counties were re-established within their pre-war boundaries.

By contrast, in territories that prior to 1 September 1939 had formed part of the German Reich (the so-called Recovered Territories, including Silesia, the Lubusz Land, Western Pomerania, Gdańsk, and Warmia and Masuria), a different approach was adopted. Alongside the initial creation of provisional "districts," counties were established whose boundaries, in the vast majority of cases, corresponded to those of the former German counties.

As a consequence of these measures, a total of 294 counties were initially established within post-war Poland, including 29 urban counties. In the years that followed, the number of counties increased steadily, primarily as a result of progressive urbanisation, which affected urban counties in particular.

In June 1946, following the provisions of the Potsdam Conference¹³, it became possible to introduce a uniform territorial structure across the entire state.

¹³ The conference of the victorious powers in the Second World War was held from 17 July to 2 August 1945. One of its key stipulations was the establishment of the Oder–Neisse line (the Oder and Lusatian Neisse rivers) as the provisional border between Poland and Germany.



Figure 4. Administrative division of Polish territories into voivodeships in June 1946. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of Poland, June 1946*, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Polski_\(1944%E2%80%931975\)#/media/Plik:POLSKA_28-06-1946.png](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Polski_(1944%E2%80%931975)#/media/Plik:POLSKA_28-06-1946.png) [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

A further reform of the administrative division was carried out in 1950¹⁴, the most significant element of which was the creation of three new voivodeships: Szczecin, Zielona Góra, and Opole. At that time, Poland consisted of 17 voivodeships, two cities with voivodeship status (Warsaw and Łódź), and 328 counties, including 57 urban counties.

The basic framework of Poland's administrative division during the period of the so-called Polish People's Republic (PRL) was consolidated in 1957 and remained largely unchanged until 1975. Under regulations adopted at the beginning of that year¹⁵, the cities of Kraków, Wrocław, and Poznań were also granted voivodeship status.

As a result of this sequence of changes in the territorial structure, at the time of the so-called administrative reform of 1975, which abolished the powiat as a level of the state's administrative division, there were 392 powiats in existence, including 78 urban (city) powiats.

Following the reintroduction of counties in 1999, the overwhelming majority of counties that had existed prior to 1975 were restored. At present, Poland comprises 380 counties, including 66 cities with county status; notably, the number of rural counties (314) is identical to that recorded in 1975.

¹⁴ Act of 28 June 1950 on changes to the administrative division of the state. Journal of Laws 1950, no. 28, item 255.

¹⁵ Decree of 31 December 1956 on the separation of the cities of Kraków, Poznań, and Wrocław from voivodeships and on granting their municipal national councils the powers of voivodeship national councils. Journal of Laws 1957, no. 1, item 1.



Figure 5. Administrative division of Polish territories prior to the administrative reform of 1975. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of Poland before the 1975 reform*, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Polski_\(1944%E2%80%931975\)#/media/Plik:PRL_1968_adm.png](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_Polski_(1944%E2%80%931975)#/media/Plik:PRL_1968_adm.png) [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

In the immediate post-war period, the organisation and competences of county authorities were governed by legal provisions in force prior to 1 September 1939, subject to appropriate modifications. This situation changed fundamentally in 1950, when, under the Soviet doctrine of the so-called “uniform state authority”¹⁶, a new system of territorial administration was introduced. County National Councils were established as the formal legislative bodies at the county level¹⁷, while executive functions were exercised by their presidia. Although National Councils were nominally elected, in practice elections were purely formal. In reality, decisive influence over the composition of both the councils and their presidia, consistent with the principle of the leading role of the communist party, was exercised by the Polish United Workers’ Party¹⁸.

The introduction of these Bolshevik principles into the administrative structure of the state represented a radical break with the model of public administration that had evolved on Polish lands over several centuries¹⁹.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion, see: G. Górski, *Wokół genezy PRL*, Lublin 2004.

¹⁷ Act of 20 March 1950 on territorial organs of the unified state authority. *Journal of Laws* 1950, no. 14, item 130.

¹⁸ For a broader discussion, see: G. Górski, *Historia administracji...*

¹⁹ A broader analysis of this issue is presented in G. Górski, *Polonia Restituta...*

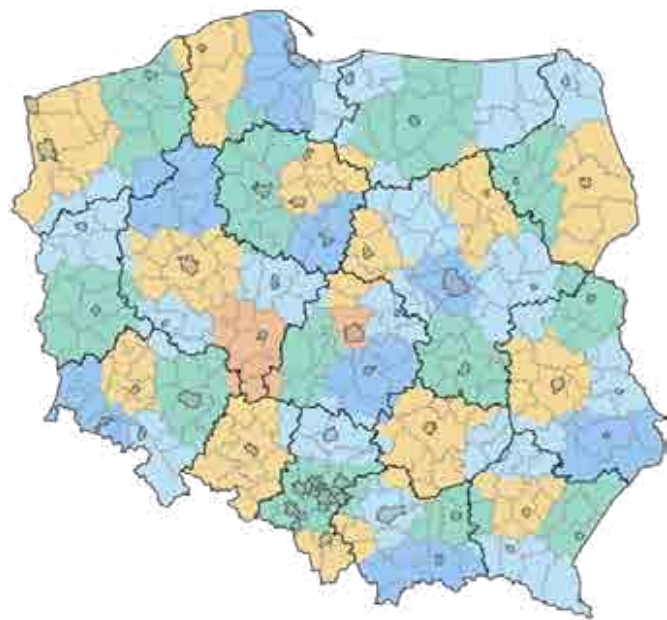


Figure 6. Administrative division of Poland since 1999, showing voivodeships and powiats. The voivodeships that existed until 1998 are marked in colour – source: Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative division of Poland since 1999 (voivodeships and counties)*, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reforma_administracyjna_w_Polsce_%281999%29#/media/Plik:Poland_administrative_divisions_comparison_map_\(1999_and_pre-1999\).svg](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reforma_administracyjna_w_Polsce_%281999%29#/media/Plik:Poland_administrative_divisions_comparison_map_(1999_and_pre-1999).svg) [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

Selection of Counties for Research Purposes by the Centre for Electoral Studies

As noted in the introduction to this study, the aim of the present research is to examine the durability of political attitudes among the inhabitants of selected areas within the contemporary borders of the Republic of Poland. In particular, the study seeks to trace the persistence of such attitudes across several centuries, during which these territories functioned under markedly different political regimes and electoral systems.

A key motivation underlying the research hypothesis is an empirical observation drawn from post-1989 electoral data. When Polish electoral results are analysed at the level of individual counties (powiaty), a striking and consistent pattern emerges: voting preferences tend to correspond closely to the historical boundaries established by the partitioning powers – boundaries that remained in force until the outbreak of the First World War. This regularity has proved remarkably resilient, persisting for more than a century after the formal end of the partitions. The longevity of these patterns provides sufficient grounds for a scholarly inquiry, first to assess whether this apparent regularity can be empirically substantiated, and secondly, should this prove to be the case, to identify the principal factors that may account for it.

Various explanations for this phenomenon have been proposed, though a detailed examination of them lies beyond the scope of this stage of the analysis. It is, however, worth noting one particularly widespread but fundamentally flawed interpretation, frequently encountered in journalistic and popular discourse. According to this view, the observed electoral differences are allegedly the result of enduring “civilisational” disparities between regions that once belonged to Germany and those incorporated into the Russian or Austrian partitions. This argument suggests that the populations of these territories differ in their level of civilisation – an assertion that lacks any serious historical or empirical foundation. Even a cursory analysis of county-level electoral data demonstrates that, while clear regional differences in voting behaviour do indeed exist, the principal dividing line most often corresponds not to the borders of the former partitions, but rather to the western boundary of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth as it existed prior to the partitions (with only minor later adjustments, notably in western Greater Poland). This directly contradicts the aforementioned thesis, which rests on a simplistic and historically uninformed understanding of Poland’s past.

If one were nevertheless to adopt a similar mode of reasoning, a far more plausible hypothesis would be that contemporary voting behaviour differs between populations inhabiting territories that have formed part of the Polish state continuously since at least the fifteenth century and those living in areas incorporated into Poland only after 1945. The latter regions were largely settled as a result of extensive post-war population transfers, and despite well-documented processes of social and cultural assimilation, their inhabitants display political attitudes that differ noticeably from those prevalent in other parts of the country. This phenomenon is particularly evident in large urban centres, where

recent decades have witnessed profound demographic changes, not so much in absolute population size as in population composition, often including ethnic structure. These shifts have had a direct impact on electoral behaviour. An even more pronounced effect can be observed in the suburban zones of major cities, which have experienced intensive in-migration from urban cores, thereby reshaping the electoral profile of surrounding counties.

These observations serve merely to illustrate broader dynamics characteristic of contemporary electoral processes, in which population mobility plays a decisive role. Such dynamics are by no means unique to Poland; they are equally evident in Western Europe, as well as in the United States and Canada, where internal and international migration continues to reshape political landscapes.

Against this background, the central research question is whether the regularities visible in maps of electoral preferences genuinely reflect deeper historical continuities. If so, a further question arises: at what stage in history did the foundations of these enduring political attitudes take shape?

Drawing on the earlier analysis of the institutional continuity of counties (powiaty) on Polish lands, a group of counties was selected for closer examination. These counties were chosen in order to investigate the potential persistence of political attitudes among their inhabitants across several centuries during which electoral mechanisms were in operation.

The selection of counties was guided by several basic criteria.

1. The analysis focuses on counties located in central Poland, specifically in regions that have remained within the borders of the Polish state without interruption since the sixteenth or seventeenth century. These include western Lesser Poland, the eastern fringe of Silesia (later Upper Silesia), Greater Poland, Mazovia, Eastern Pomerania, and parts of Warmia.
2. Most of the selected counties were areas in which processes associated with the emergence of modern political life, including the formation of political groupings, were particularly intense during the eighteenth century.
3. The core group among the selected counties, characterised by the longest tradition of political life within the framework of regional assemblies (sejmiki) operating at the voivodeship level, consists primarily of counties drawn from the eighteen voivodeships of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These voivodeships include Podlasie, Chełm, Lublin, Kalisz, Poznań, Ruthenia, Sandomierz, Mazovia, Płock, the Land of Sochaczew, Kraków, Łęczyca, Sieradz, Chełmno, Inowrocław, Brześć Kujawski, and Pomerania. In most cases, the counties within these voivodeships retained institutional continuity, even during the period of the partitions, up to their re-establishment in the Third Republic of Poland.
4. For counties located in these regions, the study analyses the distribution of political sympathies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, seeking to determine whether the foundations of later political divisions and loyalties can already be identified within the political conflicts and alignments of that period.

5. A comparable analysis is then be undertaken for a selected group of counties in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, within the context of political developments in the partitioning states, as well as for the period of the Second Polish Republic.

The overarching aim of this multi-period analysis is to assess the extent to which political experiences and patterns of behaviour formed in earlier historical epochs may be reflected, directly or indirectly, in contemporary electoral preferences. The purpose of this research is to assess the validity of the aforementioned, largely impressionistic claims, formulated on the basis of a priori assumptions, according to which contemporary electoral preferences are said to constitute a direct continuation of the former partition-based divisions and, allegedly arising from them, enduring civilisational differences that persist to the present day.

For the purposes of this analysis, a total of 97 counties (powiaty) were selected within the boundaries of Poland's present-day voivodeships. These counties are located across twelve contemporary voivodeships.

The voivodeships of West Pomerania, Lubusz, Opole, and Lower Silesia were excluded from the study. The territories of these regions were incorporated into the Polish state only after 1945, which in itself precludes their inclusion in a research design constructed along the lines adopted here. Furthermore, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the population of Polish origin in these areas was extremely limited. As a result, it is not possible, even hypothetically, to reconstruct the political preferences of that population as expressed in successive electoral processes within the Prussian state.

For a variety of reasons, it proved impossible to select an equal number of counties from each of the remaining twelve voivodeships. Nevertheless, in each case a minimum of five counties was included in the analysis. In the authors' assessment, this sample size is sufficient to permit the formulation of conclusions and evaluations that are meaningful in relation to the objectives of the study.

It should also be recalled that, as noted earlier, political life in Poland up to the end of the First Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century was concentrated around the institution of the sejmik (regional assembly), whose jurisdiction extended over the territory of a voivodeship or land. Consequently, for this period it is possible to draw certain conclusions by extrapolating political processes observed at the voivodeship level to the counties forming part of those units. For this reason, we assume that the conclusions formulated with respect to this period and these territories must, at the present stage of research, be regarded as provisional and subject to further verification. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to deny them a significant cognitive value, particularly when viewed in the broader context of later political developments and historical experiences.

Taking these considerations into account, the following counties were selected for inclusion in the analysis:

1. Podlaskie Voivodeship (6 counties): Białystok, Bielsk (Podlaskie), Łomża (Mazowieckie), Siemiatycze, Sokółka, Suwałki.

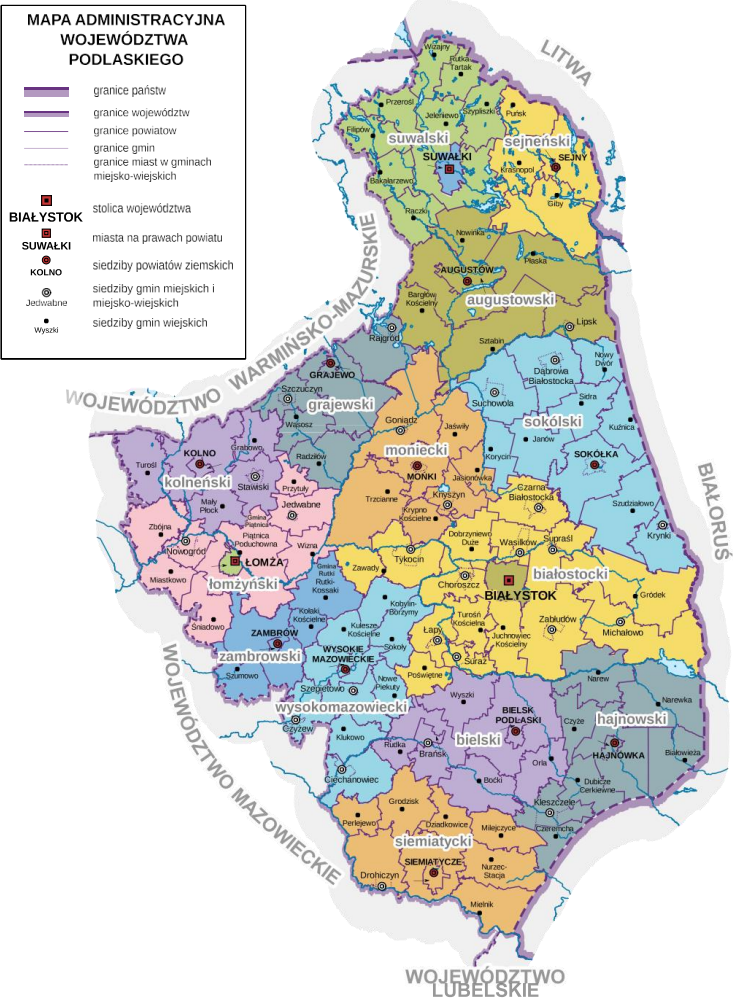


Figure 1. Administrative map of the Podlaskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Podlaskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_podlaskiego#/media/Plik:Podlaskie_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

2. Lubelskie Voivodeship (6 counties): Biała Podlaska, Chełm (Chełmskie), Hrubieszów (Chełmskie), Krasnostaw, Lublin (Lubelskie), Łuków

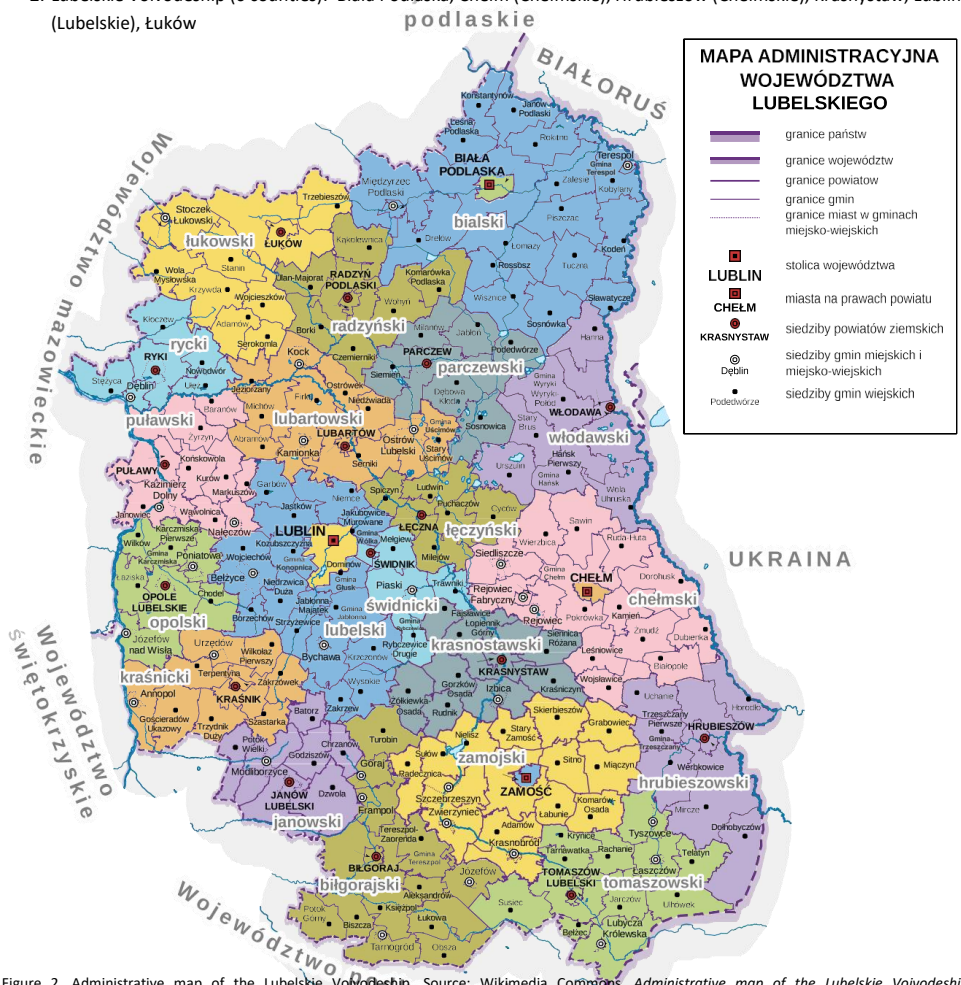


Figure 2. Administrative map of the Lubelskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Lubelskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_lubelskiego#/media/Plik:Lublin_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

3. Wielkopolskie Voivodeship (9 counties): Czarnków, Gniezno (Kaliskie), Kalisz (Kaliskie), Konin (Kaliskie), Kościan (Poznańskie), Ostrów Wielkopolski, Poznań (Poznańskie), Rawicz, Września

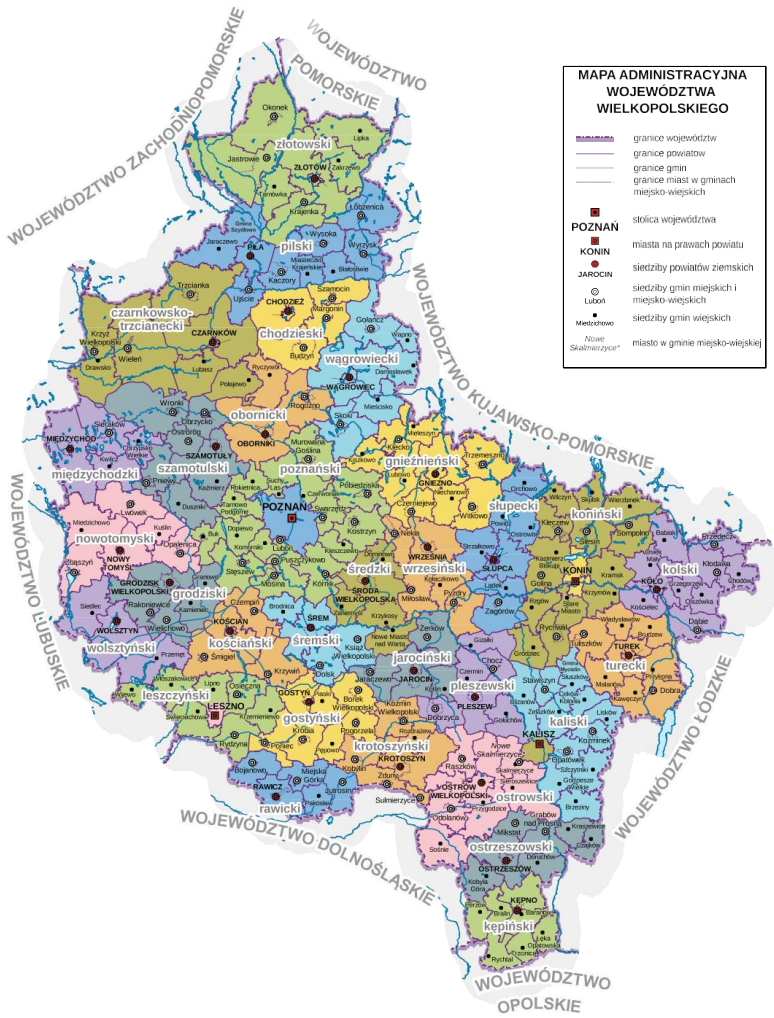


Figure 3. Administrative map of the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_wielkopolskiego#/media/Plik:Greater_Poland_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

4. Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship (6 counties): Jędrzejów, Kielce, Opatów, Pińczów, Sandomierz, Włoszczowa

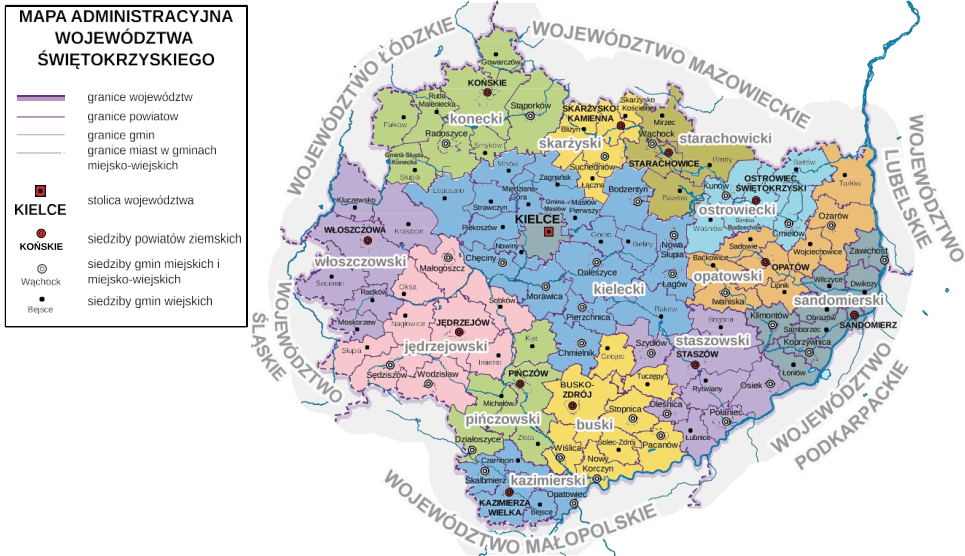


Figure 4. Administrative map of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_%C5%9Bwi%C4%99tokrzyskiego#/media:Plik:%C5%9Aw%C4%99tokrzyskie_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

5. Podkarpackie Voivodeship (formerly Lviv / Ruthenian Voivodeships) (7 counties): Krosno, Mielec, Przeworsk, Przemyśl (Ruthenian Voivodeship), Rzeszów, Sandomierz (Sandomierskie), Tarnobrzeg



Figure 5. Administrative map of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_podkarpackiego#/media/Plik:Podkarpackie_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

6. Mazowieckie Voivodeship (13 counties): Ciechanów (Masowieckie), Gostynin (Gostynin Land), Maków, Mława (Płockie), Ostrołęka, Ostrów Mazowiecka, Płock (Płockie), Płońsk, Przasnysz, Radom (Sandomierskie), Sierpc (Płockie), Sochaczew (Sochaczew Land), Węgrów



Figure 6. Administrative map of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojew%C3%B3dztwo_mazowieckie#/media/Plik:Masovian_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

7. Małopolskie Voivodeship (9 counties): Chrzanów, Dąbrowa, Gorlice, Kraków (Krakowskie), Limanowa, Myślenice, Nowy Sącz (Krakowskie), Olkusz, Tarnów (Sandomierskie)



Figure 7. Administrative map of the Małopolskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Małopolskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_ma%C5%82opolskiego#/media/Plik:Lesser_Poland_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

8. Łódzkie Voivodeship (9 counties): Brzeziny, Łęczyca (Łęczyckie), Łowicz, Opoczno, Piotrków (Sieradzkie), Radomsko (formerly Nowy Radom), Skierniewice, Sieradz (Sieradzkie), Wieluń (Sieradzkie)

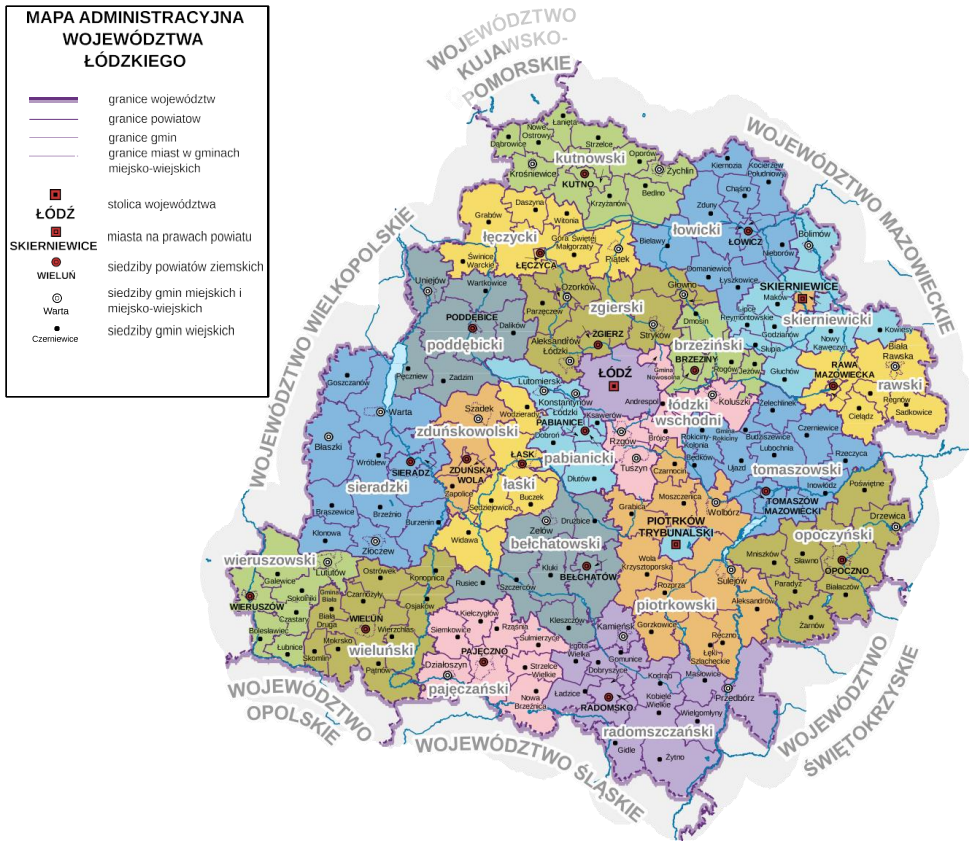


Figure 8. Administrative map of the Łódzkie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Łódzkie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_%C5%82%C3%B3dskiego#/media/Plik:%C5%81%C3%B3d%C5%BA_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

9. Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship (13 counties): Brodnica (Chełmińskie), Bydgoszcz (Inowrocławskie), Chełmno (Chełmińskie), Grudziądz, Inowrocław (Inowrocławskie), Lipno (Inowrocławskie), Nakło (Kaliskie), Nieszawa–Radziejów (Brzesko-Kujawskie), Rypin (Inowrocławskie), Świecie, Toruń, Tuchola



Figure 9. Administrative map of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_kujawsko-pomorskiego#/media/Plik:Kuyavian-Pomeranian_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

10. Pomorskie Voivodeship (7 counties): Człuchów, Kościerzyna, Puck, Tczew (Pomorskie), Gdańsk (Pomorskie), Bytów, Lębork

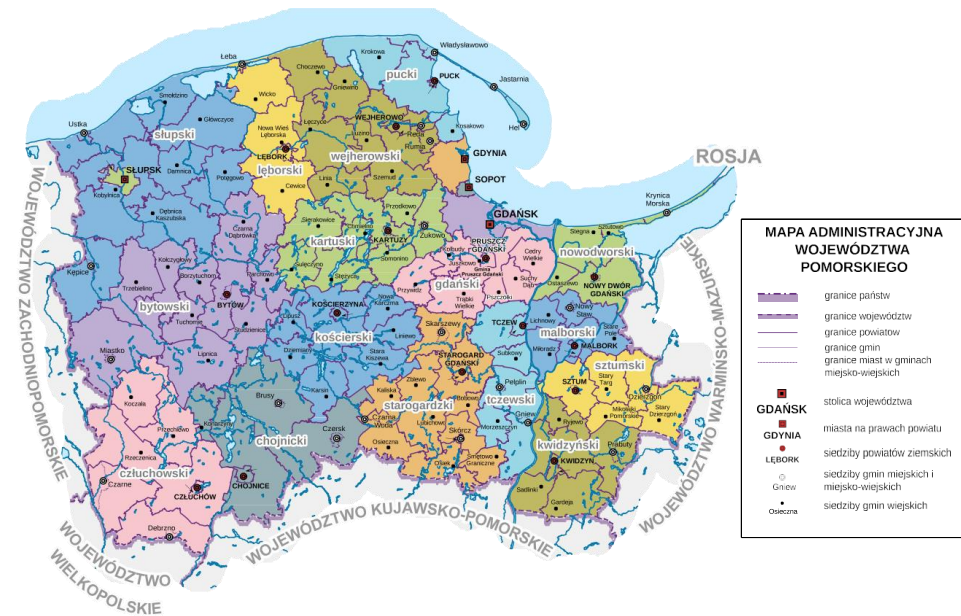


Figure 10. Administrative map of the Pomorskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Pomorskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_pomorskiego#/media/Plik:Pomeranian_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

11. Śląskie Voivodeship (7): Będzin, Bielsko, Częstochowa, Katowice, Rybnik, Pszczyna, Żywiec



Figure 11. Administrative map of the Silesian Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Śląskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_%C5%99%C4%85ski ego#/media/Plik:Silesian_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

12. Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship (5): Elbląg, Kwidzyn, Malbork, Sztum, Olsztyn

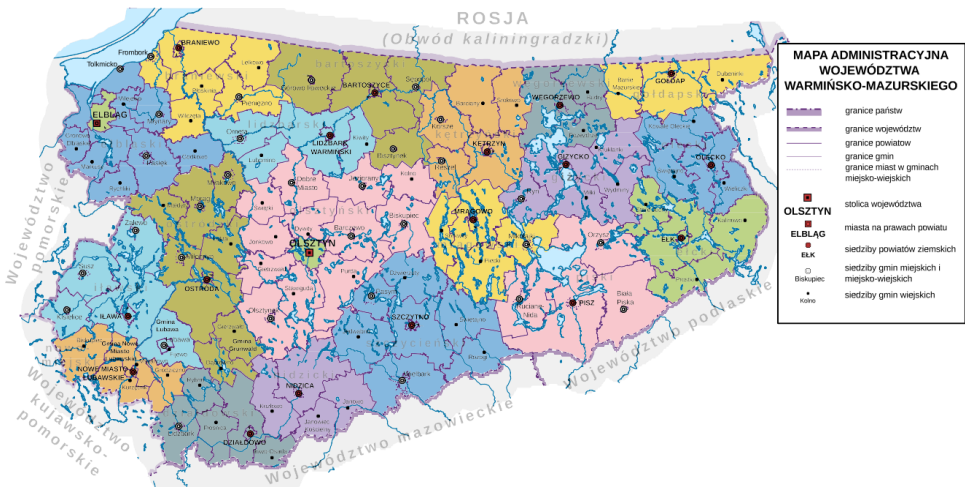


Figure 12. Administrative map of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship. Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Administrative map of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship*, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podzia%C5%82_administracyjny_wojew%C3%B3dztwa_warmi%C5%84sko-mazurskiego#/media/Plik:Warmian-Masurian_Voivodeship_administrative_map.svg [accessed on: 14.12.2025].

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