

The aim of the presented project is a more extensive inclusion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania into the worldwide discussion on the so-called Little Divergence (van Zanden 1999, Allen 2001), or an unequal pace of development of particular parts of modern Europe. Even though the East of Europe is named as one of the “loser” areas in the process (Malinowski 2016a, Malinowski & van Zanden 2017), very little has been done in order to precisely describe the phenomenon. If such attempts occur, they concern primarily issues of agriculture and serfdom (Malinowski 2016b), studied through the prism of prices and wages of several towns, which, according to the knowledge commonly shared by researchers, were to be relatively small and economically irrelevant. Our project, focused on the economy and society of Vilnius, politically, economically and demographically the most important city in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is expected to fill in the gap and verify or falsify the thesis of the little importance of urban centers in the region’s socio-economic life.

The domination of studies concerning the demography and economic history of the western part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth means that we often lack even the basic economic and demographic indicators describing its Lithuanian part. For example, even though the basic demographic parameters of families and households were developed in the case of Polish cities and towns of different size, from the largest (Warsaw, Cracow, Poznan) through small towns in Greater Poland, Lesser Poland and Red Ruthenia, there are no similar studies for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Only a little better is the state of research on the demography of rural families, peasant and noble. Even though here also more research was devoted to the Crown, we can point at important studies concerning the case of peasant population as well as the magnates inhabiting the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Szołtysek 2016, Liedke 2016). Because those studies did not cover urban populations, on their basis it is difficult to prepare a more extensive description of a demographic framework of the functioning of the whole society. Searching for an analogy, we can compare it with a hypothetical situation where the image of the society of modern France is constructed on the basis of studies of rural population and the royal court, simultaneously ignoring Paris.

A similar lack of representation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania occurs in the research of the standard of living. In contrast to Polish Crown cities, where time series of prices and wages were compiled and published a few dozen years ago, so far historians have not gathered the basic economic data for Vilnius. Therefore, it failed to find itself in the interest of European historians and economists dealing with the Little and Great Divergences in the early modern period. In addition, it is impossible to compare the situation in the Crown with that in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in particular in their capitals, which in the 18th century were experiencing a period of rapid growth.