

Popular-Science Abstract of the Project

The objective of the project is to reconstruct a network of political support – encompassing political allegiance, social relations, and magnate influence – in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the first half of the eighteenth century, using methods derived from complex network analysis. The guiding idea is to employ the dispute over the Ostrog Entail – one of the largest private estates in the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – as a coherent case study that enables a comprehensive examination of how patron–client networks were constructed, political relations forged, social relations redefined, and channels of advancement opened for political allies.

The Ostrog Entail, founded by Janusz Ostrogski in the early seventeenth century, was intended by its founder to prevent the fragmentation of an immense estate among successive heirs. The institutional structure thus created became, over time, both a marker of prestige and a symbol of obligations undertaken toward the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (for example, in the form of contributing to national defense). Yet successive holders of the entail interpreted their role and their rights to dispose of the estate in highly divergent ways. Moreover, the provisions of the founding act were designed to ensure that the estate would remain within the Ostrogski family or their closest kin for as long as possible. The exclusion of female succession, combined with the stipulation that in the absence of male heirs the estate should pass to members of the Knights of Malta, was intended to guarantee the long-term durability of the system.

The eighteenth century, however, brought a fundamental redefinition of who could be recognized as the rightful holder of the Ostrog Entail and on what terms. To date, these issues have received little systematic attention in academic research, even though their analysis provides a critical contribution not only to understanding the circumstances surrounding the transfer of the estate into the hands of the Sanguszko family, but also to recognizing the broader significance of this struggle in the context of the political disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century. The project situates this process in a much wider framework than the increasingly heated rivalries of magnate factions. The analysis of the political battle over the entail offers an exemplary case for studying the role of influence, money, clients, and private interests in shaping matters of state. Exploiting the growing dysfunction of the Sejm and the venality of opportunistic representatives of the nobility, new legal and proprietary solutions were introduced to legitimize the transfer of the estate to the Sanguszko family. A detailed study of this process provides an important perspective on magnate influence, the position and significance of royal decisions, and the strategies deployed in local assemblies and the Sejm itself.

The use of preserved, hitherto unexamined manuscript sources will allow for innovative research into the formation of political support networks, while also enabling the creation of a digital platform that will visualize the construction of political and social relations dynamically over time. The central question is whether the mechanisms of political support networks, observed in the first half of the eighteenth century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, contributed to the state's progressive dysfunction, and ultimately to its collapse at the end of the century. Should such mechanisms be identifiable, a crucial task will be to define those elements that were particularly detrimental to the functioning of the state.