In the Shadow of a Mild Revolution: Polish Women’s Political Attitudes during the Great Sejm (1788–1792)

Dorota Wiśniewska

ABSTRACT

The Great Sejm (1788–1792) is perceived as a turning point in Stanisław August Poniatowski’s reign and as one of the most important Sejms in the history of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. Studies devoted to this period concentrate in particular on parliamentary debates and deputies’ actions, as they were leading actors in this so-called Polish mild revolution. However, an interesting line of inquiry is to ask about women’s experiences, as they were also aware of the importance of these events. This paper presents conclusions arising out of analysis of women’s correspondence from the Archiwum Roskie (Roskie Archives): the legacy of the Lithuanian and Polish aristocratic Sapieha, Branicki and Potocki families that is maintained at the Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (Central Archives of Historical Records) in Warsaw. First, the article describes the group of correspondents and the source material extracted for examination. Second, it focuses on women’s approaches towards the Sejm, its deputies and its attempts to reform the Republic. Lastly, it tries to explain the factors influencing women’s attitudes. The study’s results allow us to gain a better understanding of elite women’s political culture in the late eighteenth-century Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

After 1772, when the First Partition of Poland was enacted, a significant portion of the nobility in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth opted for political, social and economic reforms that would rescue the Republic from progressive demolition. When the Great Sejm, also referred to as the Four-Years Sejm (Sejm Wielki or Sejm Czteroletni), convened on 6 October 1788 in Warsaw, and agreed to apply a majority vote instead of the usual unanimity, it aroused tremendous expectations in society. While the war between Russia and Austria with Turkey (1787–1792) alongside the Russian–Swedish conflict (1788–1790) was the central focus of the partitioning states (Russia, Prussia, Austria), heated discussions concerning reforms flared up in Warsaw. Different political groups fought a war of words trying to persuade public opinion to their program, but despite serious tensions, words remained their only weapon. As a result, military reform aiming at increasing the number of soldiers in the regular army together with tax reform were signed. Furthermore, the nobility rallied around the king, gained the upper hand over conservative circles and adopted constitutional reform (the Constitution

© 2020 The Authors. Gender & History published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

This is an open access article under the terms of the CreativeCommonsAttribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
of 3 May 1791). The Constitution established division of powers in accordance with Enlightenment ideas, banned the *liberum veto* that gave a single deputy to the Sejm the right to revoke all the regulations that had been passed by that Sejm, placed peasants under protection of the state, as well as introduced legal equality between townspeople and the nobility.\(^2\)

Undoubtedly, men were the leading actors in this mild revolution (*łagodna rewolucja*),\(^3\) which is why studies devoted to the Great Sejm consider almost exclusively their perspective.\(^4\) Nonetheless, it is interesting to inquire about women’s outlook on the political situation in Poland–Lithuania at the time. Did they care? Did women observe the proceedings of the Sejm? What were their hopes and beliefs? How did they perceive ongoing events? This paper seeks to partially fill in this lacuna by presenting conclusions derived from analysis of the correspondence from the Archiwum Roskie (Roskie Archives), which includes letters written by and to women associated with the Potocki family, one of the most prominent clans in the eighteenth-century Commonwealth. First, it describes the archives, the group of correspondents and the source material extracted for further examination. Second, it focuses on women’s approaches towards the Sejm and its attempts to reform the Republic. Lastly, it tries to explain what factors influenced women’s attitudes.

**The group under examination**

The Archiwum Roskie is the legacy of three aristocratic Lithuanian and Polish families: the Sapieha, Branicki and Potocki, maintained at the Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (Central Archives of Historical Records) in Warsaw. The collection was kept in the Potocki’s estates until the beginning of the twentieth century and then evacuated to Russia during the First World War. Returned to Warsaw, the documents were placed in Wilanów (near the capital) and for this reason they survived the next war. As a result, the Archiwum Roskie is one of the richest family heritages accessible in the Polish archives. Along with documents concerning administration of the estates (the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries), records of a public nature (the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries) and regarding military affairs (the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries), it includes a large collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century correspondence.\(^5\)

The letters sent by women between 1788 to 1792 were addressed in particular to Izabela Branicka née Poniatowska (1730–1808), the king Stanisław August Poniatowski’s sister and the wife of the Grand Hetman of the Crown Jan Klemens Branicki; Pelagia Potocka née Potocka (1721–1794), the wife of Castellan of Lviv Józef Potocki\(^6\) and Franciszek Piotr Potocki (1745–1839), the Starosta\(^7\) of Szczerzec (today Ukraine).\(^8\) Only 10 *per cent* of all records containing missives written to them were sent by women, which seems to confirm that letter writing was indeed a male practice.\(^9\) Moreover, there were slightly more women writing to Branicka and Potocka than to Potocki: they constituted 7 *per cent* of all of Franciszek’s correspondents, whereas in the cases of Izabela and Pelagia, this figure was 12 *per cent* and 17 *per cent*, respectively (see Tab. 1).

Due to the specificity of Branicka’s archive,\(^10\) in this article only letters to Franciszek Piotr Potocki and Pelagia Potocka have been studied. The former was the son of Potocka and the Castellan of Lviv Józef Potocki. After the death of the latter
in 1764, the whole family assisted in advancing young Potocki’s career. During the Confederation of Bar (1768–1772), like the majority of Potockis, he supported the confederates against Stanisław August Poniatowski. As a deputy to the Sejm, he was associated with the opposition and stood against the Permanent Council (Rada Nieustająca) – the executive introduced in 1775. In December 1788, he was elected as an envoy to Turkey, where he headed out in August of the following year. Given the tense relations between Warsaw and Moscow, Potocki was forbidden to work on any kind of military alliance with Istanbul, but he personally perceived it as a wrong strategy. When Austria withdrew from the war in the middle of 1790, his instructions changed, yet the negotiations with Turkey became much more difficult and failed before the peace treaty was signed (9 January 1792). Potocki left Istanbul ten months later. His position towards the Constitution of 3 May remains ambiguous. On the one hand, we note sources suggesting his negative attitude, but on the other, he criticised the king’s accession to the Confederation of Targowica (1792) that aimed to abolish the Constitution. As to his mother, we know very little about her life. She asserted certain authority over her son, and she strived to ensure his political career. At the time of the Sejm she was a sixty-seven-year-old independent widow.

On matters related to politics, women most frequently addressed Potocki (seven of ten), whereas only two of all of Potocka’s nine female correspondents reference such subjects. The list of correspondents whose letters contain information regarding political life looks as follows.

Female correspondents of Pelagia Potocka

- Maria Grabowska née Potocka (years of life unknown), a daughter (six);
- Katarzyna Kossakowska née Potocka (1722–1803), a sister (fifty-two).

Female correspondents of Franciszek Piotr Potocki

- Anna Jabłonowska née Sapiieha (1728–1800), a distant relative (eight);
- Katarzyna Kossakowska née Potocka (1722–1803), an aunt (thirty-five);
- Krystyna Potocka née Potocka (1753–1789), a wife (thirty-one);
- Pelagia Potocka née Potocka (1721–1794), a mother (twenty-two);
• Maria Radziwiłłowa née Lubomirksa (1730–1795), an aunt (twelve);
• Teofila Sapieżyńska née Jabłonowska (1742–1816), a distant relative (two);
• Urszula Wielopolska née Potocka (1725–1806), a cousin (one).

Every woman from the list was born into the Potocki family. What is more, the most frequent correspondence was held between close relatives – Potocka received letters in particular from her sister and Potocki from his aunt (his mother’s sister), wife and mother. Interestingly, not only more women wrote about public life to Potocki than to Potocka, but they also devoted much more space in their letters to political issues when writing to him. For instance, Katarzyna Kossakowska, who maintained a regular correspondence with both of them, wrote to Potocki almost exclusively about politics. In letters sent to Potocka, we may find many more details concerning social events, balls and parties, or family and private affairs. This characteristic resulted from the fact women shared similar everyday occupations that were associated with domestic life. Additionally, Franciszek played a leading role in the public sphere as a deputy to the Sejm and its envoy to Istanbul, which also explains this disproportion.

All of the women belonged to aristocracy and possessed numerous estates, which allowed them to lead a life that was assigned to their status. Only Maria Grabowska and Krystyna Potocka were married. The rest were widowed: Katarzyna Kossakowska by the Castellan of Kamieniec Stanisław Kossakowski, Pelagia Potocka by the Castellan of Lviv Józef Potocki, Anna Jabłonowska by the Voivode of Bracław Jan Kajetan Jabłonowski and Urszula Wielopolska by the Grand Koniuszy of the Crown Hieronim Wielopolski, or lived in separation from their husbands: Maria Radziwiłłowa was divorced from the Grand Miecznik of the Crown Karol Stanisław Radziwiłł, Teofila Sapieżyńska and her husband the Grand Krajczy of Lithuania Józef Sapieha lived apart. When the Great Sejm was convened, almost all the women were of mature age: Pelagia Potocka, Katarzyna Kossakowska, Urszula Wielopolska and Anna Jabłonowska were in their sixties, Maria Radziwiłłowa was fifty-eight, Teofila Sapieżyńska forty-six and the youngest, Krystyna Potocka – thirty-five. The latter was the only person from the list who did not observe the whole Sejm since she died in 1789. During the Sejm, the aforementioned women stood behind the opposition, so called Puławy set or Patriotic Party, in which the Grand Marshal of Lithuania Ignacy Potocki (1750–1809) and his brother Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1755–1821) together with Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski (1734–1823) were the key players. They opted for the Prussian–Polish alliance and propagated a republican vision of the state. Kossakowska was close especially to the Potocki brothers, which resulted from her role as their guardian after their father’s (her brother’s) death in 1768. For the first two years of the Sejm, the opposition gained the majority in the Chamber of Envoys, as well as received the Warsaw public’s support. Yet, on November 1790, Ignacy Potocki decided to make a compromise with the king. This meant that the Patriotic Party and the royalists were to work hand in hand on the new form of government. The result of this cooperation was the adoption of the Constitution of 3 May.

Women write about the Sejm and its deputies

Women from the Potocki family realised that the upcoming Sejm was important for the country’s existence, thus they hoped the elected deputies could find consensus in
the majority of matters they would consider. Teofila Sapieżyna claimed that a national compromise should have been reached even before the Sejm launched its discussions. She believed there was a chance the Sejm would implement the necessary reforms owing to its composition: ‘In my opinion, this Sejm ought to do something good for the country after electing so many well-thinking deputies’ (17 September 1788).16 Apparently, she was glad that a significant portion of deputies elected in 1788 sympathised with the political party supported by the members of Potocki family. Perhaps she also noticed that, in comparison to earlier Sejms which took place during the reign of August III (1733–1763) and since the election of Stanisław August Poniatowski in 1764, the deputies were better educated and more open-minded than their predecessors. Indeed, a large number of them had graduated from the Corps of Cadets (Korpus Kadetów; a state school established on the initiative of the king in 1765, which educated the nobility in a patriotic and enlightened spirit).17

Anna Jabłonowska stressed that the Sejm was the last opportunity to save the Republic. She expected deputies to take responsibility for the common good, since their failure could have serious consequences. She prayed for them to make the most of this ‘beneficial time’.18 Aware that the deliberations would be passionate and difficult, she wished for the good will and ‘zeal of the citizens’ (3 November [1788]).19 The same hopes were expressed by Sapieżyna, who was persuading Potocki to put aside, as far as possible, private interests and to focus on the public good (17 September 1788).20 Then, Pelagia Potocka praised politicians who were eager to maintain a certain unanimity among the nobility; she called them those ‘who think well’ (15 September 1788).21

Maria Radziwiłłowa was rather sceptical of what she felt was the illusory potential for reconciliation of the nobility. As the Sejm had been convened on Russia’s approval, she disagreed that an assembly under the protection of Moscow could be called a ‘victory’. According to Radziwiłłowa, it was a matter of honour not to negotiate with Catharine II. Consequently, the effort put into building a cohesive group of politicians ready to work together was wasted, as the nation would become even more incapacitated by the control of Russia. Finally, this decision would astonish the whole of Europe and would be negatively judged by future generations (22 August 1788).22 Nonetheless, she expressed her great ‘veneration’ for the Sejm. She knew unity was necessary to implement reforms. ‘It is said that the result of this Sejm will be important, please God, nothing adverse’, she wrote (6 August 1788).23 Lastly, Katarzyna Kossakowska warned Potocki that the Sejm may be the last one in the history of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, if it ends without introducing crucial changes (11 October 1788).24 At the same time, she criticised the inclusion of poor nobles and ‘new people’ into public life, promoted by the king: ‘There are so many of the noblemen who are made, not born … His Majesty the King had the right to distribute these dignities, but he produced many sons without mothers’. She stressed that citizens should be true ‘sons’, not ‘stepsons’ of the Commonwealth (15 December 1788).25 It seems that Kossakowska shared the opinion expressed by a significant number of magnates according to which even if every noble was a citizen, the most important offices should be held by the ancient, distinguished aristocratic families.

Although in general the aforementioned women had great hopes before the Sejm and positive opinions of its delegates, after the first month of the parliamentary
sessions, their attitudes became critical. Jabłonowska was deeply disappointed that
the deputies had quarrelled instead of trying to reach consensus (22 October 1788). Kossakowska wrote: ‘If it [the Sejm] will last so long, neither will you see Istanbul, nor will the Commonwealth see a 100,000-strong army’ (22 December 1788). The longer the Sejm worked, the more impatient she became. In March 1789, she concluded that ‘the winter lasts as long as the Warsaw Sejm’ (9 March 1789). She frequently highlighted the deputies’ inertia resulting, in her eyes, from their subordination to Russia:

The assembly of all of you, Sirs, is so wonderful; you are all elected to the Sejm, however there is a corncockle among you; thus, what can we still expect? All of you claim: ‘the appropriate time has come’; even if it has, what are your conclusions, Sirs? I say that you will do nothing, there is no one to be afraid of, as it was during previous Sejms, nonetheless you are afraid my dear starost! I will never wish for deputies from our house, what for? What for? If only so that they give beautiful addresses, it can be done at home, to the wall … It was ordered to deliver horses and carts together with farmhands, but the troops which were already sent to Ukraine left; why were they withdrawn? Did not have they supplies to survive through winter? People provide for the army. It was withdrawn since the friendship bade to do it (1 December 1788).

The longer the Sejm worked, the more impatient she became. In March 1789, she concluded that ‘the winter lasts as long as the Warsaw Sejm’ (9 March 1789). She frequently highlighted the deputies’ inertia resulting, in her eyes, from their subordination to Russia:

The friendship Kossakowska points to probably refers to the warm relations with Russia of the royalists and partisans of the Hetmańska Party. At the beginning of the Sejm, the latter was cooperating with the ‘patriots’, but differences of opinion between them over foreign affairs policy quickly became irreconcilable. Kossakowska attacked in particular the General of Artillery of the Crown Stanisław Szczęsny Potocki (1751–1805) – one of the leaders of pro-Russian camp. She found it naive to believe the empress would agree to the Sejm’s demand concerning the withdrawal of her army from Ukraine, which was sent to Catherine II in November 1788. Kossakowska suspected that even if it happened, she would never forgive such an insult; consequently, the Russian troops would come back to the Commonwealth as soon as Russia had ended her wars with Turkey and Sweden. She judged the decision to refrain from sending more soldiers along the eastern border as foolishness (3 February 1789).

Much space in Kossakowska’s letters was devoted to the inaction of the Sejm regarding the events in Wolhynia (the south-eastern part of the country, today Ukraine), where people had suffered from atrocities by Russian soldiers, and a peasant rebellion had taken place (February–April 1789). She accused politicians in Warsaw of indolence and indifference to the serious situation there: ‘I would advise citizens in Wolhynia to bring human corpses to Warsaw in order to parade them before the Estates of the Commonwealth, which constantly receive the reports about the calm in the country’ (10 April 1789). She blamed Szczęsny Potocki for deliberately deceiving the Sejm in his reports and acting on the orders of the Russian prince Grigory Potemkin. Finally, she complained about miscommunication between the Military Commission and the Assembly (7 September 1789). Radziwiłłowa also reproached deputies for their impulsivity in deliberations and inefficiency in taking decisions. She deemed they pursued senseless conversations and were dithering while the Russian army was demolishing Ruthenia (the south-eastern part of the country, today Ukraine). She found it inconceivable that military help was not sent to Ukraine before the conflict escalated.
Although Radziwiłłowa appreciated the effort and devotion of the majority of deputies who were eager to act for the public good, she had a poor opinion of those who wasted time to serve their own benefit (6 and 22 March 1789). She also laid the blame on the nobility sympathising with Russia, as their behaviour made it almost impossible to deliberate on important issues: ‘Every proposal meets [their] endless yelling, screaming’ she remarked (5 October 1790). In her opinion, by delaying reforms, the pro-Russian party let the empress instruct the Sejm:

There is a party controlled by Russia, which indirectly supports her interests and viewpoint … they, members of the party, manifest the most their reluctance … they promote everything that lets them keep their influence and they madly oppose the projects that would enable us to gain our political independence (5 October 1790).

The discourse that we can observe so far was very strong among the opposition. The hostility towards Russia escalated after 13 October 1788, when the declaration of the king of Prussia in support of the Polish Sejm was read out during the assembly. Then, the antagonism towards Moscow intensified with the abolition of the Permanent Council on 19 January 1789, perceived as a tool in the hands of the Russian ambassador.

Lastly, the nobility’s self-interest that inevitably led to annihilation of the efforts undertaken to reform the Commonwealth was stressed by Maria Grabowska: ‘As for the Sejm, it is a shame that after achieving so much, the deputies forgot what is good for the nation. Our nightmare is that they still do not think properly. The worst thing is that they look out for only the individual interest’, she wrote on 13 April 1789.

Women and reforms

Initially, the Sejm was to debate on three major issues: military reform, taxation, and a new form of government. The first of them unified the nobility and was supported regardless of political affiliation. Consequently, there was common agreement to introduce taxes that would facilitate it. Nevertheless, for many, only changes in the army were important, whereas the political regime remained satisfactory.

Women agreed that the number of soldiers in the regular army should be increased significantly as soon as possible. For Radziwiłłowa, security was crucial. From her perspective, mass mobilisation (wartime mobilisation, pospolite ruszenie) was not efficient, since the nobility lacked integrity. She invoked the example of the inhabitants of the Greater Poland region (north-west Poland), doubting that they would go in for a war with Russia as ‘they are more Prussian than Polish’. This conviction might have resulted from the assumption that they had no interest in fighting with Moscow, since their lands were situated a great distance from the eastern border, where people were directly suffering from Russian aggression.

Kossakowska also favoured the military reform but doubted that the planned creation of an army of 100,000 soldiers was possible owing to a lack of funds. She called the idea ‘delusion’ (15 May 1789). Moreover, as early as the Sejm started, she opposed reorganisation of the Military Department (Departament Wojskowy) that was to be transformed into the Military Commission of the Two Nations (Komisja Wojskowa Obojga Narodów). About deputies in charge of the reform she wrote: ‘I call such people harlequins of mind: [people] who have something different in their heart, something else in their head and some other thing in their mouth’. These words
referred in particular to the Grand Hetman of the Crown Franciszek Ksawery Branicki (1730–1819), and his supporters from the Hetmańska Party. He was suspected of collaborating with Russia, even if he officially denied it, and many thought he aimed at concentrating the power in the army around himself, which is why he promoted the reform. Kossakowska did not trust him, and predicted that the establishment of the Commission, in which the hetmans would have had much more power than in the Military Department, may have generated extremely negative effects (1 November 1788). Also, Jabłonowska warned that the project for reorganisation of the army may have given the hetmans too much administrative power. She identified it with the attack on the ‘healthy’ balance of powers. According to Jabłonowska, society was divided into three groups: ‘priests, citizens, and soldiers’, who lived and worked for each other’s benefit. Hence, if the hetmans (soldiers) overtook some of the responsibilities of the voivodes (citizens), the latter would become inferior to the former. Trying to bring Potocki around to her point of view, she gave the historical example of the situation in the ancient Roman Empire, where powerful soldiers destroyed humble men (‘They will squash us like in the last days of Rome’). She proposed a compromise, assuming the possibility of public (administrative) service for soldiers, but after they had quit the army (1 November 1788).

In fact, the law passed on 20 December 1788 did not restore the hetmans’ powers, as they only presided the Commission and rotated every three months, but indeed Branicki’s position improved significantly during the debates concerning military reform, which worried not only Kossakowska. Eventually, the majority of deputies expressed their anxiety as to the strong position of hetmans, therefore the Sejm decided that the Military Commission would be constituted of three senators, nine deputies and five soldiers or soldiers simultaneously holding administrative functions. Yet, the importance of Branicki and his companions in the army’s leadership still worried Kossakowska. She claimed that they (‘traitors’ as she called them) would have not respected the Sejm’s decisions and the army would have suffered from their arrogance and attachment to Russia (3 February 1789, 15 May 1789).

As was already stated, there was a general consensus on increasing the number of soldiers in the regular army, as well as on introducing taxes that would facilitate doing so. Nonetheless, as for who should have contributed to the budget, to what extent and how money would be collected, opinions were more divided. Jabłonowska was afraid that the planned income taxation (10 per cent) would have affected her well-being and that, without an efficient system, officials responsible for collecting taxes and taxpayers themselves would get involved in fiscal fraud. Therefore, she suggested that Potocki propose before the Chamber the introduction of taxes on imported goods (1 November 1788). Ultimately the income tax was imposed and by September 1789 the Sejm received first disappointing reports. As Jabłonowska suspected, tax collection depending on commissars and citizens acting under oath encouraged perjury. Moreover, the criteria concerning what to count as taxable lacked clarity.

They [deputies] only fight with each other, and they start to forget the needs of the beloved homeland; we, who live in the provinces, are scared when we see what they do, they impose new taxes, and no one knows where are those which were already collected; the army is bare and unpaid … it is said they want to destroy citizens and instead of improving their lives, they will leave them in worse condition. This is our misery; it is bad, God forbid, it is not worse (22 March 1790).
Women associated with the Potocki family, similarly to the majority of men in this family, identified with republicanism. Kossakowska criticised deputies for wasting time on debating the issue of division of powers, since there could be no consensus in this matter. She believed that instead of considering enlightened solutions, it would be better to re-establish the laws functioning before the election of Stanisław August (1764), that is ‘the laws ancient kings negotiated with the Commonwealth’. She argued that ‘in better times’ there was no need to talk about distribution of executive and legislative powers, since the nobility understood the importance of cooperation and unanimity (1 November 1788).  

She supported the idea of an obligation imposed on deputies to observe the sejmiks instructions, since they elected them to the Sejm as representatives of the will of the province. She disapproved of young deputies gathering and discussing political affairs ‘behind the scenes’, after official parliamentary sessions had ended. What shocked her was their readiness to change their opinion and to act independently, without following instructions – a duty respected by earlier generations (11 October 1788). Attempts to repeal the oath on sejmiks instructions was one of the major concerns of the radical supporters of a republican regime, as they believed a deputy participating in the Sejm without instructions from his province on how to vote would be subjected to manipulation by the king or magnates.

Kossakowska indeed dreamt of a return to the truly republican regime of the country before Stanisław August’s election, when the role of the king was limited as much as possible. The speech by the Lord Chancellor and the Grand Hetman of the Crown Jan Zamoyski (1542–1605) to the King Zygmunt III Waza (who reigned from 1587 to 1632) that she attached to one of her letters confirms it:

> There is a remarkable speech of Jan Zamoyski, in which during a Sejm, slowly and courageously, as would be expected of a Polish senator, he warned the king to behave and respect the laws on which he swore, and when the King Zygmunt III, offended by this address of Zamoyski, got angry and flew into a passion, stood up from his throne and reached for his backsword, Zamoyski [with] the steadiness of a true free Pole said to the king: ‘Your Majesty is not gagging to fight, so that posterity does not call you Gaius Caesar and us Brutuses. We elect kings and fight tyrants, be a king, do not reign’ (27 January 1789).

It is interesting to observe the usage of memory of Zamoyski and his speech after more than 100 years. Perhaps Kossakowska wanted Potocki to make use of it during parliamentary debates – invoking the famous sixteenth-century statesman and his truly republican narrative could serve as an excellent oratory tool. Importantly, at the time when Zamoyski ‘instructed’ the king, the republican regime was already enshrined: the nobility established their control over the monarch by introducing the Sejm in the 1490s, formal royal elections in 1572 and tribunals to which the judges were elected by the nobles: in 1578 for Poland and in 1581 for Lithuania. Kossakowska deliberately highlighted the Chancellor’s defence of republican values: the ‘golden freedom’ of noble citizens and their rights to rule the country. By doing so, she expressed the opposition to Stanisław August’s policy aiming at strengthening his position as a monarch.

A similar concern was troubling Jabłonowska. She was alarmed that the reforms would take too much power from the nobility. Although she supported the introduction of new regulations concerning the form of government, she was afraid that the
role of the king would expand to such an extent that he could oppress the nation (3 [November] 1788).  

Finally, Potocka referred to reforms introduced by the Constitution of 3 May, which, in her view, were undermining the liberties of the nobles. She ironically commented that it was said that the project would introduce ‘reasonable liberty’, since it was difficult to understand the notion. She found it intolerable to give all executive power to the king and his government in the form of the Custodial Council (Straż Praw). The new form of governance did not convince her it was better than the one she had known since childhood. On the contrary, she was persuaded that the old political regime respected all citizens who wanted to act for the common good and facilitated their inclusion in public life. From her perspective, her contemporaries in the nobility were only eager to curry favour, which did not make them true citizens. As a result, the king would have been able to manipulate them by offering them functions in the government (21 September 1792).  

The republicanism of women from the Potocki family is also visible in their reactions to the Sejm’s proposal to introduce a hereditary monarchy. The thought that the nation would be deprived of the right to choose their king in a free election (wolna elekcja) was unbearable for Kossakowska:

The deputies elected to the ordinary Sejm should not interfere in the cardinal law of election; it is already seven Sundays since I had an argument [concerning this issue] with bishop Kamieński, and I felt the voivodeship would not be content with such a proposition, as there is no such account that would present the dignity and the jewel of the Commonwealth differently than by highlighting the free votes that choose their master (9 November 1789).  

On the other hand, she was aware that in the contemporaneous circumstances, a future election would not be ‘free’:

We would not remember that he [a king] was ever elected by Poles themselves; there was always a devil, but even cardinals in Rome take part in the conclave and people say that it is more probable the devil is present there than the Holy Spirit. Then, also during our elections, the Holy S[pirit] is addressed, but Muscovites shout ‘be on the throne!’ (9 November 1789).  

For the same reason, Radziwiłłowa stated that to avoid a national calamity after Poniatowski’s death, it was crucial for the decision as to who should reign the country to be made during this Sejm. She criticised the fact that the issue provoked so much discord and approved of the idea to consult sejmiks (‘the nation’) on the matter of future elections. Personally, as did the majority of Potocki family, she supported the candidacy of one of the members of the Saxon dynasty (5 October 1790).  

The republicans saw this candidacy as the most convenient one because they opted for continuity of succession, disrupted by Poniatowski’s election (1764). Furthermore, they felt a certain nostalgia for the calm and prosperous years of August III’s reign (1733–1763); this option was also acceptable to the Prussian king, who they wished to set up an alliance with. Finally, the Potockis opposed Poniatowski and his family for years and we may notice a strong reluctance towards the king in the studied letters. When, shortly before the Sejm, he organised a ball in his summer residency in Łazienki (near his castle in Warsaw), Potocka was disgusted by how the monarch spent so much money on preparations. Although she was furious that the nobility bought costumes in order to ‘show themselves off’, she found the king’s guilt to be the stronger one.
In the Shadow of a Mild Revolution

The amount wasted on this initiative, we then read, could have contributed to the acquisition of ‘gunpowder, bullets and sabers’ that were needed to defend the country from foreign aggression (12 September 1788).

Kossakowska blamed Stanisław August, along with the Sejm, for the events in Ukraine:

His Majesty the King guessed, in his Moscow, that there will be a rebellion in Ukraine … but orders of the Estates of the Commonwealth to the army cannot be announced so that it could fight this riot. Sir, has this Sejm been convened so that deputies could [give] beautiful speeches in which they express sincere truth? … honest jokes and the homeland will collapse (22 December 1788).

In the spring of 1789, Kossakowska was anxious that all the ‘republican’ deputies would leave the capital by the Easter holidays, which would result in a predominance of the king and his supporters in the Assembly (‘I fear that to the end of this Sejm, every good man would leave Warsaw, and those who are bad would stay’, 13 March 1789).

The attitudes of women changed after the decision of the Sejm to elect Frederick Augustus I, the Elector of Saxony, as a successor (30 September 1790) and the formation of an alliance between the king and the opposition (November 1790). Although this conclusion cannot be drawn from the analysis of their correspondence, other sources seem to prove it. For instance, Kossakowska officially reconciled with the king when he joined ‘patriots’ and she demonstrated a strong support for the Constitution of 3 May: on the occasion of the first anniversary of its adoption, her palace was one of the most illuminated buildings in Warsaw.

Lastly, women attentively observed diplomatic relations between the Commonwealth and its neighbours. They wrote about foreign affairs almost exclusively when the latter were related directly to the situation in Poland. Even when Radziwiłłowa observed the war in Sweden, it was linked with the state of affairs in the Commonwealth. The only exception was the French Revolution, but only in April 1792, as she feared the ‘French contagion’ could reach Central Europe: ‘France collapsed, we shall be scared’ (20 April 1792).

Kossakowska disagreed with the strategy adopted by deputies during the Russian–Turkish war. She found it inappropriate that the Commonwealth had declared neutrality, but at the same time cultivated friendly relations with the Russian ambassador, Otto Magnus von Stackelberg (in Poland from 1772 to 1790). She believed that avoiding involvement in this war, whether direct or indirect, was important for the safety of the Republic (22 February 1789, 9 December 1789). Kossakowska had a deep resentment towards Russia, hence she did not hide her joy after hearing about Prince Potomkin’s death in 1791. She clearly and frequently demonstrated her anti-Russian position, criticising the king for trusting the empress. She even disputed with her friend, the bishop Adam Krasiński, that good relations with Russia were necessary to pursue reforms (13 March 1789). In Kossakowska’s eyes, the idea to demolish the Commonwealth came from Catherine II. At the very end of the Sejm she concluded: ‘Truly, remembering past actions [and] the dignity of the Commonwealth, I see that even then Moscow was taking this dignity, since [Moscow] govern[s] [the Commonwealth]’ (20 December 1791). She was counting on Prussian support: ‘I give my approval to the king of Prussia, so that he has free passage with the whole army not only to Sweden, but also to Poland … A friend should not be prohibited. May God
lead him and give him luck’ (6 October 1789). As her estates were located in Galicia (the province created by the Habsburgs after 1772 from former Polish lands), it is interesting that she spoke rather indifferently of the Austrian monarchy. She only once objected to the way the government treated the Catholic Church, but this resulted from her strong attachment to religion:

Germans come to churches and steal silver from the crown of the Most Holy Mother of Sokal [patroness of the city today in Ukraine]. They would sooner respect an infant than the Queen of Heaven. They dismantled the beautiful church of the Carmelites, and sold the stones to the Jews, leaving an empty square … Our Galicians say that it is better now, but individuals and common people do not want to attend church; this is indeed the condition of the Catholic faith in this country (9 December 1791).

The anti-Russian attitude, as well as the support for Prussia are very visible in Radziwiłłowa’s letters. She was appalled by the pro-Russian attitude of the Bishop of Vilnius, Ignacy Jakub Massalski, who should have been accused of high treason and condemned before all of Europe. She feared the Russian army, which is why she thought the nation ought to have sought Prussian support (5 May 1789). She believed the remedy for Poland’s dependence on superpowers, given the circumstances of the Russian–Swedish and Russian–Turkish conflicts, was the project of an alliance between Prussia, Sweden, Poland and Turkey. She hoped that the diplomatic mission of Potocki to Istanbul would make it happen (5 October 1790). Therefore, she was deeply disappointed when it did not, and when the Prussian king excused himself from fulfilling his promises to protect the Commonwealth (20 April 1792). Potocka did not explicitly express her attitudes towards neighbouring countries but in 1792 she rather approved of the Polish–Austrian alliance.

Why did women care?

Women writing to Pelagia Potocka and Franciszek Piotr Potocki paid attention to what was happening in Warsaw during the Sejm, and were interested in the proceedings of its sessions. Kossakowska, for instance, wanted to be sent speeches which were given during the parliamentary discussions. She asked her sister to send in particular those discussed by the public. In November 1788, she was intrigued to learn the content of the addresses of the Primate of Poland, Michał Jerzy Poniatowski (the head of the Catholic Church in Poland–Lithuania and the king’s brother), Szczęsny Potocki, and Stackelberg. She also wanted to see with her own eyes the proclamation of Frederick William II, in which he declared his support for the Commonwealth against Russia.

Although female correspondents of the Potockis visited Warsaw during the Sejm, it seems that for the majority of time they resided outside the capital, on their estates. Hence, contacting Potocka, who permanently stayed there, or Potocki, who was a deputy to the Sejm and Polish envoy to Turkey, gave them direct access to information concerning politics. Maria Grabowska asked her mother for ‘news’, as she knew Pelagia was well-informed owing to the fact she lived in Warsaw, had a close relation with Franciszek and had numerous friends who reported news to her. Grabowska’s husband emphasised that Potocka was ‘relatively quickly … informed’ about everything, which is why he wanted his wife to maintain regular contact with her. While staying in Warsaw, the women attended the Royal Castle or discussed ongoing events
during different social gatherings (the exception was Jabłonowska who probably did not visit the city).

One may claim that the reasons for the strong interest of elite women in politics can be found in simple curiosity and a desire to kill the boredom. In fact, this appears to be far from true. It should be kept in mind that political life in the eighteenth century had an important impact on the private sphere. Since Potocki’s public service was a familial affair, women sent him as much information concerning political situation as they could collect and gave him advice. The familial character of doing politics may be also observed in the way Potocki’s female correspondents expressed their pride and underlined the honour which met their families after his election to the Sejm. Jabłonowska accentuated a true ‘consolation’ to have relatives marked with glory for acting for the benefit of posterity. Potocki’s mother and his wife were also very pleased with their son’s and husband’s careers in public service. When he quit standing as a candidate to become Marshal of the Sejm in favour of Stanisław Małachowski, Kossakowska was angry with her nephew, who had thus embarrassed the family: ‘Neither grandfathers, uncles nor brothers, nobody has resigned from fulfilling just and serious obligations’. She argued that he should have followed ‘God’s will’ and welcomed this opportunity. The fact that he renounced was, in her eyes, much worse than any eventual defeat in the election for the office:

In great circumstances, interests occur in accordance with destiny and God’s will; you should have shown your face and tried your friends, no one would be ashamed then … but to apply and retreat, this is not acceptable for me …; you lost credit in my eyes; why did you make all these efforts and statements when you were not sure of your intentions?

Potocki’s mother was especially delighted about his mission to the ‘Greek lands’, as she called Turkey. When Potocki was chosen for his diplomatic mission, Kossakowska also perceived it as a prestige for the family. It was important for her to receive his farewell speech given to the Assembly before departure to Istanbul. The honour was so valued by the nobility that Wielopolska asked Potocki to take her grandson with him to Turkey in order to initiate him into public service. Undoubtedly, women were well aware that the political situation in the country directly affected their everyday lives. This is why Jabłonowska addressed Potocki to express her concerns about new regulations on taxation. This can also be observed in letters sent by Kossakowska to her sister: she asked for information, but also informed Potocka and shared her opinions and concerns with her. When the pro-Russian camp was in the middle of preparing their confederation against the Sejm, at the end of 1791, she wrote:

Last night, Hetman Branicki came to Podle, to the voivode of Belz and his wife’s house, and he sent for a courier to Jazłowiec [all cities are situated in what is today Ukraine], to the General of the Artillery Potocki and Hetman Rzewuski, who were coming back from Jassy [today Romania], from Prince Potomkin. Several individuals went to visit them from Lviv. What they did in Jazłowiec and why they went to Jassy, no one knows. I only know that they do wrong.

Women were interested in proceedings of the Sejm, as it influenced the stability of the country and their own safety. Their estates were located in the eastern part of the country, hence it comes as no surprise that they carefully observed diplomatic relations as well as the movements of Polish and Russian armies. Kossakowska anxiously
waited for reports concerning Ukraine, where her estates were situated, to save herself, but also to warn and protect her relatives and close friends.  

Lastly, we shall not neglect women’s concern for their homeland, which they manifested inter alia by expressing their hopes of implementing crucial reforms during the Sejm. When all attempts and efforts failed, they had negative feelings: from sadness to anger and fear. In the face of the definite defeat of the Sejm and the outbreak of the Polish–Russian war in 1792, Jabłonowska wrote: ‘If I were to describe what is happening here, I would cry’. Potocka was so disconsolate about the situation of the country that she refused to discuss anything related to it.

**Conclusion**

Women writing letters in the eighteenth century were privileged – noble, well-educated and/or propertied. They realised their missives might be publicly read aloud (for instance during social gatherings) and they observed the conventions of the genre, which certainly influenced their narratives. Still, correspondence, along with diaries and autobiographies, reveals women’s perspective like no other historical source. One may claim that it uncovers their experience in typically ‘female’ domains, such as family, feelings, childhood and private life. In fact, elite women occupied not only the domestic sphere, but also had access to the public one and wrote more or less extensively about politics. As Margot Finn asserts, women’s letters from this period can be ‘at once intimately domestic and intensely political, simultaneously private and public’. The analysis of female correspondence that dates back to the Great Sejm allows us to explore women’s intellectual capabilities, their opinions of and possible roles in politics, their motives to get involved in public affairs, as well as their social and political identities. These findings confirm that using women’s personal accounts as core primary sources makes their voice visible in the contexts traditionally associated in historiography with the masculine fields of activity.

**Acknowledgment**

This work was supported by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education under Grant DI2013007543 and by the Faculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences of the University of Wrocław under Grant 0420/2326/16. I am grateful to Professor Michał Zwierzykowski and Professor Leszek Ziańkowski for commenting on earlier drafts of the article, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions have been very constructive. The publication in open access was financed by the “Research University – Excellence Initiative” programme.

**Notes**

1. The Sejm was the bicameral parliament that consisted of the Senate (bishops, palatines, castellans) and the Chamber of Envoys (Izba Posłów). Together with the king, they constituted the Estates of the Sejm. Senators were appointed by the king for life, and sejmiks, local assemblies, elected envoys. While the Senate and the Chamber of Envoys passed the law, the monarch summoned the Sejm, presided in the Senate, nominated officials, distributed the Crown estates (królewszczyzny) and had the right to command the armies in wartime. The Sejm most often convened every two years for six weeks. Until the end of the sixteenth century, decisions were taken by majority voting, but after the precedence of using liberum veto by one of the delegates during the Sejm in 1652, the unanimity became required.
See Robert Ian Frost, “‘Ut unusquisque qui vellet, ad illum venire possit’ – Nobility, Citizenship and Corporate Decision-Making in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1454–1795”, in Jörn Leonhard and Christian Wieland (eds), What Makes the Nobility Noble? Comparative Perspectives from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 142–63; Frost, ‘The Nobility of Poland-Lithuania, 1569–1795’, in Hamish Scott (ed.), The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, vol. 2 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 266–310.

2. Emanuel Rostworowski, Ostatni król Rzeczypospolitej: geneza i upadek Konstytucji 3 Maja (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1966), pp. 128–40; Wojciech Szczygierski, Sejm Wielki (1788–1792): studium z dziejów łagodnej revolucji (Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2015), pp. 11–15.

3. The term was first used during the Sejm by one of the authors of Constitution of 3 May, Hugo Kołłątaj. By using the term ‘mild revolution’, Kołłątaj wanted to refute the arguments of conservative circles warning public opinion that the situation in the Commonwealth may have ended in terror, as had been the case in France. Nowadays, historians associate the Sejm with a mild revolution, juxtaposing it with other social upheavals: the English Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution. See Bogusław Leśnodorski, ‘Łagodna Revolucja’ w starciu z despotyzmem’, Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne 27 (1975), pp. 187–95; Szczygierski, ‘Sejm a sejmiki: studium z dziejów łagodnej revolucji’, Przegląd Nauk Historycznych 4 (2005), pp. 39–75.

4. See the most important publications: Walerian Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, 2 vols. (Cracow: Księgarnia Spółki Wydawniczej Polskiej, 1895); Władysław Smoleński, Ostatni rok Sejmu Wielkiego (Cracow: G. Gebethner, 1897); Leśnodorski, Dzieło Sejmu Czteroletniego 1788–1792: studium Historyczno-Prawne (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich, 1951); Leonard Ratajczyk, Wojsko i obronność Rzeczypospolitej 1788–1792 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1975); Krystyna Zienkowska, Sławni i urodzeni: ruch polityczny mieszczański w dobie Sejmu Czteroletniego (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwa Naukowe, 1976); Jerzy Michalski, Konstytucja 3 Maja (Warsaw: Zamek Królewski, 1985); Jerzy Kowceki (ed.), Sejm Czteroletni i jego tradycje (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1991); Janusz Duzinkiewicz, Fateful Transformations: The Four Years’ Parliament and the Constitution of 3 May 1791 (New York: East European Monographs, 1993); Samuel Fiszman (ed.), Constitution and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Poland: The Constitution of 3 May 1791 (Bloomington: IN, 1997); Anna Grześkowiak-Krawacwicz, O formę rządu czy o rząd dusz? Publicystyka polityczna Sejmu Czteroletniego (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2000); Richard Butterwick, The Polish Revolution and the Catholic Church 1788–1792: A Political History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Szczygierski, Sejm Wielki (1788–1792). Although studies on political engagement of elite women in the Commonwealth has recently developed, its researchers have not paid much attention so far to the period of the Great Sejm.

5. Teresa Zielińska, ‘Archiwum Roskie w Archiwum Głównym Akt Dawnych w Warszawie’, Miscellanea Historico-Archivistica 18 (2011), pp. 221–33.

6. Castellans administrated a part of voivodship called the castellany (kasztelania). They belonged to a senator rank, but they were lower in the social hierarchy than the voivodes (the exception was the Castellan of Cracow who had precedence before the Voivode of Cracow).

7. An official who was in charge of administration of territory called starostwo, accorded to him by a king.

8. Forty-one records were examined in total; twenty-five included letters sent to Branicka, Potocka and Potocki. Despite the fact the Sejm was convened on 6 October 1788 and terminated on 29 May 1792, I took into consideration the correspondence from July 1788, when the sejmiks were announced, to the end of 1792. I eliminated sets where the dates or the senders were unknown.

9. Nevertheless, one ought not forget that women writing letters became more and more numerous in eighteenth-century Europe; David Garrioch, What happened when women began writing to their friends?, lecture given at 46th Annual Conference of British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, St. Hugh College, Oxford, 4 January 2017.

10. While the majority of senders and recipients of the missives extracted from the Archiwum Roskie descended from rich noble and aristocratic families, Branicka’s correspondence is somewhat unique, since this part of the archives includes her letters exchanged almost exclusively with administrators, plenipotentiaries, clients, habitants of her estates and military figures.

11. The association of the nobility against Russia and Stanisław August Poniatowski. The Confederation ended in four years of civil war and the First Partition of Poland–Lithuania.

12. Czeppe, Franciszek Piotr Potocki, h. Pilawa, in ‘Internetowy Polski Słownik Biograficzny’, http://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/franciszek-piotr-potocki-h-pilawa.

13. The number in brackets indicates the number of letters sent by a correspondent.
14. We find little information concerning the lives of Maria Grabowska, Krystyna Potocka and Pelagia Potocka. The knowledge about the rest of women from the list is much more satisfactory; Bernard Krakowski, ‘Kossakowska Katarzyna z Potockich’, in Rostworowski (ed.), Polski Słownik Biograficzny, vol. 14 (Wrocław, Warsaw and Cracow: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1968), pp. 255–60; Rostworowski, Radziwillowa z Lubomirskich Maria, in ‘Internetowy Polski Słownik Biograficzny’, http://ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/maria-karolina-radziwillowa; Jerzy Skowronek, Sapieżycka Teofila Strzęysława, in ‘Internetowy Polski Słownik Biograficzny’, http://ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/teofila-strzyszyslwa-sapiezyna; Janina Berger-Mayerowa, Jabłonowska Anna Paulina, in Kazimierz Lepszy (ed.), Polski Słownik Biograficzny, vol. 10 (Wrocław, Warsaw and Cracow: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1962), pp. 210–212; Henryk Mierzwiński, ‘Księżna Anna Paulina z Sapiechów Jabłonowska (1728–1800)’; Szkice Podlaskie, (1999), pp. 207–19; Janusz Skodlarski, ‘Księżna Anna Jabłonowska jako prawodawca i zarządcza (1728–1800)’, Studia Prawno-Ekonomiczne 89 (2013), pp. 297–315; Elżbieta Wierzbiacka, ‘Działalność oświeceniowa Urszuli z Potockich Wielopolskich 1779–1806’, in Teresa Kostkiewiczowa and Agata Ročko (eds), Dwory Magnackie w XVIII wieku. Rola i znaczenie kulturowe (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiGi, 2005), pp. 339, 353–4.

15. There were many factors that led to the political realignment in 1790. First was the division among the opposition, between the group led by Hetmańska Party (Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, Stanisław Szczęsny Potocki, Seweryn Rzewuski) supporting the Russian influence in Poland–Lithuania, and Puławy set which was against it. Secondly, Austria and Prussia signed the Reichenbach convention on 27 July 1790 and Russia and Sweden the peace treaty at Värälä on 14 August 1790. As a result, the nobility felt betrayed by Frederick William II and feared Catherine II’s military intervention given the Turkish war going well for her. Lastly, the sejmiks in November 1790 expressed their conservatism towards most social and cultural questions and the majority of elected deputies supported the king, which made Ignacy Potoczy realised that there was no other way than seeking compromise with the court; Butterwick, ‘Political Discourses of the Polish Revolution, 1788–92’, English Historical Review 120 (2005), pp. 127, 129–30, 180, 206–7, 234.

16. Sapieżyńska to Potocki, 17 September 1788, pp. 3–4, Koresspondencja XLIII/29, Archiwum Roskie (hereafter AR); Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych in Warsaw (hereafter AGAD). All translations from Polish and French are my own.

17. Rostworowski, Ostatni król, pp. 144–6, 158–9; Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 124, 157.

18. By ‘useful time’ she probably meant the involvement of Russia and Austria in the war with Turkey.

19. Jabłonowska to Potocki, 22 October 1788, p. 8; 3 November [1788], p. 18, Koresspondencja XLIII/29, AR, AGAD.

20. Sapieżyńska to Potocki, 17 September 1788, pp. 3–4, Koresspondencja XLIII/29, AR, AGAD.

21. P. Potocka to Potocki, 15 September 1788, p. 801, Koresspondencja XLII/1, AR, AGAD.

22. Radziwillowa to Potocki, 22 August 1788, pp. 837–8, Koresspondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.

23. Radziwillowa to Potocki, 6 August 1788, p. 835, Koresspondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.

24. Kossakowska to Potocki, 11 October 1788, p. 143, Koresspondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

25. Kossakowska to Potocki, Krystynopol, 15 December 1788, pp. 154–5, Koresspondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

26. Jabłonowska to Potocki, 22 October 1788, p. 8, Koresspondencja XL/82, AR, AGAD.

27. Kossakowska to Potocki, 22 December 1788, p. 158, Koresspondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD. The strengthening of the army was one of the main postulates in the first days of the Sejm.

28. Kossakowska to Potocki, 9 March 1789, p. 304, Koresspondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

29. Meaning ‘weed’.

30. Kossakowska to Potocki, 1 December 1788, p. 148, Koresspondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

31. Kossakowska to Potocki, 3 February 1789, p. 166, Koresspondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

32. The Estates of the Commonwealth were the Sejm, the Senate and the king; see note 1.

33. Kossakowska to Potocki, 10 April 1789, pp. 308–9, Koresspondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

34. In January 1789 the voivode of Wólhnia, Hieronim Sanguszko, expressed his anxieties about the possible rebellion of peasants in his province; however, neither deputies nor the king were persuaded. Through the end of March, the Sejm received contradictory information concerning rebellion and the Russian army’s movements. In April, a nobleman Ignacy Wyleżyński and his family were killed by their servants, which attracted the attention of public opinion. The nobility accused the evangelical Church as well as Russia of fuelling the anger of peasants and the latter of illegal stationing of troops in Ukraine. The crime and reaction of nobility lit a fuse that resulted in many (innocent) inhabitants of Ukraine being sent to their
deaths after being accused of high treason. Consequently, parliamentary sessions in April and May were focused on events in Ukraine; Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 435–501.

35. Kossakowska to P. Potocki, 7 September 1789, p. 317, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.
36. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, [n.d.], p. 934, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.
37. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 6 March 1789, p. 835; 22 March 1789, pp. 837–8, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.
38. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 5 October 1790, p. 847, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.
39. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, p. 848, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.
40. Butterwick, The Polish Revolution, pp. 55, 60; Józef Andrzej Gierowski, The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the XVIIIth Century: From Anarchy to Well-Organised State (Cracow: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1996), pp. 60–74; Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 391–414.
41. Grabowska to P. Potocka, 13 April 1789, p. 240, Korespondencja XLV/30, AR, AGAD.
42. Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 1, p. 150, 173–4.
43. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, [n.d.], p. 830, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.
44. Indeed, the nobility in Greater Poland did not want to enlist in the army to fight with Russia, since they preferred to stay in the province to protect their estates. Nevertheless, they were preoccupied by the Russian influence on the Commonwealth and supported military reform; Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 554–79.
45. Kossakowska to Potocki, 15 May 1789, p. 158, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.
46. Kossakowska to Potocki, 1 November 1788, pp. 144–5, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD. The Department was introduced in 1776. Since then, it was the king and other members of the Department who made decisions concerning the army; hetmans were only to approve them; Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 177–8.
47. Kossakowska to Potocki, 15 January 1789, p. 240, Korespondencja XLV/30, AR, AGAD.
48. Jabłonowska to Potocki, 1 November 1788, pp. 11–12, citation p. 11, Korespondencja XL/82, AR, AGAD.
49. Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1 part 2, pp. 540–48; Butterwick, The Polish Revolution, p. 61.
50. Kossakowska to Potocki, 3 February 1789, p. 166; 15 May 1789, p. 198, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.
51. Kossakowska to Potocki, 3 February 1789, p. 166; 15 May 1789, p. 198, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.
52. A wide spectrum of attitudes of the nobility towards the fiscal reform may be observed in the sejmiks instructions of 1788 and then in the speeches given during the Sejm. Detailed explanation in English with particular regard to the taxation of the clergy may be found in Butterwick, The Polish Revolution, pp. 43–4, 79–101.
53. Jabłonowska to Potocki, 1 November 1788, p. 12, Korespondencja XL/82, AR, AGAD.
54. Kalinka, Sejm Czteroletni, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 56–68; Butterwick, The Polish Revolution, p. 61.
55. Grabowska to P. Potocka, 22 March 1790, pp. 242–3, Korespondencja, XLV/30, AR, AGAD.
56. Kossakowska to Potocki, 1 November 1788, p. 147, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.
57. Kossakowska to Potocki, 11 October 1788, p. 143, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD. One needs to remember that while the envoys were always obliged to observe the instructions, in practice they often found a solution to ignore them.
58. Jerzy Łukowski, ‘The Szlachta and the Monarchy: Reflections on the Struggle Inter Maiestatem Ac Libertatem’, in Butterwick (ed.) The Polish-Lithuanian Monarchy in European Context c. 1500–1795 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 132–49.
59. Kossakowska to Potocki, 27 January 1789, p. 162, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.
60. About the importance of the oratory skills in the Polish–Lithuanian political life with particular regard to the Great Sejm see Krakowski, Oratorstwo polityczne na forum Sejmu Czteroletniego (Gdańsk: Gdański Towarzystwo Naukowe, 1968).
61. As Robert Frost remarks, ‘By 1600 Poland-Lithuania seemed to be – and was seen to be – a state run by nobles for the nobles’; Frost, ‘The Nobility of Poland-Lithuania, 1569–1795’, pp. 266–7, citation p. 267.
62. Jabłonowska to Potocki, 3 November [1788], pp. 18–19, Korespondencja XL/82, AR, AGAD.
63. Perhaps the negative sentiments of Potocka resulted to some extent from the fact that she wrote her letter after the Russian troops entered the Commonwealth (May 1792) and the king joined the Confederation of Targowica that opted to abolish the Constitution (July 1792); P. Potocka to Potocki, 21 September 1792, p. 813, Korespondencja XLIII/1, AR, AGAD. About the importance of noble liberties in the political life of the early modern Commonwealth see Łukowski, Liberty’s Folly: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth
in the Eighteenth Century 1697–1795 (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005); Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty: The Concept of Freedom in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

64. An extraordinary Sejm; convened after a king’s death in order to elect his successor.

65. Kossakowska to Potocki, 9 November 1789, p. 321, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

66. Kossakowska to Potocki, 9 November 1789, p. 321, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

67. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 5 October 1790, pp. 846–8, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.

68. Gierowski, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, pp. 123–5.

69. P. Potocka to Potocki, 12 September 1788, p. 800, Korespondencja XLII/1, AR, AGAD.

70. Kossakowska to Potocki, 22 December 1788, pp. 158–9, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

71. Kossakowska to Potocki, 13 March 1789, p. 178, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

72. The question whether to maintain the elective monarchy or to introduce the hereditary one was often debated during the Sejm. The sejmiks on November 1790 clearly declared against the hereditary monarchy, finding the right to elect a ruler as one of the nobility’s core rights; Zofia Zielińska, *O sukcesyi tronu w Polszcze 1787–1790* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1991), pp. 207–21.

73. Krakowski, ‘Kossakowska Katarzyna z Potockich’, pp. 259–60. Only one of them, Anna Jabłonowska, officially reconciled with the king already after the Confederation of Bar (1768–1772); Mierzwiński, ‘Księżna Anna Paulina z Sapiehów Jabłonowska’, p. 211.

74. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 20 April 1792, p. 855, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD. Radziwiłłowa had a similar opinion on the events in France to the majority of Polish elite; see Helena Rzadkowska, *Stosunek polskiej opinii publicznej do rewolucji francuskiej* (Warsaw: Książka. Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1948).

75. Kossakowska to Potocki, 22 February 1789, pp. 172–3, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD; Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 9 December 1791, p. 360, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

76. See Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 10 April 1790, p. 326; 25 October 1791, p. 341; 8 November 1791, p. 353; 8 January 1792, p. 378, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD; Kossakowska to Potocki, 3 February 1789, p. 166; 14 April 1789, p. 182; 30 December 1791, p. 373; 8 January 1792, p. 378, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

77. Kossakowska to Potocki, 13 March 1789, p. 179, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

78. Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 20 December 1791, p. 363, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

79. Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 6 October 1789, pp. 319–20, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

80. Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 9 December 1791, p. 360, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

81. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 5 May 1789, p. 844, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.

82. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 5 October 1790, p. 849, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.

83. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 20 April 1792, p. 859, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD.

84. P. Potocka to Potocki, [1792], p. 841, Korespondencja XLII/1, AR, AGAD.

85. Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 24 April 1789, p. 841, Korespondencja XLIII/12, AR, AGAD; Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 9 March 1789, p. 303; Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

86. Kossakowska to Potocki, 15 May 1789, p. 199, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

87. Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 1 November 1788, p. 301; 6 October 1789, p. 320, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

88. Grabowska to P. Potocka, 13 April 1789, p. 235, Korespondencja XLV/30, AR, AGAD.

89. Gierowski, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, pp. 32, 127–8, 131–2; Katarzyna Kuras, ‘Partie i fakcje w schyłkowym okresie rządów Augusta III Sasa’, *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych* 12 (2013), pp. 61–4, 73.

90. Jablonowska to Potocki, Kock, 9 July [1788], p. 22, Korespondencja XL/82, AR, AGAD.

91. K. Potocka to Potocki, [1788], p. 245, Korespondencja XI/68, AR, AGAD; P. Potocka to Potocki, 31 July [?] 1790, p. 810, Korespondencja XLII/1, AR, AGAD.

92. Kossakowska to Potocki, 11 October 1788, p. 141, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

93. Kossakowska to Potocki, 11 October 1788, pp. 141–3, citation p. 141, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD.

94. P. Potocka to Potocki, 31 July [?] 1790, p. 810, Korespondencja XLII/1, AR, AGAD.

95. Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 22 August 1789, p. 315, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

96. Wielopolska to Potocki, 19 June 1789, p. 1, Korespondencja XLIV/3, AR, AGAD.

97. Kossakowska’s attention was attracted especially by news coming from Saint Petersburg and Jassy, where Prince Potomkin resided, as well as pro-Russian politicians’ initiatives, which she found the most dangerous; see Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 25 October 1791, p. 341; 2 December 1791, p. 357; 23 December 1791, p. 367; 30 December 1791, p. 372, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.
98. Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 8 November 1791, p. 353; 13 January 1792, p. 382; 30 December 1791, p. 372, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD; Radziwiłłowa to Potocki, 20 April 1792, p. 856, Korespondencja XLII/12, AR, AGAD.

99. Kossakowska to Potocki, 7 February 1789, p. 169, Korespondencja XL/108, AR, AGAD; Kossakowska to P. Potocka, 23 March 1790, p. 325, Korespondencja XLVI/51, AR, AGAD.

100. Jabłonowska to Potocki, 27 April 1792, p. 16, Korespondencja XL/82, AR, AGAD.

101. P. Potocka to Potocki, 9 June 1792, p. 825, Korespondencja XLII/1, AR, AGAD.

102. Jürgen Siess, ‘Femmes de lettres des Lumières: Images de soi dans la correspondance réelle’, Dix-huitième siècle 36 (2004), p. 112.

103. See Christine Planté (ed.), L’Épistolaire, un genre féminin? (Paris: H. Champion, 1998), p. 16.

104. Margot Finn, ‘The Female World of Love & Empire: Women, Family & East India Company Politics at the End of the Eighteenth Century’, Gender & History 31 (2019), pp. 7–24, p. 10. For political issues in women’s correspondence see also Diana G. Barnes, ‘Tenderness, Tittle-tattle and Truth in Mother—Daughter Letters: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary Wortley Montagu Stuart, Countess of Bute, and Lady Louisa Stuart’, Women’s History Review 24 (2015), pp. 570–590; Bożena Popiołek, Urszula Kicińska, Agnieszka Słaby (eds), Kobiece kręgi korespondencyjne (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2016).

Dorota Wiśniewska is a Research Assistant at the University of Wrocław (Poland). In June 2020, she presented her doctoral thesis titled ‘Women and Politics in France and Poland in the Second Half of the 18th Century: A Comparative Study of “Literary Salons” and Correspondence’, which she prepared under joint international supervision, at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, the University of Paris-Saclay and University of Wrocław.