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BETWEEN ROYAL INSTRUCTIONS AND AMBASSADOR'S AMBITION. MELCHIOR DE POLIGNAC'S COOPERATION WITH POLISH MAGNATES

ABSTRACT

Melchior de Polignac was a French ambassador in Poland whose task was to carry out a few political aims, including the most important one – starting cooperation with the royal couple, especially with Marie Casimire de la Grange d'Arquien, in order to prepare the election for one of her sons. Louis XIV wanted to see one of John III Sobieski's sons on the throne, assuming that this would maintain good relations between Poland and France without spending money on a costly election fight. Initially, the ambassador pursued a lively cooperation with the court and he enjoyed the queen's trust, but towards the end of John III's life, he began cooperating with the magnates who convinced him that none of the princes would win the throne. From then on, Polignac started efforts for the election of a French prince. Louis XIV gave in to his arguments and put forward the candidature of Francis Louis, Prince de Conti, but he announced that he would not get financially involved in the election fight, he would not pay any gratifications until his cousin was enthroned. Polignac did not pass this information to his followers and tried to encourage them to take action by promising the payments. This was ongoing until the election when the bifurcated sympathies and strong support given to the Saxon, Frederick Augustus, triggered concerns of French supporters whether the payments would take place; at that moment, fantasies that Polignac used to feed his party were exposed. As a consequence, the party fell apart and Prince de Conti's chances were lost. The aim of this article is not only to present the activities of Melchior the Polignac in Poland, but also to draw attention to the fact that the magnates did not betray the French candidate, but fell victim to the false assurances of the ambassador who took advantage of both the king's trust as well as the French supporters in Poland.

KEYWORDS: Ambassador; France; Poland; Election; Money.

Melchior de Polignac (1661–1742) was well educated. Teachers valued highly his skills; he knew how to discuss matters effectively, but without stubbornness¹. In 1689, together with Emmanuel Théodose de La Tour d'Auvergne, Cardinal de Bouillon, he went for a conclave and tried to bring France closer to Alexander VIII, who was enchanted by him². He tried to ease tensions between France and the Holy See with the next Pope, Innocent XII³.

In 1693 he was sent to Poland. His task was to win over the royal couple to cooperate – Louis XIV would be ready to support one of Sobieski's sons, the one designated by Marie Casimire, at the election⁴. He was expected to persuade the king to Polish-Turkish treaty in order for the struggles with the High Porte to fall upon the Habsburgs.⁵ Polignac was to encourage John III to get closer to Denmark and

1 August de La Force, *Le grand Conti*, (Paris: Émil-Paul Frères, 1922), 143; Otto Forst de Battaglia, *Jan Sobieski król Polski*, trans. Krystyna Szyszkowska (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1983), 334-35; Pierre Paul, *Le cardinal Melchior de Polignac, 1661–1741* (Paris: Allégre 1922), 1-5.

2 de La Force, *Le grand Conti*, 143; Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Louis XIV* (Paris: Perrin 2002), 468-71.

3 Paul, *Le cardinal Melchior de Polignac*, 6-19. Petitfils, *Louis XIV*, 468.

4 *Recueil des instructions données aux ambassadeurs et ministres de France depuis les traités de Westphalie jusqu'à la révolution française IV–V: Pologne*, vol. 1: 1648–1729, ed. Louis Farges (Paris: Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillièrre et C^e, 1888), 210-11; Karol Boromiesz Hoffman, "Historia upadku dynastii Sobieskich z nowych dokumentów", *Gazeta Polska*, n. 258 (1862).

5 Jacek Staszewski, "Elekcja 1697 roku", in "Jak Polskę przemienił w kraj kwitnący..." *Szkice i studia z czasów saskich*, ed. Jacek Staszewski, (Olsztyn: Ośrodek Badań Naukowych im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, 1997), 15-6.



Sweden through the accession to the alliance of the Crowns of the North, which was meant to revive trade between Poland and France; in particular, there were hopes to increase grain supplies to France struggling with the cold and poor harvest. Polignac was supposed to win over the queen's favour and support by awakening her hopes for her daughter's marriage⁶. The ambassador's main task was to work on preparations for the future election and making sure that in case of John III's death, Poland would not fall under the Austrian influence; therefore, cooperation with the Polish magnates also had to begin, but he had to start it carefully because he had been warned that they are very whimsical in their political sympathies⁷. The instruction clearly stated that the ambassador was expected to rely on the queen's advice and instructions, who was an experienced person, and knew the reality of Poland. Her knowledge in the political situation and the money that the Sobieski family should engage in the election were to facilitate the ambassador's efforts⁸. Moreover, Polignac also received an order to use the money carefully. The ambassador's first steps in Poland ended in failure; he did not manage to win the support of the castellan of Chełmno, Jan Jerzy Przebendowski, for the development of commerce, and failed to win the interest of the Primate, Cardinal Michał Radziejowski⁹. The first unofficial meeting with the queen went much better. Marie Casimire received the ambassador privately, in the garden, and only then a formal audience with the king took place¹⁰. After getting settled in the capital, where he arranged his place lavishly, trying to make an impression, Polignac tried to get in touch with the Polish magnates; he visited them, gave them gifts, tried to win over women's favour hoping that this way he could affect their husbands¹¹. He rendered small favours to them, acting as a go-between in contracts with France. He brought down from Paris a watch for Karol Stanisław Radziwiłł and flattered his mother, the king's sister, Katarzyna. He sought contact with Konstancja Lubomirska and her husband Hieronim, the Grand Treasurer of the Crown¹². However, not all of the ambassador's efforts were effective and not everyone was interested in meeting him and cooperating.

Still present at the court, the ambassador appeared in the king's company, whom he brought news from the world, descriptions of interesting events and phenomena, presented new books¹³. He flattered the queen and she made him her confidant even with the state matters, but she also required benefits from him¹⁴.

Social successes did not make it easier for the ambassador to carry out his tasks. Polignac encouraged the Poles in vain to increase the grain export to France¹⁵. Only Marie Casimire, who was interested

6 Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 218-19.

7 Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 211-16, 218; Forst de Battaglia, *Jan Sobieski*, 355-56.

8 Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 216.

9 Roman Kawecki, *Kardynał Michał Stefan Radziejowski (1645-1705)* (Opole: Wydawnictwo Świętego Krzyża, 2005), 76; Paul, *Le cardinal Melchior de Polignac*, 21, 27-9.

10 Michał Komarzyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska królowa Polski (1641-1716)* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1983), 136-37.

11 Kazimierz Sarnecki, *Pamiętniki z czasów Jana Sobieskiego. Dziennik i relacje z lat 1691-1696*, ed. Janusz Woliński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1958), 55; Michel de Mongrillon, *Pamiętnik sekretarza ambasady francuskiej w Polsce pod koniec panowania Jana III oraz bezkrólewia i wolnej elekcji po jego zgonie (1694-1698)*, ed. Łucja Częścik (Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk-Łódź: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1982), 52-3; Jacek Staszewski, *O miejsce w Europie, stosunki Polski i Saksonii z Francją na przełomie XII i XVIII wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1973), 42.

12 Sarnecki, *Pamiętniki z czasów Jana Sobieskiego*, 118, 254, 269; Stanisław Edward Nahlik, *Narodziny nowoczesnej dyplomacji* (Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), 85; Karolina Targosz, *Sawantki w Polsce XVII wieku. Aspiracje intelektualne kobiet ze środowisk magnackich* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Retro-Art, 1997), 266; Staszewski, *O miejsce w Europie*, 42.

13 Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 217; Karolina Targosz, *Jan III Sobieski mecenasem nauk i uczonych* (Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), 97, 100-05.

14 Chrysostôme Faucher, *Histoire du cardinal de Polignac, contenant des détails sur ses différents négociations, tirés du dépôt des affaires étrangères, pour servir d'éclaircissement à une partie du règne de Louis XIV. et de Louis XV*, vol. I (Paris: D'Houry, 1777), 197; Komarzyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 136-37; Michał Komarzyński and Aleksandra Skrzypietz, "Z działalności ambasadora Wersalu na dworze Jana III (1696 rok)", in *Ojczyzna wielka i mała*, ed. Idzi Panic (Cieszyn: Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne o/Cieszyn, 1996), 63.

15 Biblioteka Naukowa PAN i PAU, Kraków, *Teki Waliszewskiego*, vol. 6, 5016-19; Michał Komarzyński, *Jan III Sobieski a Bałtyk*, (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie 1983), 96, 98-9; Id., *Polska w polityce gospodarczej Wersalu 1661-1715* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1968) 82-107.

in it financially, tried to organise some deliveries¹⁶. The treaty with the Crowns of North was also not approved of in Poland. Although the queen signed the agreement, John III did not make effort to ratify it afraid of the opposition's counteraction¹⁷. The ambassador was also unsuccessful with convincing the king to the idea of a separate peace treaty with Turkey. Political rivalry was expressed through the fight for John III's favours – while keeping him entertained, seeking his attention and approval – between the papal envoy, Maurizio Vota, and the Venetian resident, Girolamo Alberti, against Polignac¹⁸.

Wishing to strengthen his position and influence, the ambassador got involved in finalising the marriage of Princess Theresa Kunegunda to Maximilian Emanuel, Elector of Bavaria. Initially Polignac was against this marriage, assuming that Sobieska's dowry would benefit the treasury of France's enemy, but Louis XIV demonstrated his foresight and a greater political sensitivity, and supported the idea of this matrimony¹⁹.

John III's deteriorating health made the ambassador, as well as Marie Casimire, prepared for the impending election. When an attempt was made to reconcile the conflicted Lithuanians in 1695, Polignac advised the queen, as a mediator, to seek agreement with the opposition and, first of all, with the Sapieha family who was hostile towards the Sobieski clan. It is unknown if he honestly thought that this was a route for strengthening the Sobieski family's position, or whether he tried to use the queen to reach the Sapieha family – who cooperated with the emperor – through the queen; they were the ones who blocked the project of a separate peace agreement with Turkey²⁰. The ambassador wanted to join the talks personally, but this offer was rejected by Primate Radziejowski and the Sapieha family. Polignac unsuccessfully tried to win them over for Louis XIV; they demanded a huge remuneration, but this proposal was rejected by the king who did not trust the Sapiehas²¹.

Rumours appeared at the time that Marie Casimire was going to marry the Great Hetman of Lithuania, Kazimierz Sapieha, who was still married, in order to ascend the throne together with him after the death of Sobieski. It is not known where these stories came from, but they were harmful to the royal family's interest because they triggered tensions between the queen and her husband, and the eldest son who feared his mother was ready to do so. Polignac received reports from Versailles that it would be most convenient for France if the queen remained on the throne. However, this was never Marie Casimire's intention²². It should be emphasised that the eldest prince, James, was married to the emperor's sister-in-law and his election would threaten Poland's future cooperation with the Habsburgs, and additionally it seems that Polignac could not stand him from the very beginning. Therefore, when Louis XIV accepted the support for James at the election, Polignac decisively rejected such option and assumed that this would be unfavourable for French interests. Meanwhile, the preserved documents indicate that the prince sought cooperation with Versailles and declared an

16 Ryszard Wołoszyński, *Polska w opiniach Francuzów w XVII wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1964), 21-2.

17 Komarzyński, *Jan Sobieski a Bałtyk*, 80-118; Komarzyński, *Polska w polityce gospodarczej Wersalu (1661-1715)*, 28-35.

18 Philippe Dupont, *Pamiętniki historii życia i czynów Jana III Sobieskiego*, trans. Beata Spieralska, ed. Dariusz Milewski (Warszawa: Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, 2011), 323; Woliński, *Kazimierz Sarnecki. Pamiętniki z czasów Jana Sobieskiego*, 69; Komarzyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 129-34; Aleksandra Skrzypietz, "Zabiegi posła francuskiego o odrębny pokój polsko-turecki w latach 1693-1697", *Balkanica Posnaniensa*, vol. 13 (2003): 95-100.

19 Woliński, *Kazimierz Sarnecki. Pamiętniki z czasów Jana Sobieskiego*, 51, 96; Komarzyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 146; Michał Komarzyński, *Teresa Kunegunda Sobieska* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1982), 21-3; Id., "Tajna misja ambasadora Jana III Sobieskiego w Brukseli (1695)", *Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny. Sobótka*, nn. 1-2 (1992): 54.

20 Forst de Battaglia, *Jan Sobieski*, 356-59; Komarzyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 137-40.

21 Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 218; Zbigniew Wójcik, *Jan Sobieski (1629-1696)* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1994), 504.

22 Aleksandra Skrzypietz, "Trzecie małżeństwo królowej Marii Kazimiery – u źródeł legendy", in *Maria Kazimiera Sobieska (1641-1716). W kręgu rodziny, polityki i kultury*, (Studia i Materiały, n. 6), eds. Anna Kalinowska and Paweł Tysza, (Warszawa: Zamek Królewski w Warszawie-Muzeum, 2017), 113-35.

agreement²³. However, Polignac encouraged Marie Casimire to abandon the interests of the eldest son and to support her middle son, Alexander. These encouragements which were rejected by the queen were sufficient for historiography to reproach her that it was that the youngest son would become a king. However, Alexander's candidature during the *interregnum* and election did not emerge at all²⁴. At the beginning of 1696 Polignac was not estranged from the queen, but he sought for contact with the opposition circles. It was most probably at that time that the Grand Treasurer of the Crown, Hieronim Lubomirski, convinced him that it was not worth supporting the Sobieski family at the election. Regardless of doubts expressed by Versailles, the ambassador put his trust in the magnates and started to pressure Louis XIV to appoint a French prince who could take over power in Poland²⁵. The Roman mission and first diplomatic experiences made Polignac adopt specific means of acting and implementing goals. He assumed that it was the most important to reach the representatives of the elites. He spoke to cardinals and the Pope in Rome. He believed that personal contact, charm, and skills in persuasion had the greatest significance and would bring results. He knew how to use his knowledge which he constantly developed, thus becoming an interesting conversationalist. He also probably knew how to listen and entertain with conversation, and therefore he was a welcome participant of chats and disputes. It is known that he discussed passionately and almost to tears, and since he was considered a polite and moderation-driven adversary, one can suspect that these emotions had a bit of meticulously directed theatricality. Thus, through knowledge and skills he won John III's friendliness.

In the ambassador's opinion, contacts with the senators were a path leading to success; he assumed that they would decide about the course of the election²⁶, though the instructions he had received from Versailles warned him against an excessive trust²⁷. Everyone forgot about the election of Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki who had been considered a candidate of the noblemen and who had been chosen against carefully prepared scenarios²⁸. Polignac assumed that it was enough to win the support of the senators in order to make impact on the noblemen, and achieve the planned goal. He had been convinced that nothing could be achieved through the noblemen. It does not seem that the ambassador observed Poland's internal affairs and examined the course of previous elections. It seems that he relied on the experience of his friend, Cardinal Toussaint de Forbin Janson, whose mission brought success to France since John Sobieski became the king, but the circumstances of that time had been different. Polignac did not look around for conversationalists presenting various opinions, he did not accept the opponents' opinion. The most important matter was to convince everyone to his own arguments and every judgement which was in line with his own opinions was considered correct. This was also where the sources of his failure were located. Polignac was inclined to use lie or at least a convenient bending of truth, but it is difficult to understand how a man capable of double-dealing could not suspect his conversationalists of duplicity.

Polignac did not cease his efforts to convince Louis XIV to proposing a candidature of a French prince. The king emphasised that this notion would entail considerable expenses. However, the ambassador did not rest in his efforts to obtain consent for changing the existing plans to support the Sobieski family, with a clearly defined presupposition that France would provide them with diplomatic effort

23 NGAB, fond 694, opis 12 ms 291, *James Sobieski to Louis XIV, [s.l., s.n., s.d., f. 4; Aleksandra Skrzypietz, Jakub Sobieski, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2015) 229-30.*

24 Aleksandra Skrzypietz, *Królewscy synowie – Jakub, Aleksander i Konstanty Sobiescy* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2011), 288-92, 302.

25 SSA, loc. 14339, con. 19, *Melchior de Polignac do Forbin Jansona, Warsaw 28 February 1696; Woliński, Kazimierz Sarnecki. Pamiętniki z czasów Jana Sobieskiego, 320, 324, 337, 388; Aleksandra Skrzypietz, Francuskie zabiegi o koronę polską po śmierci Jana III Sobieskiego* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2009), 58-59.

26 Skrzypietz, *Francuskie zabiegi o koronę polską*, 74, 78.

27 Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 216-218.

28 Mieczysława Chmielewska, *Sejm elekcyjny Michała Korybuta Wiśniowieckiego 1669 roku* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2006), 59-91; Aleksandra Skrzypietz, *Franciszek Ludwik de Bourbon, książę de Conti – "obraný król Polski" Saga roku Konduszów* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2019), 127-51.

and they would have to bear the election costs. Polignac assured Louis XIV that the benefits of a Frenchman's enthronement in Poland would be enormous. Nevertheless, the king demanded that the ambassador won Marie Casimire over for the plans of proposing a French candidate. He was ready to designate remunerations for the French supporters, but their beneficiaries – apart from the Primate, the Crown and Lithuanian Treasurers – were supposed to be selected by the queen²⁹. However, the money was to be paid out only after the election. This reservation was a result of events from 1669 when some of the magnates took money from a few candidates at the same time³⁰. This decision protected France from expenses, but at the same time reduced chances for success because, according to the ambassador, the success was to be brought through money³¹.

Polignac did not treat the king's recommendations quite seriously and stated that Marie Casimire did not want to cooperate with him³². Still full of doubts, Louis XIV authorized a small amount of 600'000 livres to be allocated to the Frenchman's election – paid after the election! Finally, he also named François Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, as the candidate. Simultaneously, Louis XIV warned the ambassador to show restraint and not prevent Prince James to win the throne and not turn him into an enemy of France³³. He also insisted that Polignac did not break ties with Marie Casimire completely, but he did not listen to the king³⁴. This was the goal of the Polish magnates who started cooperating with him.

According to the ambassador, the Polish senators were delighted with Prince de Conti's candidature, but they feared the reaction from the noblemen. Therefore, it was decided to keep it secret for the time being, but Polignac insisted to have the money paid to the army, which was to make the noblemen grateful. He also complained that the lack of money did not allow him to act and he hoped that – in spite of the announcements – the king would send it. He also incurred debts in order to give gifts to his closest associates³⁵.

News of the ambassador's debts reached Versailles; Marie Casimire – full of regrets and eager for revenge – made sure of that³⁶. Wishing to control the diplomat's activities, Louis XIV sent François de Castagnères, the abbot of Chateaufort to Poland. The arrival of a new envoy did not hurt Polignac either in the eyes of the magnates, or the Sun King. The abbot, poorly informed on the situation on the election fight, accepted Polignac's messages that all the activities served the interests of France, and he sent this notion of affairs to Versailles, naively commending the ambassador's efforts and confirming their validity³⁷.

29 *Depesze księdza de Polignac posła francuskiego po śmierci Jana III króla polskiego. Z rękopismu cesarskiej biblioteki w Paryżu*, vol. 1-2, 41, 51 (Poznań: Księgarnia J. K. Żupańskiego, 1855), 5-9; Aleksandra Skrzypietz, "Ludwik XIV wobec kandydatury królewiczów Sobieskich do tronu polskiego", in *Polska-Francja-Europa. Studia z dziejów Polski i stosunków międzynarodowych*, eds. Maciej Forycki, et al. (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Historii UAM, 2011), 172-73.

30 *Wyjątek z pamiętników hrabiego de Chavagnac legata do Polski po abdykacji króla Jana Kazimierza i w czasie elekcji króla Michała roku 1668*, in Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Zbiór pamiętników historycznych o dawnej Polsce z rękopismów, tudzież dzieł w różnych językach o Polsce wydanych wraz z listami oryginalnymi królów i znakomitych ludzi w kraju naszym*, vol. IV, (Lipsk: Breitkopf and Haertel, 1838), 217, 221.

31 Aleksandra Skrzypietz, "O pieniądzach, których nie było na wojnę, której miało nie być", in *Pecunia nervus belli. Z dziejów dyplomacji i stosunków międzynarodowych w XV-XVIII wieku*, eds. Mariusz Markiewicz and Ryszard Skowron, Filip Wolański (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 146-64.

32 *Depesze księdza de Polignac*, vol. 1, 4-9; Skrzypietz, "Ludwik XIV wobec kandydatury", 173-74.

33 *Depesze księdza de Polignac*, vol. 1, 5-9; Léon de Bastard: *Négociations de l'abbé de Polignac en Pologne concernant l'élection du prince de Conti comme roi de Pologne (1696-1697)* (Auxerre: Gustve Perriquet, 1864), 18.

34 Komaszyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 181.

35 *Depesze księdza de Polignac*, vol. 1, 15, 29-34.

36 Komaszyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 200-01.

37 *Depesze księdza de Polignac*, vol. 1, 65-8; Farges, *Recueil des instructions*, 231-43; de La Force, *Le grand Conti*, 150-51; Mariusz Sawicki, "Partia francuska na Litwie w latach 1696-1697 w świetle dokumentów i rachunków dyplomatów Ludwika XIV: przyczynek do dziejów elekcji Augusta II", in *Wokół wolnych elekcji w państwie polsko-litewskim XVI-XVIII wieku: o znaczeniu idei wyboru – między prawami a obowiązkami*, eds. Mariusz Markiewicz, Dariusz Rolnik and Filip Wolański (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 373-87.

Having no money, Polignac decided to refer to the promises which should attract the supporters of France. He promised that Prince de Conti would make sure that the Turks returned Kamieniec-Podolski to Poland before he was crowned. When Louis XIV pointed out that it was infeasible, Polignac explained with brutal honesty that it was possible to persuade the Turks to hand over the fortress and that they would be able to take it back after the election. These words are the evidence for the ambassador's dishonesty, but his behaviour confirmed that, while being guile, he did not understand that others could fight with the same weapon. Similarly unacceptable promise was a declaration that Prince de Conti's wife would give up on her retinue if her husband was enthroned in Poland. Louis XIV reacted to this with outrage. He clearly stated that moral rules and keeping promises were extremely important for him. Such unrealistic promises deprived the ambassador of trust of the more critical voters and they discredited Louis XIV in the eyes of the Poles, damaging opinion about him³⁸. The ambassador acted in Poland almost in a political void. There are no traces of his interest in the activities of other foreign diplomats. The election triggered keen interest of many countries. Their representatives were in Poland and carried out a wide-ranging activities. In the meantime, Polignac showed no interest in their plans, he trusted the magnates who assured him they would choose the Frenchman. Only once Polignac wrote about a Bavarian envoy, Pompeo Scarlatti, accusing him of careless attitude towards the elector's choice for the throne, even though Maximilian Emanuel did not declare his candidature for the throne, and it was the envoy's task to support James Sobieski³⁹. Meanwhile, the magnates waited for the payment and started to doubt France's good will, and Polignac position was being undermined by Marie Casimire who spread the news that no money would arrive from Versailles⁴⁰. Polignac thought that extending the time of the electoral battle would exhaust resources of the Sobieski family, but even France's supporters lacked patience and money; i.e. the Sapieha family really could not handle the expenses without the financial support. Thus, the French party started to fall apart⁴¹.

A blow to the ambassador's efforts was the emergence of Frederick Augustus Wettin's candidature, who – already in the election field – turned out to be the hope for many of those tired with the fierce rivalry between the Sobieski and de Conti⁴². When it turned out that the election was bifurcated – some of the noblemen spoke in favour of Prince de Conti and some others supported Frederick Augustus (James Sobieski's candidature was virtually lost), the supporters of France demanded payments in order to confirm French goodwill. Meanwhile, Louis XIV's order – that the promissory notes previously sent to Gdańsk would be paid only when Prince de Conti was enthroned – was still in force and in France nothing certain was known about the election, news about the split reached the country and it was not clear who had won. Therefore, the elect did not leave, waiting for the information from the ambassador whose contacts with Versailles were interrupted by Marie Casimire⁴³. The queen-widow, forced by the supporters of France to leave Warsaw, went to Gdańsk, got settled in the house of a postmaster and took over French letters. It is surprising that the only means of contact for the French ambassador with Versailles was the official post, but this was in fact the case.

Polignac still tried to get more cash to strengthen his followers and he tried to win over Marie Casimire's support, whose interests he had betrayed earlier, acting against her son's candidature at

38 *Depesze księdza de Polignac*, vol. 1, 44, 48-9, 50, 56; Skrzypietz, *Francuskie zabiegi o koronę polską*, 115-16.

39 SSA, loc. 14339, conv. 19, *Melchior de Polignac do Forbin Jansona*, Warszawa 4 December 1696; Stanisław Orszulik: "Kandydatura elektora bawarskiego Maksymiliana III Emanuela do korony polskiej po śmierci Jana III", *Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny. Sobótka*, n. 2 (1974): 234.

40 Komarzyński, *Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska*, 200; Skrzypietz, *Francuskie zabiegi o koronę polską*, 169.

41 Aleksandra Skrzypietz, "Sapiehowie wobec elekcji księcia Conti", in *Sapiehowie epoki Kodnia i Krasicyzna. Obrazy kultury polskiej*, ed. Krzysztof Stępnik (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2007), 371-90.

42 Electoral struggles was very brutal, *ad personam* arguments were used. Stanisław Orszulik, *Pisma polityczne bezkrólewia po śmierci Jana III Sobieskiego (1696-1697)*, Kraków, 1982 [typescript in Jagiellonian Library].

43 Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve, *Pologne, Correspondance 97, François de Castagnères to Louis XIV*, [s.l.] 3 July 1697, f. 244; NGAB, fond 694, opis 12, ms 310, *François de Castagnères and Melchior de Polignac to Louis XIV*, Warsaw, 16 August 1697, ff. 1r-2r; NGAB, fond 694, opis 12, ms 154, *Maria Casimira to James Sobieski*, [s.l., s.d.] ff. 9r-12v; NGAB, fond 694, opis 12, ms 155, *Maria Casimira to James Sobieski*, [s.l., s.d.] ff. 1r-12r.

the prompting of the magnates. No wonder the queen-widow ridiculed these offers, presenting empty envelopes of the Versailles letters she had taken over.

The ambassador tried to console himself and explain that Wettin's supporters violated the law because their victory was announced not by the primate, but by Bishop of Cuiavia, Stanisław Dąbski, and the elect did not have the election diploma at his disposal because it was meant to be issued by the election's marshal, the Crown Chamberlain, Ludwik Bieliński, who was a supporter of the French candidate. Polignac assured that as soon as the Poles have a look at Prince Conti, they would immediately abandon his rival in order to accept the man worthy of the crown. He deluded either himself, Louis XIV, or his own supporters with hope that everything could be still saved even though he saw that his followers were withdrawing their support and many of them did not wait any longer for the arrival of the king-elect since they had considered the election of the Frenchmen as a lost case. There is no doubt that through manipulating his adherents and the king, presenting them the situation how he saw it, or how he wished to see it, insisting on putting forward the French candidature as certain, and then conducting a ruthless electoral fight, Polignac thwarted James Sobieski's changes for the throne; and it should be assumed that these chances were not inconsiderable and there are many indications that the prince enjoyed support among the noblemen. Polignac's personal ambitions to place the French candidate on the Polish throne, to win over his and Louis XIV's gratitude, to gain the magnates' support and to set the tone of political events, made the ambassador act against the orders he had received from Versailles and compromise the mission he had received.

The election of 1697 are encircled by a black legend⁴⁴. There is talk of enormous amount of money paid for supporting the French candidate and treason committed by the Poles who accepted gratification from France and did not support its candidate decisively enough. In the meantime, the ambassador squandered no money, but empty promises. France did not involve much money in this election and thus Polish voters abandoned its representative. Polignac's deceptive assurances unsupported by money were answered with the lack of readiness to put Poles and their own interests at risk, as well as their own position in the face of chaos and general uncertainty which emerged after the bifurcated election.

All these characteristics – a mix of foresight and readiness to choose easy routes, intelligence and naivety, and, most of all, dangerous self-confidence based on proneness to manipulation – made Polignac as much a dangerous opponent as a great loser. However, it should be added that even though he moved in his life between diplomatic success and royal disfavour, he eventually reached for high offices. It was his skills and personality that were giving him hope for triumph and, at the same time, were becoming a reason of his failures. Polignac was considered highly talented both in France and Poland. He had a gift of being liked, based on his personal charm and thorough education, which he zealously broadened⁴⁵. His knowledge in literature and eloquence were praised⁴⁶.

The mission in Poland presented talents, but also uncontrollable ambitions of Melchior de Polignac. In accordance with the instructions, he initially started cooperation with the royal couple and he tried to fulfil his ongoing tasks without greater success. He demonstrated decisively less intuition and skills in predicting than Louis XIV, which is indicated even by their approach towards Theresa Kunegunda Sobieska's marriage plans. At the beginning of 1696 the ambassador gave into the narratives of the Polish magnates who did not want to see any of the Sobieski family's princes on the throne. Polignac noticed an opportunity for the enthronement of the French candidate, and he most likely dreamt of playing a significant role by his side or winning Louis XIV's gratitude. Despite spending four years in Poland, Polignac probably did not notice that the ruler's position, and even the laws he had, did not let him pursue unhampered politics, and thus nothing guaranteed that he would be able to rule in accordance with France's expectations. Nevertheless, the willingness to achieve his own ambitions, to block the election of James Sobieski as a supporter of the Habsburgs' influences, made the ambassador

44 Władysław Konopczyński, *Dzieje Polski nowożytnej*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: "Pax", 1986), 506.

45 Saint-Simon, *Pamiętniki*, trans. Aleksander i Maria Bocheńscy, vol. 2 (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1961), 31-5.

46 Sévigné, *Listy: wybór*, trans. Michał Mroziński and Anna Tatarkiewicz (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981), 374.

insist on the idea suggested to him by the magnates, and he probably believed that they were going to carry out his plans without realizing that he became a tool in their hands. He gathered around himself the followers representing the most important – although not all – magnate families and he stayed under the impression that he would bring his own elect to the throne due to their help. He did not pay attention to the noblemen's preferences, convinced that they would let the magnates lead. He did not quit his own projects even though their implementation was erasing the instructions he had received and orders coming from Versailles. These ideas required to overcome the resistance of Louis XIV who correctly assumed that the victory of one of the Sobieski family's members, willing to cooperate with France, would be the best solution and would give hope for securing French interests, as long as they could be carried out in the constantly weakening Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Sobieski's election would also release Versailles from considerable expenses required for the election fight. However, the ambassador's insistence, prompted the king to present the French candidate. He also stipulated that no money would be sent to Poland until the Frenchman is enthroned, and this decision was met. He sent to Gdańsk promissory notes paid after the election, which Polignac could not cash in, and thus the payouts did not happen. Ultimately, this compromised the chances of Prince de Conti who left for his crown with a long delay. When he arrived in Gdańsk, his rival Augustus II had already been crowned. Some of the French supporters were ready to start a fight for placing their own candidate on the throne, and effectively break out a civil war, but only on the condition that they would be given the money and military support from France; quite conveniently, Prince de Conti had no intention to win the crown by shedding blood. Therefore, Polignac's mission ended in a failure. After returning to France, he was exiled from the court, which lasted for three years.

ABBREVIATIONS

NGAB: NGAB: Nacyjonalnyj Gistarycznyj Archiu Bielarusi, Minsk.

SSA: Sächsisches Staatsarchiv–Dresden.

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