

The Sejm of the Polish- Lithuanian Commonwealth, Chamber of Deputies Background Guide

Chair: Kate Canavan

Email: katherine.m.canavan@gmail.com

Letter from the Chair

Hello Delegates!

I am so excited to welcome you to EagleMUNC XI! My name is Kate Canavan, and I am a senior majoring in Economics and Political Science at Boston College. I will be the Marshal of the Sejm (chair) for the Sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Chamber of Deputies committee.

I have been involved in Model United Nations since starting school at Boston College. I am the President of BC's traveling team, BCMUN, where we have competed at conferences in places like Washington, D.C., Montreal, and Barcelona. I have also been involved with EagleMUNC since my first year at BC, when I was a staffer. I was supposed to chair the PLC for EagleMUNC VIII, so I am very excited I am still able to participate in this committee with you all. Model UN has taught me the importance of collaborating with peers to solve issues, and of being respectful of other points of view while advocating for the policies of your own country or character. MUN has been a highlight of my time in college, especially since it is how I have met some of my closest friends.

Two years ago at EagleMUNC, I chaired the Roman Senate committee. The Roman Senate showed me how fun historical legislative committees can be, especially when typical MUN parliamentary procedure is tweaked to be as historically accurate as possible. Committees like Roman Senate and the Sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth require a lot of research and planning to execute, but it creates a truly immersive experience for delegates if they choose to fully embrace the historical elements of the committee and are flexible with learning new parliamentary procedures. This is especially fun when we use procedures in the language of the historical period--I chaired using the original Latin procedure for major votes for the Roman

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Senate. I am excited to see how the *liberum veto* (a disruptive procedure in which any member of the legislature had the power to halt any proceedings and veto any proposed legislation) plays out in this committee, especially considering the prevalence of foreign powers bribing legislators to use this procedure.

To fully enjoy this committee and do well, it is *extremely* important that you thoroughly read this background guide and any supplementary information. You probably do not have much prior knowledge of the Sejm and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth going into this committee--I definitely did not! This is a committee that you can only truly enjoy when you understand the unique procedures that we will be implementing and the historical context surrounding crisis events. Nevertheless, we will make sure that the committee runs as smoothly as possible and that we clearly explain changes to procedure and historical events so all delegates are on the same page.

I am so excited to bring this little-known historical legislative body to life with all of you in March. If you have any questions or want to introduce yourself, feel free to send me an email at katherine.m.canavan@gmail.com before the conference. I can't wait to meet you all!

Best,

Kate Canavan

Rex regnat et non gubernat

The King reigns but does not govern

Background Information:

The close relationship between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania existed for two hundred years before the official unification of these two nation-states and the formation of the commonwealth. The alliance had existed since the Polish-Lithuanian Union was formed by the Union of Krewo in 1386. Under this agreement, both nation-states maintained their own laws and customs.¹

In 1569, the Union of Lublin was signed in Lublin, Poland, which formally established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This agreement effectively created one state composed of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania under one government. This agreement gave the Lithuanians more strength and support against the powerful Tsardom of Russia on the eastern border of the Grand Duchy. Additionally, the Poles benefited from this agreement as they maintained their position as the more powerful bloc in the alliance and exerted more influence over the Lithuanians. Poland provided military assistance to the Lithuanians, and the Lithuanians agreed to recognize the annexation of some previously Lithuanian-controlled territories into the Crown of Poland. Under the stipulations of this treaty, Lithuanian nobles had the same amount of power as the Polish nobility on paper. In practice, the Poles maintained more influence politically and culturally throughout the duration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.²

Since the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was one of the largest nations in Europe, complete social and cultural homogeneity among the population was impossible. Members of the nobility (the *szlachta*), religious leaders, and other members of the elite used Latin or Polish to

¹ Koyama, Satoshi. "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Political Space: Its Unity and Complexity*." Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, n.d.

² "Union of Lublin." New World Encyclopedia, April 2, 2008.

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communicate among each other. However, the common population was much less integrated. They often remained isolated in smaller villages and communicated among members of their own community in their native tongue--for example, peasants from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania continued speaking Ruthenian, even as Polish became more commonplace throughout the nation state in the decades after the official unification of Poland and Lithuania.

As well as being ethnically diverse, the Commonwealth was religiously diverse. At the time of the creation of the Commonwealth, the country was less than half Catholic, and there was a notable Greek Orthodox portion of the population. Protestantism, most notably Lutheranism and Calvinism, was also gaining traction. Unlike many monarchical European states, the government of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth emphasized religious toleration. In 1573, the Confederation of Warsaw legally guaranteed toleration for these various factions of Christianity within the Commonwealth.³

The nobility of the Commonwealth also enjoyed many more rights than their counterparts in other European monarchies under the system known as the Golden Liberty. The Golden Liberty was established by the Pacta Conventa (an agreement between the szlachta and the newly elected king) of the first elected king of the Commonwealth, King Henry III of France. Also known as King Henry's Articles, the first pacta conventa guaranteed that the king must convene a sejm every two years, required that all taxes, royal marriages, and declarations of war be approved by the Sejm, and prevented the king's heir from any claim to inheritance on the Polish throne. All of the subsequent kings had to agree to King Henry's Articles, in addition to their individual pacta conventas which they negotiated with the Sejm.⁴

³ Koyama, Satoshi. "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Political Space: Its Unity and Complexity*." Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, n.d.

⁴ "Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth." New World Encyclopedia, March 30, 2019.

While King Henry gave the szlachta many important rights in order to secure his election to the throne, he would only sit on the throne of the Commonwealth for 2 years due to his ascension to the French throne in 1575 following the death of his brother, King Charles IX of France. After Henry's abdication of the Polish throne, the Sejm elected Anna Jagellion as the new queen and her husband Stephen Bathory as the new king. When Stephen Bathory died, Anna Jagellion decided to abdicate the throne in support of her nephew, instead of continuing on as the sole ruler of Poland. With the support of the former Queen Anna, Sigismund III Vasa was elected to the throne by the Sejm in 1587.

Sigismund III was the nephew of King Sigismund II Augustus, the Polish king who oversaw the Union of Lublin, and the Grandson of Sigismund I the Old through his mother Catherine Jagellion. His father was King John III Vasa of Sweden, and following his death, Sigismund III ascended to the Swedish throne in 1592. Unlike Henry III, Sigismund III retained the Polish crown and attempted to create a personal union similar to the one between Poland and Lithuania that preceded the Commonwealth.⁵

However, Sigismund's dream of a united Sweden and Poland would not last. In 1598, Sigismund's regent in Sweden, his uncle Charles IX, led a rebellion after the Catholic king renounced the 1593 Convention of Uppsala, which guaranteed Lutheranism as the state religion of Sweden.⁶ Sigismund quickly returned to Sweden with a large Polish army, but he was defeated by his uncle at the Battle of Stangebro. Charles IX deposed his nephew in 1599 and was crowned King of Sweden in 1604. Sigismund's loss of the Swedish crown led to sporadic conflict between Sweden and Poland, and the two nations returned to full-scale war in 1605.

⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Sigismund III Vasa: King of Poland and Sweden." Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.

⁶ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Charles IX: King of Sweden." Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.

Governmental Structure:

The Sejm was comprised of two chambers--the “Senat” (Senate) and the Chamber of Deputies. Similarly to how both the House of Representatives and the entire legislative branch of the United States government can both be called “Congress,” it was common to refer to the Chamber of Deputies simply as the “Sejm.” During the time period of this committee, the Senate included about 150 members. They were mostly bishops or other high ranking members of society. The Chamber of Deputies included about 170 deputies representing constituencies of each of the “voivodeships” (provinces) in the Commonwealth. These legislators were elected by local parliaments (sejmiks) from each region. Larger voivodeships were allocated more deputies proportionally based on population.⁷ Similarly to how U.S. states have one member of Congress to represent each district within the state, voivodeships have deputies to represent constituencies within the voivodeship. Unlike U.S. congressional districts with one representative, constituencies in the PLC could have multiple deputies based on their population.

The Sejm was especially important during this time period considering the implications of a piece of legislation passed in 1505, referred to as “*Nihil Novi sine communi consensu*,” meaning “nothing new without the consensus of all.” Under this law, it was mandated that all legislation must be agreed upon by both chambers of the Sejm and the King. However, the monarch was granted certain special executive powers related to certain issues, such as royal cities, peasants, and fiefdoms. This legislation further strengthened the szlachta against being overpowered by the King, but did not grant significant protections or powers to more vulnerable populations in Poland. The following excerpt from this law explains the legislators’ rationale for passing this piece of legislation:

⁷ “Sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.” Wikipedia, n.d.

“Since general laws and public acts apply not to a single person but to the whole nation, therefore at this general diet in Radom, together with all prelates, councils, and land deputies of our kingdom, we have considered rightful and just, as well as decided that from now on nothing new may be decided by us and our successors, without a common consensus of senators and land deputies, that would be detrimental or burdensome to the Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita), and harmful or injurious to anyone, or that would alter the general law and public freedom.”

Essentially, the szlachta believed that the King should not act unilaterally regarding all matters because government acts affected the entire population, not just the monarch.⁸

Under the Golden Liberty political system, the szlachta maintained certain abilities which protected their political influence and prevented the monarch from infringing upon their powers. The *rokosz*, or insurrection, was the ability of the szlachta to form a legal rebellion if they determined that the king had infringed upon their rights. The *rokosz* was a powerful tool of the szlachta to prevent the king from violating the freedoms guaranteed by King Henry's Articles.⁹

The *liberum veto* was perhaps the most disruptive power that the szlachta maintained. This controversial aspect of the parliamentary procedure of the Sejm required unanimous support for any legislation. The *liberum veto* could be exercised by any member of the Sejm, and its proclamation automatically nullified any legislation that had been passed during that session of the Sejm.

Some important sessions of the Sejm to consider are the special sessions used when a new King needed to be elected after death or abdication. The Sejm moved through three distinct sessions with different purposes and procedures to carry out this function:

⁸ Kwaśnicki, Witold. “Nihil Novi Sine Communi Consensu.” Witold Kwaśnicki, n.d.

⁹ “Golden Liberty.” Wikipedia, n.d.

<u><i>Name of Session</i></u>	<u><i>Function</i></u>	<u><i>Time Period</i></u>	<u><i>Location</i></u>
<i>Sejm Konwokacyjny:</i> Convocation Sejm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the <i>pacta conventa</i> (essentially an employment contract) for the new monarch • Evaluate candidates for the position 	Two weeks	No traditional location
<i>Sejm Elekcyjny:</i> Election Sejm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members of the szlachta (not just legislators) -- between 10,000 and 100,000 -- elect the next monarch • Candidates could not attend, but sent spokespeople 	Six weeks	Wola (village outside of Warsaw)
<i>Sejm Koronacyjny:</i> Coronation Sejm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coronation ceremony for new monarch • Primate (important bishop) formally gives powers to the new monarch 	Two weeks	Kraków

It is important to note that the Convocation and Election Sejms were Confederated Sejms (*Sejm skonfederowany*), which only required a majority of support for any action. Under these Sejms, the *liberum veto* did not come into play since unanimous support was not required.¹⁰

According to King Henry's Articles, the Sejm was to be called for a six week period at minimum every two years. However, "extraordinary Sejms" (*sejm ekstraordynaryjny*) lasting two weeks could also be held during times of emergency, such as wartime. Most were held in the Royal Castle in Warsaw.

¹⁰ "Sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth." Wikipedia, n.d.



The modern, rebuilt version of the Royal Castle (Warsaw)¹¹

Topic 1: The Zebrzydowski Rebellion (June 25, 1607)

Historical Context:

The current monarch, King Sigismund III has been involved in wars in Sweden and Russia, but he also faces serious resistance at home. In 1606, some members of the szlachta led by Mikolaj Zebrzydowski (governor of Kraków) formed a rokosz in opposition to King Sigismund's request to create a permanent standing army, his increased intolerance of non-Catholics, and the belief that Sigismund wanted to establish a dynastic monarchy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.¹²

On June 24, 1607, the members of the rokosz presented a document outlining 67 demands. It included calling for King Sigismund III to abdicate the throne for taking power from the szlachta, as well as calling for more rights for Protestants and more democratic elements to

¹¹ "Royal Castle in Warsaw." Polish Tourism Organization, n.d.

¹² The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Zebrzydowski Rebellion: Polish History." Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.

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the governmental structure of the Commonwealth. The Sejm at the time did not accept any of the rebels' requests.¹³

The Problem the Sejm Faces:

Tension is brewing between rebel nobles and members of the legislature loyal to King Sigismund III. Members of the *rokosz* are furious with King Sigismund III and do not want him to rule the Commonwealth anymore. Important decisions need to be made by the *szlachta* which will affect the future of the Commonwealth for decades.

Questions to Consider:

- Should the Sejm support policies of Mikolaj Zebryzdowski and his followers for the sake of peace, or should deputies work to maintain the status quo?
- What problems could arise when there is an unpopular ruler in power? How should legislators respond to potential violent reactions from political opponents?

Topic 2: Religious Conflict (December 1619)

Historical Context:

When Ferdinand II became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (a group of semi-autonomous states throughout central Europe), he mandated that all citizens of the Empire be Catholic. In response, Protestant Bohemian states in the empire (located in modern day Czech Republic and Austria) allied themselves with Protestant German states in the empire and began the "Bohemian Revolt." These states sought independence from Ferdinand II's oppression. These battles marked the beginning of the 30 Years War, a major military conflict involving

¹³ "Zebryzdowski Rebellion." Wikipedia, n.d.

most European superpowers from 1618 to 1648, mostly occurring in central Europe within the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁴

According to the Confederation of Warsaw, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth supported tolerance of both Protestants and Catholics within the empire. Therefore, they did not officially partake in the Thirty Years War. However, the *Lisowczycy*, a highly skilled mercenary group loosely affiliated with the official Polish-Lithuanian cavalry fought in favor of Emperor Ferdinand II and the Catholics in the Battle of Humenné. This mercenary group was unique in the sense that they were not paid wages. Instead, they were permitted to ransack any villages or cities where they won battles and take anything they wanted for themselves.¹⁵

In the Battle of Humenné, the *Lisowczycy* and their allies defeated the forces of the Protestant rebels in western Slovakia on November 23, 1619.¹⁶ They looted Humenné “killing even children and dogs.” Afterwards, half of the mercenary group continued to ransack Slovakia before returning to Poland, while the other half continued to support Ferdinand II in the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁷



¹⁴ History.com Editors. “Thirty Years' War.” History.com, August 1, 2018.

¹⁵ “Lisowczycy.” Wikipedia, n.d.

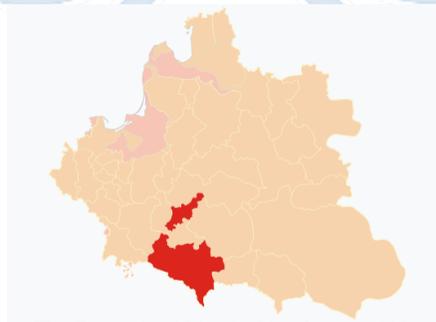
¹⁶ “Battle of Humenné.” Wikipedia

¹⁷ “Lisowczycy.” Wikipedia, n.d.

The Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1618 (with modern country borders for reference)¹⁸

This religious conflict is also sparking greater debates among marginalized members of the PLC. It is very important to consider that as a Commonwealth of various cultures and identities, it is virtually impossible for ethnic minorities to become influential members of the szlachta unless they assimilate to Polish culture. This means speaking Polish, converting to Catholicism, and fully embracing the Polish way of life. One group that is especially important to keep in mind during the discussions of this session of the Sejm is the Ruthenians.

In 1569, the Union of Lublin formally created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It included a stipulation that the Ruthenian territories, which were controlled by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania but maintained a certain amount of religious and cultural autonomy, would also join the PLC. This led to the Ruthenian nobility virtually abandoning Ruthenian language, culture, and religion (Eastern Orthodoxy). By 1595, the Ruthenian Orthodox Church re-established itself as the Ruthenian Uniate Church, under the authority of the Catholic Pope.¹⁹ Over time, the Ruthenian language (Chancery Slavonic) and the Lithuanian language was used less and less in favor of Polish among the nobility, while the lower class continued to speak their native language.²⁰



¹⁸ “Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.” Wikipedia, n.d.

¹⁹ “Union of Brest.” Wikipedia, n.d.

²⁰ “Grand Duchy of Lithuania.” Wikipedia, n.d.

The Ruthenian Voivodeship²¹

The Problem the Sejm Faces:

Half of the Lisowczycy forces have returned to Poland after their significant victory, and have continued to do what they do best--looting cities and stealing for themselves. After making their way through Slovakia, they have gone rogue and begun looting villages in the southern region of the Kingdom of Poland. They are going from town to town killing and stealing from both Protestants and Catholics. In one small village, they burned down a Protestant church. News of this church burning is spreading throughout the region, causing violent conflict between Protestants and Catholics. The religious conflict plaguing much of Europe is starting to spread to local villages all over the Commonwealth.

Deputies must work together to uphold the values of religious toleration that have allowed the diverse populations of the Commonwealth to live in harmony thus far. Firstly, it is important to discover who sent the Polish mercenaries to help Ferdinand II and why they did it. After gathering information, Deputies must draft a comprehensive piece of legislation to promote religious toleration among the general population and quell violence for the sake of national unity and peace.

Questions to Consider:

- What are the most effective ways to promote toleration during a time of religious conflict?

²¹ "Ruthenian Voivodeship." Wikipedia, n.d.

- How should legislators consider the principle of consensus that characterizes the Sejm?
What compromises need to be made to ensure that all citizens are happy with the result of this legislation?
- How do greater issues of class and ethnic conflict tie into the problem the Sejm is facing?
Should the policy of toleration extend past religion? Is the fact that members of the szlachta are increasingly participating in “Polonization” while the constituents they represent seek to maintain their traditions causing problems?

Topic 3: The Deluge and the *Liberum Veto* (October 1655)

Historical Context:

The Swedish army is extremely strong and powerful, but expensive to maintain. To obtain the wealth necessary to keep his army going, Swedish King Charles X Gustav plans on invading the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. The PLC is now ruled by the ultra-Catholic King John II Casimir, who is a former Jesuit and Cardinal. Some members of the szlachta (especially those who maintained their Protestant faith) are frustrated that the elected King is a Catholic who openly dislikes the culture of the szlachta.²² The ensuing conflict between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Sweden is known as “The Deluge.”

By July 1655, the powerful Swedish army was invading the Commonwealth, and immediately won major military victories under the leadership of Swedish King Charles X Gustav. By September 1655, the Swedish army had captured the capital city of Warsaw, and King John Casimir fled to Kraków. He later leaves the Commonwealth before the Swedish army captured Kraków by October. At this point, almost all of the land of the PLC is occupied by

²² “Deluge (history).” Wikipedia, n.d.

Sweden. Every town that is occupied is completely decimated, and almost all of the PLC's precious cultural artifacts have been stolen.²³

As the Swedish army has conquered much of the Commonwealth, members of the Chamber of Deputies begin to defect to Swedish leadership. In late October members of the Radziwiłł family--a powerful Lithuanian family (who are not members of the Sejm)--sign the Union of Kėdainiai with King Charles of Sweden on behalf of all members of the Lithuanian szlachta. This agreement essentially dissolves the ties between the Crown of Poland the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and places establishes a union between Lithuania and Sweden instead.²⁴

The Problem the Sejm Faces:

The future of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth is at stake, and the Sejm needs to take decisive actions to regain lost land and restore the PLC to its former glory, especially considering the absence of the exiled King. They need to make strong gains against the Swedish army before the Union of Kėdainiai goes into effect, which will sever ties between the Crown of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In order to do so, deputies must resist the attempts of King Charles of Sweden to infiltrate their government. This is proving to be difficult with the *liberum veto*--Sweden and their allies are bribing legislators, especially Lithuanian legislators, to use the veto power and halt a strong response from the Sejm.

Deputies must work to overcome internal strife and influence from foreign powers to save the Commonwealth from complete destruction. With the *liberum veto* still in place, the government of the Commonwealth has become anarchical and ineffective. Additionally, they must decide if they should keep the *liberum veto*--keeping it could encourage compromise

²³ "Deluge (history)." Wikipedia, n.d.

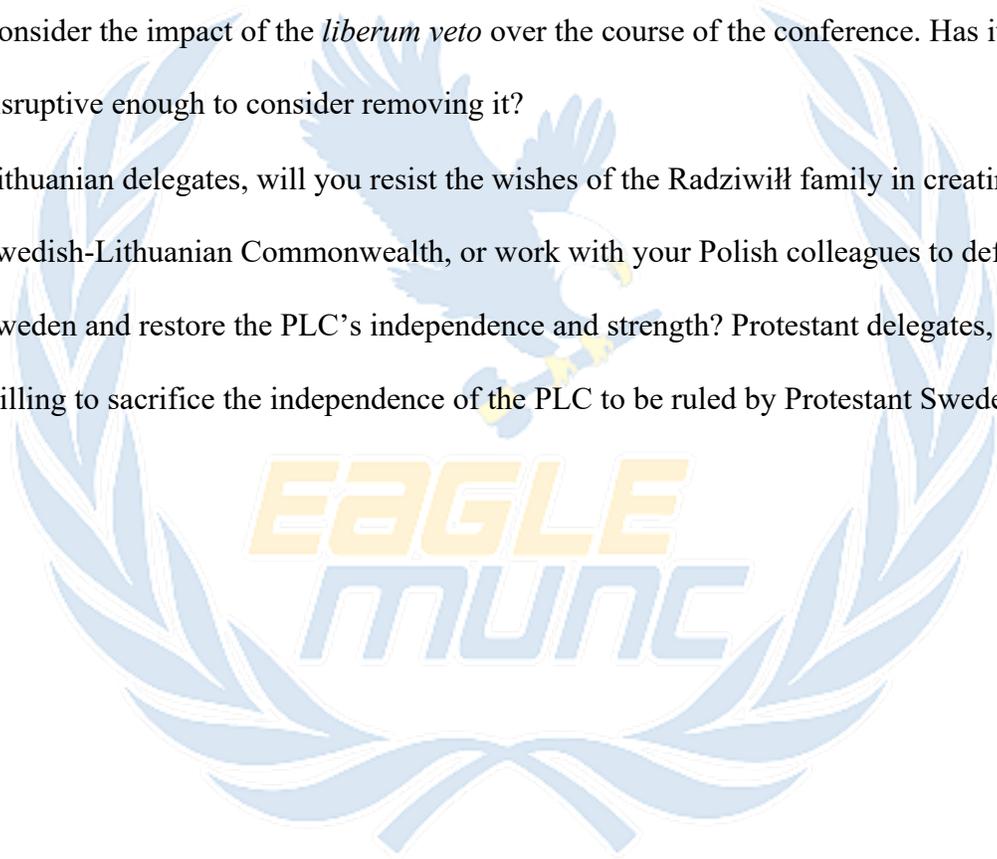
²⁴ "Union of Kėdainiai." Wikipedia, n.d.

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among the deputies, but could also make the government more paralyzed and dysfunctional in the future.

Questions to Consider:

- Is it more important to uphold the values of consensus and equality among the members of the *szlachta*, or do changes need to be made to make the government more efficient?
- Consider the impact of the *liberum veto* over the course of the conference. Has it been disruptive enough to consider removing it?
- Lithuanian delegates, will you resist the wishes of the Radziwiłł family in creating the Swedish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or work with your Polish colleagues to defeat Sweden and restore the PLC's independence and strength? Protestant delegates, are you willing to sacrifice the independence of the PLC to be ruled by Protestant Sweden?



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