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**SEJMS AND SEJMIKS OF LITHUANIAN DUCHY AS  
COMMUNICATION TOOL OF XVI CENTURY**

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*Abstract*

The paper is devoted to the analysis of social communication of the gentry in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of the XVI century and aims at identifying its significance for the development of the state. The work is based on the principle of historicism, historical-genetic and historical-comparative, retrospective methods. After the analysis of legislative acts of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy, some features of social communication among the nobility in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the XVI century were identified. The author has revealed the peculiarities of the socially significant information transferring channels. It was concluded that the subjects of social communication in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were "szlachta people" as a single ethnic community and a single social group. The information environment can be described as an environment that activates deeds of a nobleman owing to sufficient information. The nature of the information circulation can be described as open because information circulated from the Grand Duke through the sheets to the county regional councils. One can distinguish several hierarchical levels: global, regional and local. The global level was implemented in the discussion of critical issues of national character. The regional level was implemented at the preliminary sejmik, and the local one – in the regional councils work. The regional councils (sejms) were, the bodies that ensured the exchange of social information. Besides, they were a channel of information transmission, regulated by laws and norms, enshrined in the Lithuanian statutes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1566 and 1588.

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**Keywords:** Post-industrial society, social communication, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, szlachta, sejm, sejmik.



## **1. Introduction**

The most important features for the modern post-industrial society are the unified information space, the high level of information needs of society members, information culture and education, intensity of social interaction. Social communication plays an important role in the post-industrial society. It cannot effectively operate outside the institutions of civil society, as it is based on the rule of law and gives rise to many relations between individuals and social groups, which is manifested in various forms of social communication.

Thus, the most important factor for post-industrial society is the development of civil society institutions. Post-industrial society has a short history, whereas the concept of civil society goes back to the "polis" of Aristotle, to the ideas of the natural law (Gadzhiev, 1991), formed as a result of free and equal citizens' agreements. Modern states are expanding the guarantee of the rights and freedoms of citizens, are obliged to provide a decent standard of living, reflected in satisfying the citizens' basic needs (Bogdanov, Makarenko, 2014).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The society of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which existed from the mid-thirteenth till the last third of the eighteenth century, was at the stage of civil society formation in the XVI century. At that period, it adopted a progressive code of laws, which promoted the principle of powers separation, the assignment of civil and political rights for the Grand Duke's servants. In addition, it created a developed system of caste and municipal government.

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania is more than five hundred years behind the modern societies. Communication techniques had undergone five hundred years of evolution before they transformed into the communication environment of the modern post-industrial society, a kind of doctrine described in the theory of the information society, means of communication which is critical to its development. However, despite the differences, one can draw an analogy between the social communication technologies of the traditional society of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy and the modern post-industrial society. Considering a civil society as an integral factor of formation and development of the information society, it is possible to analyze the techniques of social communication in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in which, by the XVI century, civil rights and liberties of the nobility had already been established in the standards of the Lithuanian statutes. The latter were actually the first European Constitution and established the channels of social communication among the gentry class.

## **3. Research Questions**

In the modern information society, communicational environment and social communication play an important role in the functioning of civil society institutions. This explains the interest in the development of social communication at the earlier stages of civil society formation. A comparison of the communicative environment of the modern information society with channels for socially significant information transfer in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania seems rather possible.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to analyze social communication of the gentry in the Grand Lithuanian Duchy of the XVI century and to identify its significance for the development of the state.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The work is based on the principle of historicism, historical-genetic and historical-comparative, retrospective methods.

#### **6. Findings**

The social structure of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy included many social groups: princes and lords, the nobles of different classes, the clergy, burghers and peasants. Szlachta—the nobility — played the leading role in the evolution of the state among these groups.

"The people of nobility" (Lappo, 1911), which was formed in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania created a unified environment in which nobles acted as a homogeneous social group whose members interacted with each other and with other groups. Social communication was necessary for such interaction.

The gentry of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a subject of social communication were united by the unity of the economic situation and the unity of the political situation in the state. These were the owners of the political rights enshrined in the Grand-Ducal regulations, Statutes. However, the nobles constantly sought to expand their authority and political influence in the political system the Grand Duchy of Lithuania using sejms to achieve their goals, a gentry self-government organ and a part of the class-representative system of the government. The uniformity of the gentry's economic situation, political aspirations and forms of organization allow us to consider the nobility of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy both as a social group and as a social institution of the state.

As a social group, the nobility was divided into several categories. The foundation of this division was the number of horses they could give to the governmental army, as it was determined in proportion of the number of peasant "services", which belonged to the nobleman.

"Naidrobneishaya" (the smallest) and "drobnaya" (small) szlachta was the poorest category of nobles, offering from one to ten horses to the army of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They were personally in the military service and were close to the farmers by their financial position, living on small farms, cultivating the land with their servants or having no land at all (such nobles were called "golota" (naked ones)).

"Syarednaya szlachta" (medium nobility) gave eleven to fifteen horses; while "buynaya" (violent) and "naibuineishaya" (the most violent) (Bokhan, Galenchanka, 2007) [magnates] gentry, the richest stratum of landowners, gave fifty horses and more.

According to the regional "popis" (census) of 1528, a military census of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Radziwills noble family provided 621 horse, and one 'pan' (a noble man) Gashtold and his son provided 466 horses, which was seven times more than the total number of soldiers who stood to fight under the banner of the Vitebsk land (Census of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy Troops, 2003).

As a social group, the nobility was a closed corporation, membership in which was assigned either in a legal act or required the legal procedures of proof (confirmation of one's noble origin). The uniformity of social education and social roles implemented by the gentry (a politician, a knight, a protector of the realm, a head of the family, the father, the ruler of his realm, a philanthropist (Slizh, 2002), determined the formation of stable values and ideals shared by all the gentry representatives as a social institution.

The activities of the gentry as a subject of social communication had the general, overall orientation. It was based on the policy of one's political and economic powers' expansion and consolidation in the regulative documents, therefore, the nobility fulfilled a common task to achieve common goals. Certain legal acts determined their position and activities — the privileges of Grand Dukes of Lithuania and the Statutes of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy. Military service, a similar economic and social position of the nobility representatives made them a united system.

The gentry as a social institution was a special form of social interaction organization that used state institutions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Parliament, Sejm, Vradnikysystem, local sejmiks and positions that only the nobles could have) for the realization of their political aspirations and had a certain material base – land.

The leading position of the nobility in the functioning and development of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy political system caused a conflict of interest in the nobility structure. This conflict was expressed in the contradiction between the role of a princely manager-sergeant and a member of the national system of aristocratic government. As a princely official of any level, the gentleman-sergeant needs to think and care about the state affairs, economic well-being of all the principality lands, their military security and efficiency in the rule of law sphere. These tasks differed depending on different administration levels. Indeed, parts of the governmental Council had to think and act in the state scale. Princely governors shall carry out decisions of the Prince and the Council of Lords at their places, locally: the governors-sovereigns had to monitor the welfare of the economy; the urban managers (prior to the redemption of Voit posts by cities) had to take care of the city development. At the same time, the higher position in the administration system was occupied by the gentry; the more intensively corporate gentry interests could interfere with his operation. This is due to the close connection of the property and in-class position of the nobleman with his chances for promotion in public service. The richer and more honorable the gentleman was, the more chances he had to become not just the local constable, but a high-ranking official, a governor or a princely court constable.

Accordingly, this system itself promoted nobles-magnates to higher posts: their personal and corporate interest was expressed to the greatest extent. Small serving gentry did not reach the highest state positions, although it is them who could be the best performers, which was illustrated by the example of the Moscow state, where the service people, without wealth or noble ancestry, became the tools that obeyed and implemented the will of the Prince.

Most vividly, this conflict of interests was manifested during the sitting of the Val'niy Sejm.

The leading position of the nobility in the Grand Lithuanian Duchy was conditioned by its cohesion as a social group and a social institution. The uniformed upbringing, education, political interests of the nobility as a social institution created a need to develop a mechanism of social

communication. This mechanism would contribute to the realization of their social and political interests to represent them at the meetings of the Great Val'niy Sejm.

The subjects of social communication in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the information environment, formed by the gentry, were the "people-gentry" as a single ethnic community and a single social group. The gentry people held the highest and local office and had the group and individual status when interacting with the whole group of the gentry, as well as with government officials, broadcasting the will of the Grand Duke, sejm people as bodies of gentry self-government and the main channel of socially significant information transmission, Sejm, as a body of the whole state nobility representation, and by the Grand Prince himself.

The Ruler, the Council of Lords and Sejm were the supreme authorities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The status of the Lithuanian Grand Duke, the highest authority in the state, was changing with the development of the gentry-class' powers and this development changed the political system of the state, creating new laws, new governments, new tensions. From the original Prince's squad, only performing their military function, szlachta turned into the "people-the gentry" and main social institution of the state in the XVI century. After the nobles got their political rights, the institution of nobility was so entrenched that it replaced other political institutions of the state, becoming the control unit of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy.

Sejm is an elected representative body of the nobility, which invited the nobility representatives elected from the district to discuss urgent national issues. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Congress had not yet collected all the nobility, only the richest and the most influential ones met. In the same period, such meetings gained the name of the Great Val'niy Sejm. The Statute of 1566 presented the Sejm members – "*all the princes and church and secular councils, marshals and other rural and royal officers, banner carriers, ambassadors from regional landowners*" (Statute, 2010). Originally such meetings did not have any sort of solid state power authority, they were irregular, depending on the discussed issues. For example, according to the privilege of 1447, the Grand Duke refused to collect taxes from private citizens ('serebtschina', tax in silver). Therefore, every time the Grand Duke was obliged to consult with all the gentry and to ask them for the permission to collect this tax. Gradually the Sejm was gaining more and more meaning, sets of laws were accepted and approved there, and in 1492 Sejm elected Alexander, the son of Casimir Jagiellonchik, to become Grand Duke of Lithuania.

There were no clearly defined time, place or duration of Sejms. They were organized on demand in different cities, for example, in Vilna, Grodno, Slonim, and could continue working for several days or months, but most often for 2-4 weeks. Sejm's functions were wide: the election of the ruler, the decision about the conclusion or confirmation of the unions with Poland, the issues of war and peace, acceptance and publication of military regulations, issues about collecting war taxes and military service duration, the adoption of laws and regulations, the introduction of new and extraordinary taxes, court and control functions (Lyubavskiy, 1900). Sejm also was in charge of financial matters, limiting the power of the Grand Duke in this sphere. The ruler could not exempt "*taxpaying people and townspeople, Duke's servants, banners' carriers, szlachta and boary*" (Statute, 2010) from taxes by his own decision without the approval of the gentry and Val'niy Sejm regulations. As representatives of other social classes were

not allowed to be present in Sejm, it became the representative body of nobles only, which, inevitably, led to the fact that legal acts adopted at Sejms began to reflect mainly the gentry, szlachta's interests.

The gentry as a social institution spawned a certain informational environment, where the main mechanism of social communication was the 'povetoviye sejmiky' (regional assemblies). The bodies of gentry self-government, *sejmiks*, were recorded in the Statute of 1566 (Statute, 2010). That was the right which the nobility obtained at Bielskiy Sejm in 1565. The sejmik discussion as the most important organ of the political system is a significant part of the discourse about the political and legal status of the gentry class.

The debate about the origin, regulation and functions of Sejmiks emerged in the late nineteenth century in the works of historians, researchers of the Ukrainian national school, as well as of scientists in Moscow and St. Petersburg historical schools. In the early twentieth century, I. I. Lappo's fundamental work was published, the second volume of which was devoted to the study of county sejmiks (Lappo, 1911). There were no more large studies on sejmiks of Grand Lithuanian Duchy published after that. At the present stage of the sejmiks discourse development, the discussion is still acute, however, the researchers in their works base on M. K. Lubavskiy and I. I. Lappo's writings.

Rich gentry, who occupied key local positions: governors, prefects, castellani played the main role at the sejmiks. The role of simple nobility was intensified after the adoption of the Lublinuniya.

Sejmiks were established to regulate Val'niy Sejm's work, when after the reforms the county became an administrative and military unit (Zakrzewski, 2000).

The discourse formed two approaches to understanding the origin of the Lithuanian Sejmiks. N.A. Maximeiko expressed a point of view on the ancient character of the local sejms on the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which were active as early as in the XIV century (Maximeiko, 1902), possessing a wide reference – election of local princes, legislative, military and judicial functions. However, this approach needs to be questioned, as N.A. Maximeiko does not distinguish between sejmiks and ancient collective meetings. According to F. I. Leontovich and M. S. Grushevskiy, one should see the Polish political tradition in regional sejmiks and local county courts' establishment (Leontovich, 1899; Grushevskiy, 1995). This view was confirmed and became a paradigm of the discourse, as sejmiks go back to the Polish political tradition and Neshavskie statutes.

The Statute of 1588 defines several types of sejmiks. Before the meeting at the Great Val'niy Sejm, preliminary szlachta's sejmiks were held in the provinces and counties. Such sejmiks were also called "particularistic" as opposed to the large sejmiks – "general" ones (Lappo, 1911). The purpose of preliminary sejmiks was a preliminary consideration of the resolutions to be proposed at the Val'niy Sejm and appointment of 'Zemskiy' (counties) ambassadors at the Sejm (Statute, 2010). After the Val'niy Sejm session was over, county ambassadors returned to the counties and organized another sejmik, now a relative one. Here the Grand universals were read aloud to inform the gentry about the Sejm decisions. In addition, two electing sejmiks were organized, the only ones for which the exact date was determined – the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February. Elective sejmiks were convened by the governors or district wardens for the election of local officials: members of the land court and the Lithuanian Tribunal (the chief appellate court of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy). Here the mayor took the oath of the office elected by the gentry (Statute, 2010). Perhaps private sejmiks were also organized for the local gentry to deal with their internal issues.

In addition to these types of sejmiks, the Grand Duke issued the Statute of 1588 to regulate the noble men and county ambassadors' right to gather for their own convention in Slonim two weeks before each Val'niy Sejm (Statute, 2010).

Sejm was composed of various people and consisted of all the camps of the local gentry. According to the Statute of 1588, the Sejm meeting involved: "*biskupove, voivodove, castalani and zemskiyevradnyki, N[ya]zi, panove and szlachta – each in their office of voevode or county*" (Statute, 2010). Sejmiks' membership and meetings' regulation were shown in detail in the research of M. K. Lyubavskiy and I. I. Lappo. Sejmiks formed the county corporation of the nobility, and their meetings were attended by all the military service of the county (Lyubavskiy, 1892). Sejmik included two categories of nobility: executive officers belonging to the pan-council kolo and to the knights' kolo (bishops, magistrates, castellane, zemstvo officials (Lappo, 1911), and local landowners (all the princes, lords and gentry of the district (Lappo, 1911).

I.I. Lappo emphasized the weak regulation order of the sejmiks meetings, as well as the strong influence of the magnates on the county nobility (Lappo, 1911). By obtaining the paper on summoning to the sejmiks from the Grand Duke and thanks to their official position, the nobility was much more aware of the situation than the entire county nobility was. Sejmiks were gathered in the central city of the county, where the county administrative organs and the district court were seated. The quorum and duration for the sejmiks were not defined. The duration of the meeting initially depended on the complexity and importance of the issues involved. However, according to the Statute of 1588, it was restricted up to 4 days (Lappo, 1911). County Marshal ('povetoviy marshalok') collected and headed the sejmik, while in the main district of the province this function was played by the castellan.

M.K. Lyubavskiy's (Lyubavskiy, 1900), M.V. Dovnar-Zapolskiy's (Dovnar-Zapolskiy, 1898), M.S. Grushevskiy's (Grushevskiy, 1995) works defined the main functions of county sejmiks, which were to elect the ambassadors to Val'niy Sejm, to solve local problems, judicial affairs, to accept local legislative regulations, to elect local officials. The question of war military donations payments was discussed at the county sejmiks.

Many research papers evaluated the role of sejmiks in the state life of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy. M.K. Lyubavskiy noted that despite the fact that the number of szlachta representatives at the meetings reduced, their political activity increased (Lyubavskiy, 1915). Yet, A.E. Presnyakov drew the researchers' attention to another factor when evaluating the sejmiks' importance. Due to the increased political influence and the better system within the county szlachta, their disputes with magnates developed (Presnyakov, 1939). This led to pushing and shoving when solving essential issues. A.E. Presnyakov considers this very conflict between magnates and szlachta representatives to be the reason for the whole Grand Lithuanian Duchy collapse.

Sejmiks' channels and social nets were really influential and wide. Sejmiks had direct stable information transfer channels with the Great Val'niy Sejm, local uryadniks (constables), such as wardens and governors, as well as with local szlachta people. There was another indirect channel, through the Val'niy Sejm, which passed the information from sejmiks to the Grand Duke, when a sejmik considered the Sejm's and the Sovereign's statements, and the uprising link when the sejmik was electing ambassadors to go to the sejm. The channel connecting them with the Grand Duke was when the

Monarch was sending the universals, sheets with the lists of state issues which were to be discussed at the sejmik.

Analyzing the social communication, one can speak about some features of a legal state appearing in the Grand Lithuanian Duchy. Lithuanian statutes fixed the germs of powers distribution into legislative (Sejm), executive (the Grand Duke and state positions) and judicial (a developed system of state and caste courts). The mutual responsibility of the citizen-polish gentleman and the state was established (the statutes regulations, according to which the Grand Duke was obliged not to diminish or interfere with the szlachta rights, as well as the szlachta's rights and duties, were fixed). In addition, the equality of everybody in the face of Statute as the main law and in the face of the court was fixed (Statute, 2010). Thus, the authors can speak about the presence of civil society elements in the Grand Lithuanian Duchy which were the tools of szlachta community's influence on the state aiming at providing the szlachta citizens with freedoms.

## **7. Conclusion**

The informational environment created by szlachta as a social group can be characterized as an activating force of a szlachta-representative by means of the enough amount of information — from the point of view of the influence of a subject-Polish gentleman (Smirnov, 2001). Judging by the character of information circulation in this sphere, it can be described as open because information was circulating from the Grand Duke by means of papers sending the issues on the agenda to the Sejm, to county sejmiks. In turn, they were discussing these issues and forming the position of their representatives at the Sejm.

Like in any informational environment of the modern society, the informational society of szlachta society in Grand Lithuanian Duchy demonstrates several hierarchical levels: global, regional and local. The global level was realized in the discussion of most essential issues of the nationwide nature at the Great Val'niy Sejm. The regional level was realized at the preliminary sejmik. The local level was realized in the work of county sejms. Every level of the informational sphere replaces the interests from local-county ones up to overall state ones in the process of getting the knowledge by the subject-szlachta representatives which promotes perception of more global information.

County sejmiks of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy can be considered from different points of view within the problem of social communication development. Szlachta's social communication in the Grand Lithuanian Duchy of the XVI century can be defined as a specialized or a group one according to the audience type. Thus, it functions only in the narrow szlachta's corporation because no other representatives of the caste were admitted to participation in decision making at sejms. By the source of the message, social communication of the nobility was official, as the issues related to the Sejm agenda were discussed at the sejmiks – overall national and local county problems of the gentry. By the analysis of the nature of the interaction, sejmiks were a combination of personal and role group social communication, as the nobles protected both the interests of the entire class and their personal interests, speaking at sejmiks as the officials.

Sejmiks were, firstly, an institution that ensured the social information exchange, and secondly, the form of competences' interaction, because officials, who headed sejmiks, were obliged to convey the

Grand Duke's universals to the county gentry. Thirdly, that was a channel of information transmission, regulated by law, enshrined in the Lithuanian statutes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1566 and 1588.

The transmission of information via sejmiks as a channel of social communication, was carried out according to the following scheme: a preliminary sejmik (where issues relating to the county nobility's needs were discussed and where sejm representatives were elected), sejmik in Slonim (where the elected representatives of the gentry were present), the Great Val'niy Sejm (where the most important national issues were discussed), and finally, the relative sejmik (where the county gentry heard the Sejm decisions).

After the three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania disappeared from the map of Europe and ceased to exist. Sejmiks were canceled immediately on the territories ceded to Prussia and Austria, and on the territories of the Russian Empire they disappeared by 1840 (Picheta, 1961). However, the traditional institutions of civil society preserved the social importance on the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the social communication channels were also preserved even after the abolition of sejmiks which lost their official value. Formally, sejmiks as a channel of social communication were destroyed, but the system of relations, formed by county gentry in the XVI century at the sejmiks and county courts did not disappear. Its manifestations traces can be detected in the work by the poet Adam Mickiewicz "Pan Tadeusz". The work was devoted to the events of the early nineteenth century, and was published in 1834 (Library of world literature, 1968). It reflected the social and political significance of the former authorities institutions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, emphasizing the observance of ancient customs and even naming characters in accordance with the adopted traditions of the XVI century, for example with titles such as "Judge"

Sejmiks played a crucial role for the civil society in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, being a platform for resolving local issues in the counties, for the development of a concept of the ambassadors' behavior at the Great Val'niy Sejm, who were to represent the interests of all the nobility of the state. Through the sejmiks, information about the most important issues of the state was transmitted, the Grand Duke's decisions reached distant places, the local officials were selected. Analysis of the Grand Lithuanian Duchy gentry's social communication proves that as early as in the XVI century it formed the features of civil society that demonstrates the overall trends in the social communication organization in democratic societies in different periods of development. First, the gentry possessed personal, property and political rights, protected by the norms of the Statutes. Interestingly, it was there for the first time where the rights of noble women were stated and defended. Secondly, there was a sphere of activity of the nobility, which was not directly regulated by the state — sejmiks decided on local issues independently, often not involving state officials into the process, being a political system organ and a local self-government body at the same time.

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