The Constitution of May 3 (1791)

THE FIRST MODERN CONSTITUTION IN EUROPE ADOPTED DEMOCRATICALLY

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The Central Archives of Historical Records ul. Długa 7, 00-263 Warszawa

THE CONSTITUTION OF 3 MAY (1791)

| CONCEPT AND TEXT: | Michał Kulecki, Magdalena Morawska, Hubert Wajs |
|---------------------|---|
| TRANSLATION: | Anna Maria Tymosz |
| EDITORIAL REVISION: | Ewelina Solarek |
| GRAPHIC DESIGN: | Felis Fidelis |
| PHOTOGRAPHS: | Karol Zgliński |
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Historical background

| 1776 | A STATE | ECONOMY: The Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith was published in London | |
|--------------------------|--|--|----------------------------|
| 1781 | | ASTRONOMY: The Uranus planet was discovered by Sir William Herschel | |
| 1781 | | PHILOSOPHY: Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant was published in Riga | |
| 13.03.1791 | | HUMAN RIGHTS: <i>Rights of Man</i> by Thomas Paine (first part) were published in London | |
| 26.03.1791 | | METROLOGY: Basics of the metric system were adopted in France | |
| 03.05.1791 | USTAWA RZADOWA. WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW WWW PRANO UCHWALONE. Dais of Main , Judia 1794. | • CONSTITUTIONAL LAW: The Constitution of May 3, the first modern constitution in Europe, was proclaimed by the Four-Year Sejm of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth | EUROPEAN HERITAGE LABEL |
| 09.09.1791 | | SOCIETY: the capital city of the United States was officially named Washington (D.C.), after the name of | |
| | | the first president of the states | |
| 13.09.1791 | | | |
| 13.09.1791 30.09.1791 | | CONSTITUTIONAL LAW: The final version of the first | |

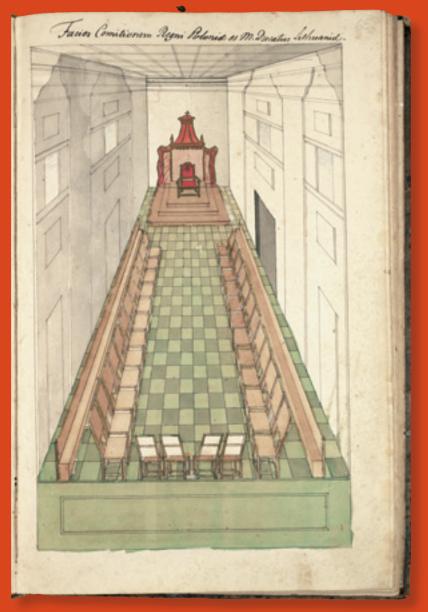
The Great (Four-Year) Sejm

(1788 - 1792)

• The Sejm (Parliament), which passed the Government Act, has commenced its sessions in a very complicated international situation. Russia, which held actual protectorate over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, became entangled in wars with Turkey and Sweden. Austria supported Russia against Turkey, and Prussia took a position openly antagonistic to Russia. It seemed to be the only opportunity to regain sovereignty of Poland. Seim managed to form a confederation, the so-called treaty of guarantee was terminated, and following the disbanding of the Perpetual Council, the Sejm took full power in the country, commencing an attempt to reform the system. Enactment of the Government Act was the culmination point of those activities. Russia has never accepted losing its influence in Poland, and after signing peace treaties with Turkey and Sweden, commenced military actions against the Commonwealth. Those soon led to capitulation of the king and power was taken over by opponents of the May 3rd 1791 Constitution, who were united in a confederation formed under the influence of Russia, called Targowica Confederation after the town where it was formally established.



• Adoption of the May 3rd 1791 Constitution, J. P. Norblin, National Library of Poland



 Arrangement of the Senate Chamber in the Royal Castle in Warsaw, 18th century, contemporary drawing. CAHR, Acquisitions of the 1st Department, no 198, k. 65

The King

(1764–1795)

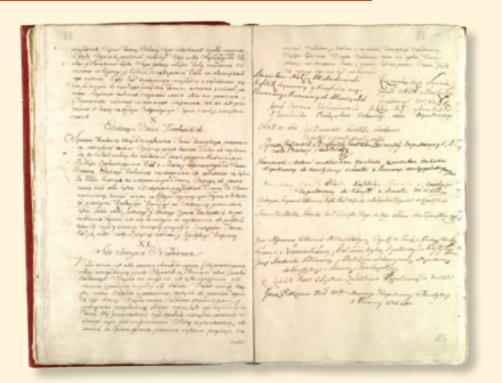
• The Great Sejm, which managed to form a confederation in order to avoid disruption, was most of all result of efforts and ideas of Stanisław August. The King himself with Ignacy Potocki and Hugo Kołłątaj were the main authors of the Government Act.



 Portrait of Stanisław August Poniatowski in coronation robes, M. Bacciarelli, Royal Castle in Warsaw



• Stanisław August, the Great Seal of majesty impressed on 24th of December, 1791 King enthroned under a canopy supported by two columns, with a scepter in his right hand. Drapery in the background. On both sides of the king, allegory figures (one with a palm leaf, the other with a sword and scales). Each of the figures holds a small shield, surmounted by a crown (one with the King's monogram (SAR), the other with Poniatowski coat of arms (Ciołek)). Above the top of the canopy, a shield surmounted by a crown with the Eagle, with birds on both sides. On the step of the throne, date MDCCLXXX. Around, 11 shields with coats of arms: Ruthenia, Pomerania, Sandomierz, Jagiellonian two-barred cross, Podolia, Dobrzyń, Lublin, Kujawy, Kalisz, Prussia, the Pogoń (surmounted by a ducal coronet). Seal enclosed in a box, impressed in red wax, Ø 12,3 cm Inscription: STANISLAUS AUGUSTUS : D. G. REX POLONIÆ M. DUX LITH : RUS : PRUS MAS SAM : KIOV VOL POD PODL LIV SM SEV CZ CAHR, Collection of parchment records no 1485



• Last page of the manuscript of the Constitution confirmed by signatures of the Marshals of Sejm (Crown Referendary Stanisław Małachowski and General of Lithuanian Artillery Kazimierz Nestor Sapieha) and members of Constitutional Delegation CAHR, Potocki Family Public Archive, 100, vol. 2, p. 84

• The May 3rd 1791 Constitution (Government Act) was adopted on May the 3rd, 1791 by the Sejm (Parliament) which was in session since 1788, and which is known in the history of Poland as the Four-Year Sejm or Great Sejm. The Government Act was Poland's first fundamental law and one of the first constitutions in the world adopted in a fully democratic manner. The document consists of a formal preamble and 11 articles. The Government Act in Poland introduced the system of constitutional monarchy, which was enacted by most of European countries only in the following century. The May 3rd 1791 Constitution maintained the class (estates) based structure of the society, but it opened paths for social advancement and perspectives for further reforms of the system. The Constitution accepted the Montesquieu's tripartite division of power into: legislative, executive and judicial. obowiązkow, ktore dobrowolnie na kebie przyjej- Rtąd czyli arnaczenie Władz publicze Wzatka wradza wspołeczności ludzkieg weząten swog z woli Mardin. Aby wieje Cativi Banstin wołnie Byw y porządek spoteczności w rowney wadze na żawse zod trzy wtadze Pizge Mardin Bolskiego składzie powinny w sou miniegozego na kawsze składzie bejoz, to iefe: Władzie weza wo temach karomidzomych. Mładza hagnerzań weza wo temach karomidzomych. Mładza hagnerzań zwacza w temach karomidzomych, lub ustanowiesie zwach na ten żeniec ustanowienych, lub ustanowiesie Seym czyli Władza Brawcience na dwie ekster Seym czyli Picany Zgromodizone na dwie ekster

ARTICLE V. FORM OF GOVERNMENT, OR THE DEFINITION OF PUBLIC POWERS

- All power in civil society should be derived from the will of the people, its end and object being the preservation and integrity of the State, the civil liberty, and the good order of society, on an equal scale, and on a lasting foundation. Three distinct powers shall compose the government of the Polish nation, according to the present constitution; viz. 1st. Legislative power in the States assembled.
- 2d. Executive power in the King and the Council of Inspection.
- 3d. Judicial power in Jurisdictions existing or to be established.

New Constitution of the Government of Poland Established by the Revolution, the Third of May, London. Printed for J. Debrett opposite Burlington House, Piccadilly M. D. CC. XCI



The three copies of the May 3rd 1791 Constitution preserved in the Central Archives of Historical Records are unique and special. This stems from the very short time of functioning of the system introduced on 3rd May, 1791. Russia has never accepted loss of its influence in Poland, and soon led to capitulation of the king and power being seized by opponents of the Constitution. Confederates of Targowica have commenced activities aimed at obliterating every trace of the document. Original copies of the Constitution were tracked with a particular zeal. The text from the Lithuanian Metrica has probably survived in the Royal Library (where Confederates could not reach it). The text from Potocki Family Public Archive was preserved in hiding by the members of the family, who, due to their role in development and enactment of the Government Act, could not count on clemency from their opponents. The copy from the Archive of Four-Year Sejm was preserved by one of Sejm secretaries.

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• Government Act, original, language: Polish, manuscript 40 x 25 cm in size, placed in the book with Sejm's resolutions adopted between 16/12/1790 and 29/05/1792, preserved in Lithuanian Metrica fond, section VII, 4, f. 75-82

[Copy from the Royal Library [?], signatures of the Marshals of Sejm and members of Constitutional Delegation]

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 Government Act, original, language: Polish, manuscript 40 x 25 cm in size, placed in the book with Sejm's resolutions adopted in 1791, preserved in Potocki Family Public Archive fond, 100, vol. 2, p. 74-84

[Copy from the Potocki Family Public Archive, signatures of the Marshals of Sejm and members of Constitutional Delegation]

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• Government Act, fair copy manuscript of the Constitution, 23,5 x 39 cm in size, placed in the book which contains, among other things, rough copies and fair copies of resolutions of Sejm from 1790 to 1791, preserved in Archive of Four-Year Sejm fond, vol. 20, f. 91-101

[Copy from the Archive of Four-Year Sejm, signatures of the Marshals of Sejm]

The earliest prints in Polish

• Official print of the text

of the Government Act

with the entry formula, confirming its origin

from Warsaw chancery

CAHR, Archive of Four-

Year Sejm, vol. 25, f. 357-360v

• Acts passed by the Sejm in Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were registered in the courts' chanceries records, which meant that they were entered into the court books in larger towns. The registered text became official and everyone could cite it with the legal effect. Entry into the court book of Warsaw meant legal validation of the acts of the Four-Year Sejm. For this reason the authenticity of the printed copy of the Government Act was confirmed by the impression of an official seal of the chancery and signature of the chancery clerk.

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Within the first 12 months of its enactment, the Constitution had at least 14 editions, with ca. 20,000-30,000 copies printed. Shortly after it was enacted, the Constitution was published in the Polish press, e.g. in "The National & Foreign Gazette". Text of the Government Act in "The National & Foreign Gazette", No 38, 11 May 1791, CAHR, Library, Cz. 1288, p. 154

Government Act and other basic acts of the Four-Year Sejm, regulating the Commonwealth's reformed political and social system. Printed "in Warsaw at P. Dufour, Cou[rt] Counsel[lor] for HM-sty and Director of the Cad[et] Sch[ool] Print[ing] House", 1791 CAHR, Library, SD I 50

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In foreign languages

• Immediately after the enactment of the 3rd May Constitution, it was admired by the entire liberal Europe. Edmund Burke (1729–1797), philosophical founder of conservatism, praised it as an example of peaceful transformation of the political system. The document evoked positive comments from "Nouvelles Extraordinaires de Divers Endroits" as well. Words of praise were also heard in the parlours of Vienna. Pope Pius VI (1775–1799) regarded it favourably; even the king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II (1786–1797), sent a letter of congratulations. The then-ambassador in Paris and later President of the United States (1801–1809), democrat Thomas Jefferson, wrote that the world has gained three Constitutions worth memory and respect, in order of their enactment: American, Polish and French.



NEW CONSTITUTION

OF THE

GOVERNMENT OF POLAND,

ESTABLISHED

BY THE REVOLUTION,

THE THIRD OF MAT, 1791.

THE SECOND EDITION.

L O N D O N: PRINTED FOR 3 DERRETS, OFFICIENT BULLINGTON MODEL, FOCKADELE, M.DCC.NO. On the 15th of May, the "Nouvelles Extraordinaires de Divers Endroits", called "Gazette of Leiden", mentioned the Polish Government Act for the first time. In the next edition (the 20th May) there were three articles about its enactment. In England "The Times" and "The Morning Chronicle" first reported on the Government Act on the 20th of May, and then, on the 21st of May, "The London Gazette"; it means information had reached London after 17 or 18 days. In Paris, "Gazette Nationale ou Ia Moniter Universel" described the event on the 22nd May. In June, three British newspapers printed the complete translated text of the Constitution: "The Star", "The Morning Chronicle" and "The Lloyd's Evening Post". This was a success of Franciszek Bukaty (Polish ambassador in London), who arranged the translation. The text was also printed as a single book by John Debrett. The French translation was published in Warsaw by "Journal Hebdomadaire de Ia Diète" in the subsequent editions from 6th July till 3rd August.

FORME 207 CONSTITUTIONELLE

décrétée par acclamation DANS LA SÉANCE DU 3. MAI. & fanctionnée à l'unanimité, DANS LA SÉANCE SUIVANTE DU 5. MAI 1791.



Chez P. Duroux, Confeiller Aulique de S. M. Of Direileur de l'Imprimerie du Corps Royal des Codets.

 Forme Constitutionelle decrétée par acclamation dans la séance du 3 mai, sanctionnée a l'unanimité, dans la seancé suivante du 5 mai 1791 Contemporary print, CAHR, Library, SD I 72

