The Jagiellonian Idea – Some Political Challenges

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The article undertakes the concept of the Jagiellonian idea, its background, development over the centuries, contemporary understanding of the phenomenon and its possible political and cultural applications. The text is composed of three parts, in which the first delivers a general outline of the idea itself and the reasons for its genesis. After the historical part, I move on to describe the legacy of the Jagiellonian dynasty, how it is being perceived and commented nowadays. Finally, as a young representative of the graduates of the Jagiellonian University, I present my opinion on the idea’s assumptions and the possibilities of implementation in political and cultural dimensions.

While beginning to consider the Jagiellonian idea, one definition should be quoted, in this case provided by Witold Kamieniecki, from the year 1928: The Jagiellonian idea is a political system, based on drawing to the Polish State by way of voluntary accessions, unions, neighbouring area, filling the geographic area between the Carpathian Mountains and the Baltic Sea. The Jagiellonian Republic of Poland, established by way of creating the union, was based in its structure on the following principles: the union system (Crown – Lithuania), autonomies of individual components within its framework, administration composed of local citizens, equality of languages, religious tolerance, development of democratic civil liberties, agreeing nation-

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al patriotism of the Republic of Poland with local and local-national patriotism, apostolate of the western civilisation.¹

The Jagiellonian idea dates back to the 15th century. At that time the Jagiellonian dynasty established an empire, whose territory was based on the access to three seas – the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. While looking from the contemporary perspective, the monarchy included the areas of Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation (Smolensk county), the total of almost million square kilometres, inhabited by eight million people, which constituted almost 1/10 people of Europe.²

The characteristic feature of the empire was the fact that it was not created by conquests to a great extent, but under international agreements and mutual understanding. The Jagiellonian idea cemented the multinational and multicultural superpower where all parts joined it voluntarily, not under pressure. The united lands were diverse as regards peoples’ ethnic and religious background. Apart from the Poles, a great majority constituted pagan Lithuanians and Orthodox Ruthenians.

The wedding of Władysław Jagiełło, the Grand Duke of Lithuania and the queen Jadwiga took place in 1385 and sealed the military alliance between the Crown and Lithuania. The alliance was addressed against the Teutonic Order that had been present on the territory of the Republic of Poland since 1226, brought by Konrad Mazowiecki in order to protect the Polish lands against the pagan Prussia. The Union was formally valid since 1386, under the agreement concluded in 1385 in Krewo.³ Lithuania was incorporated into the Kingdom of Poland under several provisions. One of them constituted the obligation of Jagiełło to baptise and Christianise Lithuania, as well as the promise to incorporate the lands to the Crown. The Union had at the beginning a military character, however with passing time, the bonds between the countries got closer and closer. Many

nations being together side by side co-creating the union shed blood for the Republic of Poland over the years, as for example against the Teutonic Knights in Grunwald in 1410, the biggest battle of Europe in the 15th century.

Cooperation was extended to political, cultural, religious, and economic dimensions. The union brought the colonisation of the Lithuanian areas, trade routes extension, free flow of thoughts and ideas, etc.\(^4\) After the Union of Lublin of 1569, both countries were bound by the same law and administration. The Union of the Crown with Lithuania gave the Republic of Poland a strong military partner, whereas Lithuania was brought into the circle of Latin Christianity which prompted a dynamic development in terms of politics, culture and economy. The assumption of the Jagiellonian idea was to direct the united countries towards the Western civilisation and culture. The monarch was the holding figure, who had a title of the Grand Duke of Lithuania and the king of Poland.

Reigning of the descendants of Władysław caused that the dynasty of Jagiellonians also ruled in Hungary and in the Czech Republic, which can be considered that, de facto, the Central-Eastern Europe was in the hands of one dynasty. The times of the king Sigismund I the Old and his son, Sigismund II Augustus, brought a dynamic development of culture, thus, it were called ‘the golden age of culture’. Kraków was flourishing at that time, being a prosperous academic centre with the Jagiellonian University, where Nicolaus Copernicus among others got his education. During the Renaissance period the influence of the Western patterns was visible, mainly thanks to the queen Bona Sforza.\(^5\) The Polish language and literature developed intensively, as it got a new meaning thanks to creative output of Jan Kochanowski.\(^6\)

In the 16th century, when Europe faced numerous crises and wars, the state of the Jagiellonians seemed to be the oasis of peace. In the West it was the time of fighting between the supporters of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. However, there was order in Poland, which was ensured by religious tolerance in multicultural and multi-ethnic state

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of the Jagiellonians. A peculiar melting pot of nations guaranteed peace for dissidents from different parts of Europe, whereas tolerance in multi-denominational country encouraged people from different religions and beliefs. The inhabitants of the Republic of Poland valued more the rights granted to them and solidarity rather than religion. They also enjoyed religious tolerance – for instance, disputes were carried out between followers of different religions, whereas there was the inquisition in Spain.

The act of Warsaw Confederation issued in 1573 was a visible act of tolerance, creating from the Republic of Poland the country of not two, but many nations. The Dutch, Jews, the Tatars, the Armenians, the Scots, Lithuanians, the Roma, Italians used to live within its borders – the followers of different religions – Catholicism, Calvinism, Judaism or Islam. The Uniates, the Mennonites or the Polish Brethren called the Arians were among them. When taking into account such a large diversity, what mattered most were benefits and talents, which the visitors could provide.

Noticeable drop of tolerance took place in the 17th and 18th century. The main religion was Catholicism, therefore, its followers wanted to strengthen its highest position. Apart from a person of a king, who had to be a Catholic, this religion was permanently inscribed to the Constitution. The Jesuit Order had great influence on its domination, which indirectly led to any tumults on religious grounds, as well as expelled the Arians, whose policy of abolishing feudalism and granting freedom to peasants contradicted the trend, which was present in Europe at that time.

In the 17th century the Sarmatian myth was developing intensively, according to which the Poles came from the legendary race of Sarmatians. Their routs were also searched for in Lithuania. Simultaneously, polonization of Lithuanians ran smoothly, despite their sense of own historical identity.

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8 Ibid. M. Markiewicz, Historia Polski…, p. 132.
9 The Armenians together with the Jews used to have earlier privileges guaranteed to them by the king Casimir the Great (pol. Kazimierz Wielki).
10 A. Suska, ‘Rzeczpospolita…’.
It was even planned to create a new province, the so-called New Poland, from the Lithuanian part.\textsuperscript{12}

More tense relations were between Poles and Ruthenians at that time. The Ukrainians demanded better treatment, the peasants complained about poverty and domination of the Polish families in Ukraine. The orthodox religion, although tolerated, started to be treated as inferior. Poland, as a catholic country, had to take into account popes’ orders. Bad situation led to many Cossack risings\textsuperscript{13} and finally the Great War with Ukrainians in the mid-17\textsuperscript{th} century. A partial agreement was reached in Hadziacz, where the Polish – Lithuanian – Ruthenian (Three-Nation) Commonwealth was proclaimed.\textsuperscript{14} A great conflict was ended by the Truce of Andrusovo, which divided Ukraine between Russia and Poland.

Later, when long decades passed, the partitions of the Republic of Poland (which started in the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century) reminded the Jagiellonian idea to the Poles. The elites surrounded at the duke Adam Józef Czartoryski planned to abolishing the diktat of the partitioners, most of all, Russia. The creative output of artists and writers at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was filled with references to the heritage of the Jagiellonians. Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz published \textit{Songs} (pol. \Śpiewy), in which he expressed his high approval for the Jagiellonian times, however Jan Matejko created the paintings ‘The Prussian Homage’ and ‘Lublin Union’, which were to remind Poles about the golden age times.\textsuperscript{15}

After November (1830–1831) and January Uprisings (1863–1864) repressions intensified towards Poles and nationalist tendencies were activated in Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine at the same time.\textsuperscript{16} Whereas strict Germanization policy directed against the Polish nation caused to take the fight for national identity by making the peasants aware about Polish heritage and history.\textsuperscript{17} The Jagiellonian idea was once again recalled and also the Piast idea, which was competitive to the previous one. It was supported by historians, inter alia, Michał Bobrzyński and Józef Szujski.

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\textsuperscript{12} M. Markiewicz, \textit{Historia Polski…}, p. 375.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 496.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 539.
\textsuperscript{17} A. Chwalba, \textit{Historia Polski…}, p. 155.
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The camp of Józef Piłsudski also referred to the Jagiellonian idea. He wanted to create anti-Russian coalition together with Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. His vision of the country ‘from the sea to the sea’ was to be based on the federation modelled on the Jagiellonian one. According to Piłsudski’s adherents this federation would correspond to the old idea modified by the current geopolitical situation, creating a new neo-Jagiellonian idea. They thought that Lithuania was not able to exist independently, whereas Belarus was a country susceptible to every kind of assimilation. The federation was to be a union of countries, not nationalities. The idea of intermarium met with resistance of the countries, which were to compose the federation.

Actually at the beginning of the 20th century, in which not only the Polish elites aimed to create national states, the Jagiellonian idea seemed anachronistic. Apart of it Poland was too weak as a country to give the concept more attractive look. Piłsudski’s proposition was not accepted in Ukraine, also due to an anti-Polish approach present in Lithuania.

The year 1939 stopped attempts of restoration of the Jagiellonian heritage. The outbreak of World War II and the new geopolitical system, which was created after its end caused that Poland became a dependent country, closed behind the iron curtain. Russian domination and imperialism won.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (USSR) there were some possibilities to return to the Jagiellonian policy, however the eastern neighbours of Poland showed no interest, after obtaining greater or smaller political subjectivity.

Contemporary perception of the Jagiellonian idea is still popular in some circles, as it corresponds to the glory days of the Republic of Poland. However, it is not an exceptional phenomenon or especially typical for Poland. Similar opinions are expressed by national environments from the other countries, e.g. from Hungary and Serbia, where the slogans of restoring Greater Hungary or Greater Serbia are still re-

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18 Ibid., p. 29.
The supporters of the Jagiellonian idea in Poland expect that politicians will refer to traditions of the Jagiellonians. The Jagiellonians, in opposition to the Piasts, built a strong country in the Central – Eastern Europe, without taking into consideration strong bonds with the West. We can also see analogies to the concept of creating federation of countries initiated by Józef Piłsudski and being opposite to the concept of an ethnically coherent country. Experts and promoters of the Jagiellonian idea see similarity in the politics of Kaczyński brothers, who were trying to support the Eastern countries in democratisation and political changes.

Groups of national environments consider behaviours of politicians from less conservative parties, including Donald Tusk, who devoted himself to building new relationships with the West, in particular, with Germany, as a manifestation of the Piast model. Therefore, we can talk about bipolarity of the Polish political thought, based on relation with the West and the European Union on the one side and the East of Europe on the other side. Each of the chosen policies has advantages and drawbacks.

The Jagiellonian model is a good initiative, in the same way as it was a good idea to organise the energy summit in Kraków in 2007, where, apart from the president of Poland, the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Lithuania, and Ukraine took part in this event. This meeting resembled the idea of close cooperation of Poland with the Eastern countries, in the same way as it was when the Jagiellonians used to reign the country.

Referring to the possibility of applying the Jagiellonian idea nowadays, we should go back to the 18th century, when the Jagiellonian idea collapsed and the country went under pressure from Moscow. One of many reasons might be that the idea was not enough updated and adjusted to the political circumstances of that time. The restoration of the Jagiellonian idea at the beginning of the 21st century would be possible and could constitute not only an alternative but rather a supplement to other political and cultural entities. It is possible but under some conditions. The countries included in this organism would access their membership on voluntary basis and agreements. However, such situation is currently (2017) disputable.

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21 Ibid.
The events and political and cultural results of the World War II, as well nowadays fully formed national states, in my opinion, make the concept of the union with a definite leader less possible. Many ethnic and national minorities having lived on the Jagiellonian territories in the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were united under the crown by historical bonds and also trade networks. However, this situation has dramatically changed nowadays.

The Jagiellonian idea has its important advantages and ambitious assumptions. It taught cohabitation and respect for diversity, integration base on cooperation of any parties. If during migrations, which took place in Europe of that time, different groups of interests could reach agreement, why shouldn’t it be possible today? Clearly, some people say that despite coexistence of many nations or ethnic groups on one territory, there were many feuds, however, people have managed to coexist for many years and many disputes were exacerbated by external factors or ideologies present in Europe. The current wave of emigration, which reached the Western Europe, is similar in its extent. Here representatives of different religions and also these, who want to earn money are seeking asylum in the old continent. The Jagiellonian idea with the objectives of coexistence and cooperation could help to make people and politicians aware about the possibility of dialogue and cooperation between people. However, huge impact of negative emotions is brought by terrorist attacks, hindering cooperation and closing societies to this, which is unknown.

When looking from contemporary perspective, we can evaluate the Jagiellonian idea as an ambitious plan, being implemented over several hundred years, which, however, was not continuously adapted to the changing dynamics of the region (wars, border conflicts, economic interdependencies). The idea of joining the Crown with Lithuania was the concept of the men from Kraków in the 14th century and the dynasty, which reigned at that time and wanted to extend the borders of the country by treaties, marriages, etc. However, there was something more in the country created by them, namely the idea of maintaining an union based on mutual respect, tolerance and freedom. The freedom gradually extended, strengthened by rights and privileges led to increasing lawlessness of the gentry and resulted finally in the collapse of the Republic of Poland.

In contemporary times, the inspiration from the Jagiellonian idea
such as tolerance, mutual respect and collaboration could serve to maintain good relationships with Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus as partners, but also partners from the West. The Jagiellonian idea, although it is highly commendable, contains also some anachronic elements. Thus, to make the concept a useful model we should adjust it to the current geopolitical and cultural situation. For instance, as regards the issues of cultural tolerance, the Jagiellonian idea provides clear solutions and can set an example in Europe and in the world. It is particularly significant now at the time of mass migrations, especially the immigrant from the Middle East, who come to Europe. Multiethnic and multinational country of the Jagiellonians proved that it was possible to create a coherent organism, in which the interests and the rights of each person were respected.
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