It was one of the Polish szlachta’s greatest successes that by 1569, in the Union of Lublin, the king accepted demands to extend Polish liberties to the nobilities of other provinces and parts of the Jagiellonian inheritance: Royal Prussia, Livonia and the Lithuanian lands. This formed the basis for a commonwealth—not a mere monarchy based on personal loyalty to the person of the king, but a polis which attracted loyalty due to the legal constitution that gave it a distinct identity. Functional links between a centre and its peripheries are usually built on complex and tension-ridden relations, particularly in a commonwealth defined in terms of decentralisation and local decision-making processes. Traditional historiography has interpreted Poland–Lithuania’s decentralisation in a negative light to explain the Commonwealth’s decline and demise in the eighteenth century, owing to the lack of centralisation, modernisation and royal leadership. It has assigned an exceptionalism to Poland–Lithuania in the concert of the European powers which allegedly followed a more successful path to absolute government and dynastic expansionism by breaking peripheral and regional resistance against the central dictate. This picture has come under increasing criticism. Robert Frost, for example, has asked in his study of the Wasa kings, why, if decentralisation processes devalued the monarchy rapidly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was “the perception of the power of the crown…so deep-rooted?”

Following the crucial distinction between monarchists—a small minority who wanted a considerable boost to royal power and even supported hereditary monarchy—and regalists (nobles who supported the monarch’s policies only as far as they did not contradict or diminish the constitutional framework

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of the Commonwealth and its local decision-making processes), Frost shows how respect for the monarchy remained strong among the majority of the nobility at least until the abdication of Jan Kazimierz in 1668. Support for the hypothesis that a decentralised system such as the Commonwealth could also produce support for the monarchic centre, might be gained from a closer analysis of the political activity of the nobility on a provincial level, and the degree of their engagement in the process of active citizenship connecting and balancing individual, regional and state-wide interests in their relationship to the crown.

Crucial for this analysis is an appreciation of the variety and multiplicity of the Commonwealth’s composite parts within a union of provinces and dominions. For modern national or nationalist historiography, whose shadows until quite recently many historians have found so difficult to shake off, the history of unions has always been problematic. This is particularly true for parliamentary or political unions, which created multinational states and commonwealths whose legitimacy was based on more than mere conquest or dynastic marriage. Apart from the Anglo–Scottish parliamentary union, which celebrated its tercentenary in 2007, only the Polish–Lithuanian union has demonstrated comparable longevity. Here, a dynastic union under the Jagiellonians (from 1385) was converted into a parliamentary union in 1569 and lasted to the third partition of 1795. Although the constitution of 3 May 1791 was silent on the union, the “guarantee of the two nations” of October 1791, according to newer interpretations, did not weaken but strengthened Lithuanian self-government in the union. Owing to the need to redefine Polish–Lithuanian relations in post-communist Central Europe, a growing historiography on the union between the kingdom of Poland and the grand duchy of Lithuania has understandably focused on the bilateral aspects of such hard-fought-for compromises between the two nations.

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4 Niendorf, Das Großfürstentum Litauen, 45, with a brief overview of the latest historiography. Reinvestigation of the Poland’s relationship to another periphery—Livonia—has