The importance of cultural heritage of the First Commonwealth for the integration between Central and Eastern Europe and the West

Abstract

The choice of the topic of the dissertation shows the author’s fascination with the First Commonwealth and its role as a place of meeting of the cultures of the East and the West and the phenomenon of mutual borderline arts’ infiltration, whose origins come partly from Latin culture and Western – Catholic plus Greek - Slavic and Eastern – Orthodox. A similar phenomenon was so evident only on the Iberian peninsula and on the area of eastern Christianity defeated by the Ottoman Empire.

The thesis is strongly connected with the mainstream of ‘Jagiellonian idea’ understood as the feeling of community of the nations’ fate, the nations which were under the reign of Jagiellons, the idea which formed the area of Central and Eastern Europe between the Eastern and Western Europe. The author was inspired by the following quotation of Pope John Paul’s II speech: ‘from Lubelska Union to European Union’. This statement is a pertinent metaphor, emphasizing the fact that Central and Eastern Europe has its own separate history which can be compared with the success of integration process in Western Europe in the XX century which led to the EU foundation. However the First Commonwealth faced the problems which appeared in Europe a few hundreds years earlier: multiculturalism, religious diversity, tolerance and European identity formation, but most of all the identity of a nation consisting of many ethnic groups.

The aim of the dissertation is an attempt to define the phenomenon of the First Commonwealth and to diagnose the importance of its cultural heritage influence on the identity of the nations of the former country, and also to determine the condition of current integration process of its former territories with the West. The research problem was based on an assumption that the Commonwealth disappearing from the political stage of Europe has left intriguing heritage, whose traces can now be found in a few countries founded on its former territories.

The field of research was limited to the part of Central and Eastern Europe which in the past formed the area of a former country.

The hypothesis presumes that the cultural heritage of the First Commonwealth was one of the crucial factors which had an influence on the choice of the direction
of the integration with the West, made by a few nations of this part of Europe. Without the phenomenon of the Commonwealth, it would not have been possible to form the area in Central and Eastern Europe which was culturally independent from Russia. The integration processes which took place in the former country were on a greater scale and on a much deeper level than the integration processes in today’s Europe.

The foundation of the Commonwealth of Two Nations was one of the most interesting and unusually culturally fertile meetings of the two worlds of eastern and western tradition. The foundation of the country was religious tolerance, multiculturalism, ethnic diversity and the code of noble democracy contrary to reigning in Europe absolutism. What was specific for the country was its unity of two different nations which had different law systems, diversity of languages and mixture of cultures. The First Commonwealth, being the part of Western-Christian civilisation, created for hundreds of years the area of tradition, language and coexistence of various religions – its fall stopped this continuity though it failed to destroy it. The expansion of the Polish-Lithuanian country to the east led to the clash of two imperialistic powers – the Commonwealth and Russia. The victory of Russian imperialism and culture has determined geopolitical situation of Central and Eastern Europe up to present times.

The idea of close cooperation of its nations seems to be still valid at the turn of the XX and XXI century but it has currently lost its force of attraction, giving its way to a much more appealing idea of European integration.

In the light of the conducted research the assessment of stated thesis is not unambiguous. It is difficult to precisely specify to what extent the Commonwealth heritage influenced the Baltic countries, Belarus or Ukraine. However, it seems that just the presence of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the EU and NATO is the proof of appreciating by these countries European values which were one of the foundation of the existence of the First Commonwealth whose undeniable contribution to the formation of European identity in this part of continent is not to be underestimated.