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Virtues and institutions as the foundations of a *res publica* in Wawrzyniec Goślicki and Gasparo Contarini

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this article is to examine and compare two republican approaches to politics and *res publica* presented in the sixteenth century by Wawrzyniec Grzymala Goślicki and Gasparo Contarini.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: Both authors define the core elements of a republican *scientia civilis* but emphasize different aspects as being of primary importance for a well-ordered *civitas libera*. Goślicki saw the best safeguards of a free and well-ordered commonwealth in the character and virtues of the rulers and citizens, whereas Contarini believed that such safeguards could only be found in a good legal and institutional structure that kept corruption at bay. The article follows the contextual method typical for intellectual history to present different arguments that Contarini and Goślicki formulated in their understanding of *scientia civilis* and the best commonwealth looking at both the context of their works and their arguments.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: After introducing the context for the two works the next two parts focus on Goslicki's and then Contarini's vision of *scientia civilis* and the most effective ways to keep corruption and decay at bay followed by comparison and conclusion.

RESEARCH RESULTS: A comparison of these two visions should shed some light on the later development of both polities and republicanism in modern Europe more generally which largely followed Contarini and not Goślicki. It

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can also provide an important lesson for our own understanding of politics and political philosophy that should underpin a political order to make it resilient to corruption and backsliding.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Examining these two authors and their prominent works helps better situate political discourses in the two countries that explain different trajectories of their constitutions and political developments, and for us today provide an interesting lesson on how we should understand politics and *respublica*.

KEYWORDS: **WAWRZYNIEC GOSLICIUS (GOSLICIUS), GASPARO
CONTARINI, RES PUBLICA, POLAND-LITHUANIA, VENICE**

INTRODUCTION

Venice was for modern Europe, notably for England and the United Provinces of the Netherlands as well as for the American Founders, a model of stability and a lesson in constitutionalism and political practice. It was admired in Poland, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Poles, however, saw republican Venice not as a model to follow, but as another example of a well-ordered *res publica* that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was supposed to embody in a similar manner. The two polities differed significantly in terms of their size, climate, the composition of their populations, economy and largely in terms of their political structures. Yet they also shared the aspiration to preserve the republican order of a *civitas libera* and their mixed constitutions. Venice was an aristocratic republic whereas Poland-Lithuania gradually shifted towards a “monarchical republic” with a strong role for the nobility and its representation within the parliamentary system. The deliberative and legislative functions of the Venetian government were built into the institutional machinery of election and rule while in the Polish context they much depended upon political will and compromise of the three estates of the Sejm: the king, the Senate and the House of Envoys (*izba poselska*). In what follows, two different accounts of a *res publica* presented in the sixteenth century by Gasparo Contarini’s and Wawrzyniec Goślicki (Goslicius) chief political works will be discussed and compared in view of presenting some of the key differences in their understanding

of the foundations of a political order: one elevating virtues and character of citizens and rulers, the other praising institutions and formal mechanisms as the best barrier to corruption. A comparison of these two visions should shed some light on the later development of both polities and republicanism in modern Europe more generally which largely followed Contarini and not Goslicius.

THE CONTEXT AND METHOD

The sixteenth century marks the height of Renaissance humanism and republicanism which were deeply influenced by the classical heritage of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. Contarini and Goslicius were prominent authors of that period representing two different and yet to some degree similar political contexts: the Commonwealth of Venice and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*). The two polities were described in the sixteenth century as embodying a model of a *res publica* (or commonwealth), though unlike Venice *Rzeczpospolita* was a hereditary monarchy and in 1572 it became an elective monarchy based upon the principle of *electio viritim*. Similarly, in England Sir Thomas Smith (1982) used the term *Republica Anglorum* to describe the constitution of the English Commonwealth which like Poland and since 1569 Poland-Lithuania was a mixed monarchy (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, 2011; Collinson, 1987). In contrast to later periods, the term *res publica* was used by these authors to depict a good political order of a mixed form and a free political community. *Res publica* was not meant to be the antithesis of a monarchy. Even in Venice, which was not a monarchy, the monarchical element of its constitution, the office of the doge, played an important role in providing balance and harmony within the mixed constitution of what could perhaps be called an aristocratic republic (Contarini, 1599). The term *res publica* became popular in the Renaissance along with the political writings of Cicero and was understood in the Ciceronian manner (Cicero, 1999, p. 19). In both the Polish and the Italian contexts, *res publica* denoted a free, independent and self-governing political community, a *civitas libera* that guaranteed liberty in its two crucial dimensions. The first dimension of liberty concerned the very *societas civilis*, the free commonwealth that was not dependent upon

any external master but was able to follow its own will. The second dimension concerned the liberty of citizens who enjoyed personal freedom, had property and political rights, and the only bidding power they needed to respect came from the law. In other words, they had no master except the law, but they were also supposed to share a commitment to the preservation of the commonwealth and the obligation to act for the achievement of the common good (Skinner, 1990). In Venice, a top-down process of establishing liberty took place in the eighth century when the very foundations of the Republic were established. In Poland, on the other hand, a bottom-up process secured civic and political liberties to the nobility and culminated in the second half of the sixteenth century with the Henrician Articles and the principle of elective monarchy (Rau et al., 2016). Consequently, while the Polish institutional structure of a mixed constitution was seen as successful by the upper strata of society because it provided a foundation for the liberty of the citizens, the Venetian institutional structure was seen as successful because of its endurance and the safeguards that it provided for the republic against corruption and decline. Both polities turned firmly against absolutism and favored a mixed government with strong foundations for civic liberty. Both commonwealths eventually collapsed but they enjoyed free institutions much longer (especially Venice) than any other early modern state and at the same time avoided such dramatic events as civil war, regicide and religious wars.

By the end of the sixteenth century a number of political treatises advocating aristocratic republicanism were translated into English including Francesco Patrizi's *A Morale Methode* (1576), Valerius' *The Casket of Jewels* (1571), Laurentius Grimalius Goslicius' *The Counsellor* (1598) and Gasparo Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599), in order to strengthen the reception of republican ideas in England, and especially the idea of citizens' participation in the law-making process (Peltonen, 2002). These works shared republican concepts that gained prominence in Florence, Venice and Poland in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and found advocates among English authors by the end of the sixteenth century. Neither Polish nor English authors, however, argued against monarchy. They were in favour of a mixed polity, *monarchia mixta*, or, to use the term which gained currency in recent scholarship, a "monarchical republic"

(Collinson, 1987), which was to be based on the supremacy of the and aimed to preserve the liberty of its citizens.

A mixed government as presented first by Aristotle combined two types of mixture. One was a mixture of two or three types of political constitutions (for example, monarchy and aristocracy in Plato, or democracy and oligarchy in Aristotle, and subsequently monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in Polybius and Cicero) and the other was a proper mixture within human character which served to promote virtues. The second mixture is often overlooked by scholars interested in republican ideas, especially those who exclude Aristotle as having a major contribution to what became known in recent scholarship as the classical republican tradition (see especially Pettit, 1997). This omission, however, makes it impossible to understand the work of Goslicius which was much indebted to Plato and Aristotle, and many other Polish republicans of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is no doubt that some of the Renaissance authors, for example Contarini and Francesco Guicciardini, were skeptical about human nature and did not expect that virtuous character would predominate in any political community. But they did not exclude such character and instead saw institutional arrangements as the best safeguards against corruption. This indicates that rather than focusing on the primacy of virtue and character, they advocated either a balanced, mixed constitution like the one of Venice (Contarini) or a stronger role for the monarch combined with the normative basis of the republican political order (Guicciardini, 1998). In Poland-Lithuania this was the position of Krzysztof Warszewicki (1598) and Piotr Skarga.

The common background in Renaissance humanism (Goslicius studied in Padua and Bologna for his law degree) and in the classical republican tradition, as well as the political experience of their commonwealths, which aspired to achieve *de optimo statu reipubliceae*, make Goslicius' and Contarini's works very interesting examples of an early-modern republican theory that had important practical implications. Both treatises were to serve similar educational purpose. Goslicius' *De optimo senatore* (The accomplished senator), which was written as a *speculum principium* in a way that was similar to Erasmus' *Institutio principis Christiani* (1515), and numerous other mirrors for princes, was to provide instructions for the rulers, in his case for senators, but went far beyond such a task developing the

republican political theory deeply influenced by Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. Contarini's *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum libri duo* published in 1543 was of a different kind. It presented and discussed the constitution of Venice which for several centuries had successfully provided the institutional basis of the *de optimo statu reipublice* and was admired throughout Europe. In his remarkable treatise, written chiefly during Contarini's diplomatic service in Spain and completed afterwards (Gleason, 1993) he presented a political theory of a well-balanced mixed government which due to its solid institutional structure preserved Venetian *civitas libera* for many centuries. Sixteenth century Venice was thus portrayed as a model of a perfect government that could not be found anywhere else at the time. Interestingly, sixteenth-century Poland was presented by its political writers, such as Stanisław Orzechowski and Jan Zamoyski (1563), as aspiring to be "the second Rome" in a manner similar to their Venetian contemporaries, who were promoting Venice as a "new Rome" (Bowd, 2000, p. 427). This was a clear reference to the republican, mixed form of government as the most esteemed. It is interesting, however, that although both authors addressed the same question of the very foundations of a good political order, their answers differed significantly.

In what follows I will first discuss the approach of Goslicius as influenced by ancient political theory, especially by Plato and Aristotle. This should allow for a more general conclusion on the nature of republican theorizing that became prominent in Poland during the sixteenth century. Interestingly, although Venice was taken by many Polish authors, including Goslicius, as the best contemporary example of a free, well-ordered *rzeczpospolita* (*respublica*), none of them was much preoccupied with the institutional arrangements established by the Venetian constitution. Contarini's discussion of this peculiar institutional context which will be analysed next provides something that was missing in the Polish discourse and engages in a different *scientia civilis*. A comparison of these two visions should shed some light on the later development of both polities and republicanism in modern Europe more generally which largely followed Contarini and not Goslicius.

THE PRIMACY OF VIRTUE IN GOSLICIUS' *SCIENTIA CIVILIS*

The sixteenth century witnessed an exceptional political development of the *Rzeczpospolita*, which contemporary political writers would compare to that of the Roman and Venetian republics. They were not, however, interested in either imitating some of their institutional devices or in learning from their experience. The success of *Rzeczpospolita* was supposed to be as unique as that of Rome or Venice and resulted from the wisdom of its ancestors (Orzechowski, 1972) who designed the foundations for its final shape of a *libera res publica*, a free political community concerned with the public good and based on mixed form of government (*monarchia mixta* which at the same time was *respublica mixta*).

This was the context that was addressed in Goslicius' *speculum De optimo senatore libri duo* which was published in Venice in 1568 (the second edition was published in Basel in 1593). It is remarkable that from the very outset the treatise attracted more written commentary from foreign readers than from domestic recipients, particularly in Elizabethan England (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, 2007). *De optimo senatore* was dedicated to the Polish king Sigismund Augustus and in many ways it referred to the Polish institutional and social context. Unlike Contarini interested in the real function of constitutional mechanisms, Goslicius argued that what was needed to sustain a good political order was a public philosophy (*civili scientia*), a deductive science that would focus on the very foundations of the polity and the guidance that it needed was derived from reason and the works of the greatest ancient philosophers. The purpose of this science was practical. Dedicating his book to king Sigismund Augustus, Goslicius expected that his work had an important practical dimension for it not only sought knowledge about *respublica* but was supposed to serve the commonwealth (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, 2007). The starting point of his reflection is a conviction that the wisdom that is needed in a *respublica* above all else comes from the right reason, which is like a God on earth (Goslicius, 1568). Thus, his *scientia civilis*, which we could translate as "public philosophy" or "civic education" seeks knowledge that would promote the good of the public and thus would go beyond contemplation of pure nature of things. Goslicius shared the belief

common in the sixteenth century that philosophy which did not serve the commonwealth was of little use. His aim was to establish the principles of a *scientia civilis* which, like in Aristotle, was teleological, and concerned primarily with the *telos* of the political community. Thus, Goslicius argued that one had to determine first what was “the best life for men” and only then “the best form of government could be found” (Goslicki, 1733, p. 22). At each stage of his inquiry, he praises virtue as the highest principle for guiding action. His main conviction was that the character and well-being of a *respublica* depended on the character (virtue) of its citizens, and if there is no respect for virtue there can be no respect for the law whose source is the right reason. The normative order of a commonwealth – the law guided by reason – could not function well without supportive character traits among citizens; that is, without virtue. Goslicius, like Aristotle, praised mixed character seeking in humans, and not in impersonal rules or mechanisms, the real foundation of the commonwealth. True wisdom was to be attained by experience and virtue referred to the right type of action. What was to bind the individual and the community were, among other things, shared moral values – virtues supported by customs and the law: “For in the private happiness of the subjects consists the general and public happiness of the commonwealth” (Goslicius, 1733, p. 27). The ethical dimension of politics was of primary importance here as it was in Aristotle and Cicero. Goslicius, however, took a radical view that would dominate Polish republican discourse for many decades to come, emphasizing the quality of character in rulers and the ruled and expecting that the rulers or the guardians such as senators can only be guardians if they follow the path of the right reason, or, in other words, take responsibility for the common good (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, 2012; Wagner-Rundell, 2008). There could be no virtue without the guidance of the right reason (Goslicki, 1733, pp. 7–8). Civic virtue required knowledge (in the Platonic sense) to promote the common good. Similarly to Seneca, Goslicius argued that the best life was a combination of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, both guided by virtue. Although he had no doubt that the law was the real soul of *respublica* (*Lex anima reipublicae*), he saw it through the lens of the right reason that required virtuous conduct of citizens for the preservation of law and order. Without virtuous magistrates the commonwealth could not achieve its goal. Following Plato’s analogy presented in the

fourth book of *The Republic*, Goslicius argued that a commonwealth should possess four virtues: wisdom, courage, moderation and justice – similar to that of a good character of each man (Goslicki, 1733, p. 74). Thus, the moral constitution of a republic was of primary importance because it guaranteed the good life of citizens. Interestingly, as a future bishop Goslicius did not refer much to Christian ethics but was very much influenced by the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical tradition, which was typical for the Renaissance thought, building a bridge not with the scholastic, but with ancient philosophy.

In practice, virtue meant the right type of action and its antithesis was corruption (Bruni, 1921; Patrizi, 1585; Rinuncini, 1953). Only in some forms of government virtue could play its formative role:

Monarchies and aristocracies are indeed the only forms of government in which the greatest regard is paid to virtue in all public sections, as the surest guide to happiness and the great promoter of the good and welfare of all communities and societies of men (Goslicki, 1733, pp. 133–134).

The account of different types of government presented in *Optimo senatore* served the same purpose as in Aristotle's *Politics* or Cicero's *De Re Publica* which was to identify the best form of a polity – real and ideal at the same time. Goslicius had no doubt that democracy could not be such a form:

For since liberty is the only great end and design of this form of government in which all things are managed and directed at the will and pleasure of the multitude, and subject to their violent and uncertain humours; for these reasons, there is in such a state very little regard to virtue and right reason (Goslicki, 1733, p. 29).

The condition, the character of a *respublica* depended primarily on the character of citizens, their manners, customs and above all virtues:

This form then, and constitution of a republic, we do readily prefer to all others, which naturally produces the best and most vertuous subjects; and wherein the three orders of King, Senate and People, have all the power committed entirely to their care (Goslicki, 1733, p. 35).

On this reading, political virtue serves the public good and the maintenance of public liberty whereas opinion and numbers which govern in democracy are above any true and unwavering standard of political action. If good government is restrained by good laws these have to be established in accordance with the strict rules of justice and good policy; this required *recta ratio*, the right judgment. Goslicius' starting point seems the normative foundation of a *respublica* and even when it is mixed with a description of the real, such as the Polish or Venetian constitution, it is the ideal that serves the purpose of putting the foundations to his *scientia civile*. This mode of thinking is evident in Goslicius' (1733, p. 39) conclusion that the best government is one in which the people are the happiest, and since virtue is the cause and foundation of all happiness, it must necessarily follow that the best government is the one in which the highest place is reserved for the most virtuous. Virtue needed to be proved in the public life and *De optimo senatore* can be read as a treatise on this topic.

In practical terms, the mixed constitution was the best way to achieve harmony and "political concord" which resulted from agreement between the upper, the middle and lower orders of mankind. Goslicius preferred mixed *respublica* as the form which "naturally produces the best and the most virtuous subjects" (Goslicki, 1733, p. 25). He located virtue in the Senate and the king but found it also in the citizenry composed of those who possessed political rights. Mixed government was seen in Poland as a source of unity following Cicero's argument that *res publica* does not exclude anyone. This unity could not be achieved without some supreme authority. The central theme of *De optimo senatore*, especially in its second part, is the examination of the role and character of senators presented in the manner of a *speculum*, an ideal vision which was supposed to have an educational function (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, 2009). Goslicius had no doubt that the aristocratic element of the mixed constitution which is composed of the most virtuous citizens is the best guardian of the unity and well-being of the whole. His vision of the *respublica mixta* regards the aristocratic senatorial element as carrying the greatest weight politically and it responds to contemporary Polish realities. Additionally, Goslicius supported an elective monarchy arguing that the king should be endowed with the right to rule thanks to his royal virtues and the appropriate qualifications and only such a king

could be regarded as the divinely appointed accomplisher of God's will. Giving the example of Romulus – an elected king – Goslicius presented an outright denunciation of hereditary monarchy as a tyranny arguing that the election of the king is typical for freest peoples and those who hate tyranny (Goslicki, 1733, p. 61).

The very conception of a *respublica* focuses on the *telos* of a political community as evident in Aristotle and Cicero. The most important aspect of these considerations in Goslicius is his conviction that *respublica* has an ethical goal and is based on moral foundations, on the fulfillment of the requirements of virtue. This last qualification corresponds with both the political sphere (public virtue) and with the private sphere (virtuous life) that cannot be entirely separated – a citizen is required to perform civic virtue, but that is possible only if he is already a virtuous person. Contarini, as will become clear in the next section, was more skeptical about this suggestion, arguing that it was almost impossible to secure the highest offices in a polity to the most virtuous and thus, while praising senate, he also stressed the importance of formal rules that would keep corruption at bay.

For Polish political writers in the sixteenth century, the Commonwealth of Venice was the key point of reference along with the Roman Republic. They saw in the Polish constitutional arrangements and the way the political structure functioned including the sphere of liberty under the law a clear resemblance to the other two free commonwealths. Goslicius must have been familiar with Contarini's approach and the way the Venetian constitution functioned. However, his philosophical perspective (like that of other Polish republican writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) was different and more radical. In *De optimo senatore*, he praises Venice in remarkable words:

It was the particular glory of the Lacedemonians that they remained without any alteration in their manners and customs, in their laws and constitutions, or in the form of their government, for seven hundred years together; and a much greater share of the same glory justly belongs to the Commonwealth of Venice which commonwealth has for a thousand years remained unaltered and unshaken, and without any visible change in its constitution (Goslicki, 1733, pp. 33–34).

The passage can be read as a statement of his political creed,

a belief and trust in the permanence and excellence of the Venetian constitution, and also the conviction that Venice should serve as the model for Poland to emulate, or indeed the model Poland was already emulating (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, 2009, p. 104).

In fact, he might have been convinced that Venice and Poland-Lithuania had indeed achieved a stable and lasting political order, as both were mixed republics, although based on slightly different principles. Like Contarini, Goslicius finds the very foundation of Polish laws, customs and liberty in the virtues of the predecessors – “the old Poles”: “Their first and greatest wisdom was to make virtue their sole guide” (Goslicki, 1733, p. 114). His *scientia civilis* follows this conviction much further than Contarini. Focusing on the ethical dimension of politics he seems to be treating the institutional dimension as of secondary importance, as if assuming that institutions are only a mechanism that can be modified and improved as long as the very essence of the republican order is intact, and as long as they serve this very essence.

The centrality of virtue in Goslicius’ treatise is evident at all levels of reflection that he presents. It is seen as the most desirable foundation of a good political order and built into the structure of a mixed government where the middle order, that of senators, is expected to be always guided by virtue in all political reasoning and decision-making. It is hard to determine how realistic this account could be. Frequent reference to Plato would suggest that Goslicius is presenting a philosophy of government which is purely normative and thus prescriptive; the frequent mentions, however, of the Polish constitution and especially of the authority of the monarch and that of the senate indicates that his account is also a reflection upon the existing form of government which exceeds other forms in virtue and prudence that arises from the chief virtue which is wisdom. Reference to Cicero’s lost *De res publica* and his phrase *moderatoris rei publicae*, the phrase found already in Stanisław Zaborowski (1507), also suggests the practical underpinning of his work. Goslicius does not present a political program, but a *speculum*, a mirror for those who are naturally destined to be virtuous and through their wisdom and the recognition of the common good can unite the whole political community (Stępkowski, 2009). The mirror he created

was designed to have a two-way effect: the presentation and promotion of Poland-Lithuania to the international reading public, and of the Italian humanist intellectual and political culture to his compatriots,

and his contribution to political literature written in the *speculum* mode “was a specific Polishisation of the image of the Ideal Senator” (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, 2009, p. 128).

GASPARO CONTARINI AND THE “MECHANIZATION OF VIRTUE”

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the miracle of Venice and its stable constitution became subject of great interest in the rest of Italy and later in Europe, notably in Poland-Lithuania and England. Venetian historiographies further reinforced the myth of Venice (Skinner, 2002). The Venetian Republic was praised by Henry of Rimini (1472) at around 1300 as the best embodiment of a mixed government, and the myth was articulated by Pier Paolo Vergerio in his *De Republica Veneta* (ca.1400) in which he saw civic greatness combined with the preservation of peace as of central importance for Venice’s success (Grubb, 1986; Martin, 1993; Gaeta, 1961). In 1500, Domenico Morosini followed this with his *De bene instituta Republica* and in 1520s Gasparo Contarini composed his masterpiece *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum*, published posthumously in 1543. Contarini’s family was prominent in the public life of Venice for several centuries and its ancestry went back to the founding moment of the Venetian republic in the eight century (Gleason, 1993). Unlike the previous works on Venice, Contarini’s treatise “had a traceable impact in many countries” (Pocock, 1975, p. 320). To become “the great source that fed republican thought in monarchical centuries” (Gilbert, 1967, p. 184). Contarini portrayed the Republic of Venice as unique among Italian city states and this picture became of special importance at the time when monarchical and absolute rulers started to dominate Europe. Three of his ancestors had been elected to the office of Doge and five other members of his family held this position after his death. He studied at the University of Padua to

begin his service to the Venetian Republic in 1518 as a member of the Great Council, and at some point a member of the Council of Ten, the special executive council for secret affairs and state security. His main occupation, however, was within the diplomatic service (Gleason, 1993). Contarini was also a theologian and a highly successful prince of the church who was made cardinal in 1535 by Pope Paul III. Interestingly, his views on Venice and politics presented in *De magistratibus* were secular and similar to the views of the future bishop Laurentius Goslicius. Closely involved in public affairs of his Serenissima Venezia, he had an ideal background and position to compose a political work of great importance for his contemporaries in Venice and in Europe, and for future generations of republican authors who would find in it an invaluable source of political knowledge.

Venice portrayed by Contarini was a free commonwealth, a *civitas* that was born free and sovereign and remained such due to the true harmony of its well-designed mixed form of government, its preoccupation with liberty, justice, virtue and wisdom in public life. Similar statement can be found in Polish republican treatises of the sixteenth century (Opaliński, 2002; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2020), although, especially in the work of Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, they also encouraged constant civic vigilance and improvement of both the laws and the mores so that corruption could be kept at bay.

Contarini's work addresses the most important problem in republican political theory which Goslicius and others were also preoccupied with: how it may be possible to construct and maintain constitutional arrangements of a well-functioning republican order and promote a credible commitment to them, when the body politic itself is constituted by imperfect and self-centered human beings. It portrays the problem of collective human action based on a long-lasting experience of the Venetian Republic and draws conclusions for future generations. Contarini learnt from the Venetian constitution and Venetian history that the real source of a *libera respublica* was in the law, in those sacred laws established by Venice's fathers and seen as the only source (except God), higher than man himself, of a lasting political order. Man's fallibility could not be overcome, but it could be neutralized or constrained by a higher order of rules translated into an institutional framework that shapes political action.

De magistratibus et Republica Venetorum presents the complex institutional structure of the Venetian republic and situates Venetian experience in a historical and philosophical context, but above all it reveals how institutional and legal arrangements could sustain a thriving republic allowing for true citizenship in the Aristotelian sense of ruling and being ruled in turn and securing a credible and lasting commitment to the principles of the political community. This is the most important aspect of Contarini's work for our analysis. The government of law is always superior to the rule of man; this statement is perhaps the best justification for a mixed polity, whether it is a mixed monarchy or a mixed aristocracy. Both Contarini and Goslicius praised the law as a unifying principle of a *respublica*, but they also understood that civic unity required some supreme authority, a monarch or a Doge whose was to give special care to the common good, its preservation and the perfection of civil agreement to direct everything with "moderation and practical wisdom" (Contarini, 1599, p. 40). The same topic was addressed in 1459 by Poggio Bracciolini's *Laudem Rei Publicae Venetorum* in which he observed that the key to Venice's achievement was the fact that the city was ruled by many ancient and noble families, so that public offices were entrusted only to persons of outstanding capacities within the ranks of the nobility. In such a system no role was prescribed to the body of the people, be it the entire nobility like in the Polish case where the principle of equality, birth alone, was decisive when it came to political rights, including the right to participate in legislation. With such measures Venice could avoid internal discord and dissension. In Goslicius, it was political virtue located in both the monarch and the senate that served the public good and the maintenance of civil liberty.

Contarini's political theory emerged along his analysis and praise of the Venetian constitution. His method was empirical, and similar to that of Aristotle's presented, for example, in his *Constitution of Athens*, but his conclusions were general and prescriptive, and as such they were meant to contribute to contemporary European political ideas and understanding (Pullan, 1973; Gilbert, 1968). The exposition of the principles upon which the Venetian government was based also served a domestic purpose, as it was a lesson for contemporaries on the key constitutional principles that needed to be preserved also in the future.

Venice as a “self-conscious republic of the Renaissance type” (Bouwsmma, 1968) managed to avoid political crisis which troubled republican Florence at the time. This was due not only to historical circumstances, but above all due to its harmonies and well-established constitution. In comparison with the Polish fundamental laws that Goslicius referred to, the Venetian constitution came into being much earlier and was crafted by the wisdom of its great ancestors. While the Polish political order was still in the making around 1570s, especially when it came to the rules of succession, the Venetians could rely on an institutional structure that had provided stability and political concord for a few centuries. The guardians of the political order in both commonwealths were the nobles – the mind and the soul of the state whose created social order reflected the hierarchical cosmic order. The fundamental role of the aristocracy in Venice was well depicted in the humanist literature and continued to provide a starting point of the political analysis found in Contarini. Although Venice was perceived as an aristocratic republic in which the nobility governed, the state relied on the consent of the governed, and their trust in the guardians of the commonwealth (Gleason, 1993). The mixed system of government required moderation which the nobility was able to provide (Contarini, 1599, p. 19). This moderation which Aristotle portrayed as the main virtue of the middle class in a mixed polity, in the Polish context was located in virtuous character whereas in Venice it was translated into a wider legal-institutional structure which would secure moderation when the moral character was likely to fail. Civic concord in Venice found its source not only in the mixed government, but also in the wisdom of the nobility without which moderation could not be attained. It was, however, the institutional order embedded in wise laws that were established by the founders of the Republic that provided not only for a special role of the nobility and their enjoyment of liberty, but above all for a just, stable and long-lasting commonwealth. In this process, wisdom and other key virtues of the ancestors of Venice guided them in such a way that they could understand the requirements of justice and turn them into the very foundation of the new political order. Such an order, however, was not to rely purely on virtue – the sense of justice of those who govern, but on an institutional mechanism which would guarantee that the just order functioned even when its guardians

lacked in virtue. In other words, the Venetians benefited from the laws that eliminated passions, kept corruption at bay and led to rational decisions (Contarini, 1599). This very aspect of the Venetians' constitution, clearly understood and valued in Contarini's account, was described in recent scholarship as the "mechanization of virtue". This phrase is particularly useful when explaining the differences between Goslicius' and Contarini's positions and more broadly for a comparison of the very foundations of both commonwealths.

Like Goslicius, Contarini regarded virtue as playing an important role in a well-ordered commonwealth; it was not virtue alone, however, that secured community's well-being, but virtue built into a complex institutional structure of a mixed constitution. Virtuous conduct of various types of magistrates would not arise simply from their virtuous character but from an institutional structure that kept corruption at bay. In remarkable words, he recognizes, as it were, the foundational role of virtue which gives rise to an institutional order:

Our ancestors delighted not on vaineglorie or ambition, but had only their intensive care to the good of their country and common profit. With this then exceeding virtue of mind did our ancestors plant and settle this such a commonwealth (Contarini, 1599, p. 6).

The ancestors and founders of Venice

used such a moderation and temperature, such a mixture of all estates, that this only city retains a princely sovereignty, a government of the nobility and a popular authority, so that the forms of them all seem to be (Contarini, 1599, p. 21).

An actualization of virtue is not located in human character alone, but in human conduct which is shaped by lasting institutional principles. This process is perhaps best described in contemporary scholarship as "the mechanization of virtue". The phrase was used by Pocock (1975, p. 285) when referring to Contarini's observation that Venetians managed to construct laws that made citizens act in a virtuous manner and thus contributed to the endurance of the republican institutions and the republican spirit:

If one thought of *virtù*, as one might, as the taking of decisions directed at the public good, and if one thought of the *sala del consiglio grande* as an enormous physical device for eliminating extraneous pressures and ensuring — almost enforcing — rationality in choosing for the public good, then one thought of Venetian government in a way for which such a phrase as “the mechanization of *virtù*” though anachronistic, is not inappropriate. No less than the image of a Polybian perfection of equilibrium, the belief that the Venetians had achieved this was a potent element of the *mito da Venezia*.

That myth asserted that Venice created a wide range of regulations for decision-making which ensured both the rationality of every decision and the virtue of every decision-maker. Venetians were not “inherently more virtuous than other men, but they possess institutions which make them so” (Pocock, 1975, p. 324). The mechanization of virtue was a process of subjecting human passions to some firm principles and rules that supported and at the same time demanded moral and ethical behaviour. The virtue of the founders of Venice was translated into the laws that became “sacred” and their role was to preserve virtue and protect from corruption of any kind. It was not so much the moral character of the citizens, as Goslicius assumed, but rather the legal mechanisms – the establishment of fundamental enduring laws and legal principles – that was of key importance for the Venetian commonwealth in which sovereignty, the *summa imperii*, belonged not to men, but rather to the law (Silvano, 1993, p. 88).

In reality, the mechanization of virtue was a response to a pessimistic view of human nature which we also find in Florentine political writings of the time, especially in Machiavelli and Guicciardini. This pessimistic view was less prominent among Polish and Lithuanian political writers of the sixteenth century such as Goslicius, Frycz Modrzewski, and Andrzej Wolan (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2020). If philosophical reflection on politics is to some extent guided by historical or factual evidence, then obviously it would be difficult to disagree with the skeptical view of human nature, but philosophical reflection usually goes beyond facts and is interested in the essence of things, in the very nature of what it investigates. For the Polish political culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Goslicius’ position might not have been very practicable, but it certainly dominated political discourse and seemed to be in tune with what we would call today

the national character which was not likely to be borrowed from other nations even if they were as successful as the Venetians.

Contarini's work had a clear purpose of educating other nations in political matters. *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* remained a primary source of knowledge on how Venetians themselves understood the institutional robustness of the republic and the essence of their commonwealth. It "became the great source that fed republican thought in monarchical centuries" (Gilbert, 1967, p. 184), an inspiration for many political theorists in Italy and beyond, especially in Poland and England in accordance with Contarini's wish which he clearly expressed. In Florence Savonarola sought to remodel the Florentine polity on Venetian principles (Bowd, 2000), whereas in England James Harrington took the Venetian institutional framework of government as a model of an enduring political order free of factional politics (Wootton, 1994; Worden, 1994) and his work, inspired by Contarini, was to have a significant impact upon the American Founding Fathers, thus making Contarini at least an indirect source of influence upon American constitutionalism. For the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, however, the model of Venice served to confirm the righteousness of its own political and institutional choice that led to the establishment of a republican order that was expected to be equal in greatness to that of both Rome and Venice (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Goslicius had no doubt that it was the Commonwealth's interest and task to educate citizens, "to make all her citizens and subjects good that she herself may be so too" (Goslicki, 1733, p. 87). The goal of such education was to instill virtue. The political theory presented in *De optimo senatore* shows one of the central strands within Polish republicanism. The reliance on the virtuous character of citizens and their commitment to the public good would remain one of the major aspects of the republican discourse in the seventeenth century, at the time when English and Dutch republicans would turn against monarchy to look for the best institutional solutions to protect liberty of citizens and the rule of law. The language of virtue which dominated

political discourse in Poland-Lithuania was well rooted in the ancient Greek ideal of a good life in a political community, which required above all virtuous character. It was guided by the conviction that "Virtues make man happy and blessed, and not only man but also the Commonwealth" (Górnicki, 1961, p. 453). Goslicius uses this language to build his political theory and more broadly a project of civic education for the monarchical republic of Poland-Lithuania. Others followed, emphasizing repeatedly that the only safeguard against corruption can be found in the right conduct guided by civic virtue (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, 2018). The concept of virtue became an essential part of a coherent ideal of the Rzeczpospolita. Goslicius' work is very demonstrative in this respect as it utilizes both philosophical argumentation and political practice or practical wisdom. He did not look for other examples of a well-ordered commonwealth such as Venice to learn from them or imitate their concepts or practical solutions as he believed that his own Commonwealth was already in possession of sufficient solutions, although there was still much room for the improvement of moral character. Hoping for such an improvement, many other republican writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the in first half of the eighteenth century (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2015), would, as it were, neglect the need for serious institutional and legal reforms that could improve the functioning of state institutions on the one hand, and the situation of the two other estates, the city dwellers and the peasants, on the other hand. It is not the aim of this article to explain why this was the case, but perhaps a preliminary explanation can be found in the privileged position and the number of Polish-Lithuanian nobility whose understanding of this position was closely linked with their service to the Commonwealth and their constant need to secure their liberty as citizens. Thus, the shift of emphasis from virtue to institutions evident for example in Sir Thomas Smith and manifest in the seventeenth century in James Harrington, followed then by the American Founders and Hume, had no fertile ground in the discourse of Poland-Lithuania until late eighteenth century.

One of the major conclusions of Contarini's close analysis of all positive aspects of the Venetian political order can be summarized in a sentence that is found in book one of his treatise:

I cannot well resolve whether mankind be more beholding for any other thing to nature (the mother of all things), than it is for this invention of laws,

and even if virtuous men were found to take care of the government,

yet neither on this condition were the rule of man to be wished for before the government of laws: for he being of a mortal and frail nature could not long enjoy that function, when laws (as I said) do in a manner concur with eternity (Contarini, 1599, p. 24).

What can bring perfection to a government is then found in the eternity, stability and predictability of the laws and not in the expectation that virtuous citizens will guarantee that the political community and its liberty will flourish. The myth of Venice, which inspired a lot of attention in Italy and Europe from early times, had two important political aspects: “the one was that Venice was the city of liberty, the other that Venice was a city of domestic peace and stability” (Gilbert, 1968, p. 466). The same could have been largely said about Poland in the sixteenth century until the first interregnum in 1572–1573.

Goslicius and Contarini agreed that the goal of the commonwealth, first defined by Aristotle, was the well-being of the people. But Contarini was quick to add:

There have been many commonwealths which have far exceeded Venice as well in empire and in greatness of estate, as in military discipline and glory of their wars; yet there have not been any, that may be compared with this of ours, for institutions and laws prudently decreed to establish unto the inhabitants a happy and prosperous felicity (Contarini, 1599, p. 10).

The institutional order of Poland-Lithuania was still in the making at the end of the sixteenth century and its painful gaps were to be revealed during the first and second interregna in 1572–1573 and 1574–1576. Having the right to legislate and accept or block any law the nobility had to seek consent only within the upper stratum of society. Goslicius understood that danger and saw a solution in securing a strong position to the senate in the mixed government so that those who were truly virtuous had a privileged position in the decision-making process. This, however, could not be a practicable

solution in the later epoch, when the consent of all citizens was required under the institution of *liberum veto*, and it could not work with the election of the king which was based on equal participation of all noblemen (*electio viritim*).

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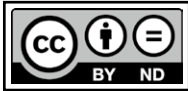
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