

# The symbolic language of a diplomatic scandal: Count Nikolaus Esterházy in Dresden in 1747

Olga Khavanova\* 

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines an episode in Austrian-Saxon relations and the diplomatic career of Count Nikolaus Esterházy that resulted in a brief disruption to bilateral relations in 1747. The Dresden court, which was regarded as a potentially advantageous ally for the belligerent powers of Austria and France, was compelled to take sides in the ceremonial conflict that had arisen on the eve of the dynastic wedding of Elector Frederick August II's daughter and Bavarian Elector Maximilian III. As an expression of exceptional benevolence, the recently elected Emperor Francis, who was not yet officially recognized by France, elevated the status of his minister to that of ambassador for the duration of the festivities. This symbolic gesture served to dismantle the diplomatic hierarchy, humiliate the French ambassador, and exacerbate the already strained relations between Saxony and France, which had been meticulously cultivated in the preceding months. One of the instruments utilized in this conflictual dynamic was the language of correspondence, which was initially employed to convey respect but ultimately transformed into a means of asserting power, disciplining, and exerting control. Nikolaus Esterházy was confronted with a dilemma: he could either obey the imperial rescript and ostentatiously withdraw from the Dresden court, or avoid confrontation by declining to participate in the festivities. He ultimately opted for the former, a decision that would lead to his reputation as a selfish and inflexible diplomat.

### KEYWORDS

War of Austrian Succession, diplomacy, language of diplomatic communication, ceremonial

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: austrian.centre.inslav@gmail.com; olkha9@hotmail.com

Count Nikolaus (Miklós) Esterházy (1711–1764) was one of the first Hungarian aristocrats to succeed as a diplomat in the Habsburg Monarchy, and an unjustly forgotten figure in Hungarian and Austrian history. Over the course of two decades, he served as the diplomatic representative of the House of Austria at a series of short- and long-term diplomatic missions in The Hague, London, Lisbon, Warsaw, Dresden, Madrid, and St. Petersburg. The coincidence of his name with that of *Prince* Nikolaus Esterházy (1714–1790), the patron of Josef Haydn resulted in the complete confusion of the two namesakes. A significant portion of the family archive was lost over the course of the last century, and there is a paucity of comprehensive biographical studies on the subject, with the exception of articles and chapters in genealogical surveys.<sup>1</sup> Historians have at their disposal Esterházy's official diplomatic correspondence stored in the Viennese *Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv*, and the transcripts of the in- and outgoing correspondence copied by the diplomat's secretaries into the books that have survived in the state archives of Budapest and Bratislava until the present day. Nowadays historians are constrained to reconstruct the biography of Count Nikolaus Esterházy from the scattered references to his name in the archival and published documents of the eighteenth century that have been fortuitously discovered in archives and libraries.<sup>2</sup>

In the twenty-first century Count Nikolaus Esterházy still remains a political figure without biography despite the very fact that his diplomatic career was rich in intrigues, *démarches* and scandals. Some incidents only characterize his complex and controversial personality, others shed light on more general principles and mechanisms of diplomatic communication in early modern Europe. The latter is especially true for his behaviour during the crisis of Austrian-Saxonian relations in the summer of 1747. This article analyses the course of events around the twin-wedding in the Houses of Wettin and Wittelsbach with special attention paid to the reaction of foreign diplomats, and strives to demonstrate how the language, once understood both linguistically and symbolically, was turned into an instrument of symbolic power.

## SAXONY IN THE WAR OF AUSTRIAN SUCCESSION

During the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748), Saxony was ruled by Elector Frederick August II, who had also reigned in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as August III. since 1734. This concentration of territory and power under the sceptre of a single ruler, the role of the Saxon elector in the elections of a new emperor, and Saxony's strategic position in the context of the ongoing war, all contributed to the Dresden court becoming a valuable ally for both Maria Theresa and Friedrich II. The elector was characterised as a weak and vain ruler, influenced by his wife Maria Josefa, the first minister Count Heinrich von Brühl and Jesuit priest Ignatius Guarini.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the elector's wife was a cousin of Maria Theresa, the family ties between them gave rise to discord and rivalries between the courts. Saxony refused to recognize the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713 and Maria Josefa claimed the right of succession after Emperor Charles VI's death. Maria Theresa did her best to secure the allegiance of Saxony

<sup>1</sup>Eszterházy ([1901]); Berényi (2004); Berényi (2014).

<sup>2</sup>Khavanova (2019); Khavanova (2023).

<sup>3</sup>Arneht (1870).



through the conspicuous display of favoritism towards the Saxon minister in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> After Grand Duke Joseph was born in March 1741, Maria Josefa and Friedrich August were invited to be his godparents. During the baptism they were symbolically represented by Duke Ernst Friedrich II von Sachsen-Hildburghausen, a *Generalfeldwachtmeister* in the Austrian service.<sup>5</sup>

Choosing between an alliance with Prussia or rendering support to Maria Theresa in return for substantial territorial concessions, Friedrich Augustus first joined the anti-Austrian coalition attracted by the offer of Moravia and Upper Silesia, which would have united his Saxon territories with Poland. However, he was soon compelled to alter his position in light of the aggressive territorial acquisitions pursued by Friedrich II. Consequently, he signed the Dresden Treaty with Austria on September 7, 1742. During the Second Silesian War (1742–1745) the pro-Austrian orientation was reinforced by the Treaty of Warsaw (8 January 1745), which compelled Friedrich Augustus to deploy 30,000 Saxons to integrate with the Austrian army in exchange for financial assistance of the Maritime Powers. Meanwhile, the victorious Prussian army entered Saxony and proposed a separate peace based on the status quo, which was rejected.

Since the end of 1744 Frederick Augustus II had been preoccupied with the endeavour of reconciling the Habsburgs and Bourbons. However, this project ultimately proved unsuccessful due to France's insistence on the inclusion of Prussia in the proposed alliance. Moreover, Maria Theresa was in need of peace with France just for recovering Silesia. The Second Silesian War concluded with the ratification of the Treaty of Dresden on 25 December 1745. Prussia acquired Silesia, yet acknowledged the imperial title of Francis of Lorraine.<sup>6</sup> In the event of the failure of the reconciliation of Vienna and Versailles failed, the Franco-Saxon rapprochement advocated by Brühl was gaining momentum. Devastated by the war, Saxony needed peace and stability to recover its economy. The signing of the subsidy treaty with France and Spain on 21 April 1746 was followed by the dynastic marriage between the recently widowed Dauphin and Saxon Chur Princess. Another avenue of engagement was pursued with the court of Bavaria. In April 1744, the Bavarian minister in St. Petersburg, Baron Neuhaus, conveyed to his colleague in London that Saxony had already accepted the proposal of a treaty with Munich and that Empress Elizabeth regarded it as advantageous for her empire.<sup>7</sup> The bilateral alliance was reinforced symbolically by a twin wedding between the ruling dynasties. This event constituted the reason for the dissolution of the diplomatic relations between the courts of Vienna and Dresden. One of the pivotal figures in this scandal was played by Nikolaus Esterházy and the linguistic tool employed to exert pressure and influence was the language of diplomatic correspondence.

## NIKOLAUS ESTERHÁZY IN DRESDEN AND WARSAW

In 1742, Nikolaus Esterházy was appointed as an envoy (second rank minister) to Dresden and Warsaw. As a country with limited finances and a modest budget for representational costs, Saxony lacked the capacity to maintain diplomatic representation at foreign courts and to

<sup>4</sup>Schnettger (2020).

<sup>5</sup>Stöckelle (1982), 320.

<sup>6</sup>Arneth (1870); Becker (1902); Horn (1929).

<sup>7</sup>AVPRI, F. 6, Inv. 2, Doss. 1, fol. 69v.



receive first-rank ambassadors. For this reason, the diplomatic corpus accredited at the Dresden court were second-rank ministers, a status that was reflected in the ranks of the Saxon emissaries abroad.<sup>8</sup> This was not by any means a sign of low prestige or humiliation. The Swiss historian Andreas Krischer compared it to the monarchs' incognito travels, noting that the limited budgetary resources allocated to ceremonial costs do not negate the high rank of the travelling prince.<sup>9</sup> This appointment followed shortly after Esterházy had successfully accomplished his first diplomatic mission. From March to June 1741, he had visited The Hague, London and Lisbon with the message that the Queen of Hungary, Maria Theresa, had given birth to a male successor of the House of Austria. There is little doubt that he was chosen for this function due to his personal acquaintance with her spouse Herzog Francis of Lorraine. Most likely, the royal patron recommended the young Hungarian count to the new position in Dresden, too. Officially, Esterházy fulfilled the duties from 14 November 1742 to 24 May 1744 and from 5 March 1745 to 7 June 1747.<sup>10</sup> He initially served as the minister of the Queen of Hungary and subsequently, following Maria Theresa's coronation in Prague in 1743, also of the Queen of Bohemia. Following the death Emperor Charles VII of the House of Wittelsbach in 1745 and the subsequent election of Francis of Lorraine as the new emperor in Frankfurt, Esterházy's status was elevated to that of imperial minister on 6 October 1745.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to his appointment in Dresden, Nikolaus Esterházy had no experience and little knowledge of diplomatic routine, negotiations, bargaining, smoothing contradictions, or appeasing sides. Historians Alfred von Arneth and Reinhardt Becker had a low opinion of his professionalism, noting that in pivoting instances the Vienna court dispatched exceptional envoys to Dresden.<sup>12</sup> Contemporaries described the court of Dresden as one of the most picturesque and joyful ones. To adduce evidence from a slightly later period, the future Polish king Stanisław Poniatowski recollected that in 1750 he spent one and a half most vivacious months in Hubertusburg with its splendid forests, cheerful and elegant society, where everyone was happy and content and apparently didn't have much to do but to have fun.<sup>13</sup> This milieu flattered Esterházy. A natural-born courtier concerned with his proximity to the royalties, his own grandeur, and his reputation of a true aristocrat, he accompanied the court to the countryside residences, where he attended receptions, balls, hunting events and other amusements, regularly asking for shorter and longer absences for private reasons, while regular dispatches were written by the mission staff.

To represent the splendid Vienna court in Dresden, Esterházy was constantly short of finances. He spent money left and right, begging for more and more subsidies from his court: "Since I now live here in such an expensive place, and consequently must necessarily take care of and endeavour to maintain the decorum as required by the character I am accompanying, Your Excellency can certainly believe that I have not only already used up much of the capital I have raised, but also that I have already spent more than I can afford, [...] should this sad situation

<sup>8</sup>Matzke (2011).

<sup>9</sup>Krischer (2009), 19.

<sup>10</sup>Matsch (1986), 135.

<sup>11</sup>Lippert (1908), CXXXIX.

<sup>12</sup>Arneth (1870), 38; Becker (1902) 12.

<sup>13</sup>[V.T.] (1915), 369.



last any longer, and should I be left without help, I can at the same time imagine how I will ruin myself and my loved ones.”<sup>14</sup> His marriage to the adopted daughter of a Polish magnate was made in the expectation of increasing his fortune at the expense of the bride’s dowry. The history of this marriage, together with other gossip circulating in Dresden and Warsaw, was arduously collected and retold to Frederick II on his request by the councillor Heinrich Podewils after the scandal described below, which evoked much interest by the Prussian king.<sup>15</sup>

The extravagant Hungarian diplomat who had socialised in the luxury and pomp of the Viennese court society was looking down on the provincial nobility of Dresden and Warsaw. Once he turned up at the annual ball arranged by the Dresden court, to which dignitaries and foreign ministers were invited, accompanied by a extravagantly dressed lady who turned out to be a local prostitute. On another occasion, his French servant caught the count with his wife; he broke down the door and caused a scandal, so much so that Esterházy had to pay the disgraced husband a large sum of money to make up for the embarrassment. Frivolity and adultery were not uncommon at that age time, but Esterházy might have stood out for his particular neglect of social conventions, and so the Prussian diplomat concluded: “Having made it his aim to arouse hatred and contempt, he quite openly led a life of rudeness and debauchery”.<sup>16</sup> The Russian minister in Dresden, Mikhail Petrovich Bestuzhev-Riumin, the brother of the great chancellor, also reported to Empress Elizabeth about the Hungarian count’s “rude and insolent” behaviour: “He made himself unpleasant by his derogatory talk about the local nobles”.<sup>17</sup>

Podewils could not withstand sharing the details of Esterházy’s marriage to Princess Mary Susanne Anne Lubomirska. The Hungarian count allegedly had fallen in love with a young Polish lady from the Chatsky (Tzschasky) family, courted her and received the family’s consent. Apparently, she was one of three daughters of Michael Chatsky, the Castellan of Volhyn. It was on the way to the wedding that Esterházy suddenly broke off the engagement and married the much richer daughter of Prince Teodor Lubomirski – the voivode of the Cracow Voivodeship and *starosta* (royal official) of Spisz (Zips in German, Szepes in Hungarian, now Spiš in Slovakia), the historic region that the Hungarian king Sigismund of Luxembourg pawned to Poland in 1412. The Prince had two adopted children – the son and the daughter of his Irish wife Anne Elizabeth Culler-Caming – from her first marriage to the horse breeder John Christe. Malicious tongues speculated that Princess Mary Susane Anne was Prince Lubomirski’s natural daughter, whom he formally adopted when he married her widowed mother in 1729. The bride’s dowry was 200.000 fl. The wedding took place on 15 December 1744. It was also rumoured that Esterházy, disturbed by the bride’s dubious origins, tried to “smooth things over” by forging the late emperor’s signature on a false diploma. Although the Russian Empire did not take part in the War of the Austrian Succession, events in this newcomer to the European

<sup>14</sup>Nikolaus Esterházy to Anton Corfitz Ulfeld, Dresden, 27 March 1746, ÖStA, HHStA, Staatskanzlei, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Sachsen. 1742–1743, Kt 7, No 16.

<sup>15</sup>Droysen (1880): 541.

<sup>16</sup>Wolf (1850), 528.

<sup>17</sup>Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin to Elizabeth, Dresden, 15 (26) August 1747, no 46. AVPRI, Fond 79, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 6, fol. 230r. Hereinafter, letters of Russian diplomats are dated, as in the original, according to the Julian calendar, the dates in brackets are adduced according to the Gregorian calendar used in Europe at the time.



concert of great powers<sup>18</sup> directly affected Austrian-Saxon relations and indirectly influenced the career of Nikolaus Esterházy.

## RUSSIAN-AUSTRIAN DISCORD AND ITS AFTERMATH, 1743–1745

In 1746, St. Petersburg and Vienna signed a new alliance, which was, *mutatis mutandis*, a continuation of the treaty of 1726. This solemn act was preceded by a series of turbulent events of 1743–1745, when a suspected conspiracy of the old Russian aristocracy against the “illegitimate” (born out of wedlock) daughter of Peter the Great on the throne was discovered, and the main suspects were severely persecuted and exiled.<sup>19</sup> The Hungarian minister to the Russian court, Marquis Antonio Botta d’Adorno, was mentioned among the ardent supporters of the restoration to the Russian throne of the infant Tsar Ivan, a grandnephew of the widowed Empress Maria Eleonora and a first cousin of Maria Theresa. There is no direct evidence of Botta’s involvement in the alleged plot; moreover, he had left Russia for Berlin by the time the “conspiracy” was discovered. Nevertheless, the failed coup d’état was attached to his name, and the Russian-Austrian alliance was broken. It was only after the imprisonment of Marquis Botta in Graz and the receipt of Maria Theresa’s written apology<sup>20</sup> that Elisabeth agreed to negotiate a new alliance with Vienna. The very person of the diplomat and his professional qualities in the de-escalation of the scandal were of primary importance. Rumours circulated in diplomatic circles that the person to be appointed would be none other than the Minister for Saxony and Poland, Count Nikolaus Esterházy. Knowing his dubious reputation, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VII’s minister in St Petersburg, Baron Joseph Maria Neuhaus, doubted that this would be a good choice.<sup>21</sup>

The Viennese court finally approved the candidature of Count Philipp Rosenberg-Orsini, an astute man and cautious negotiator, who had spent almost a year in St. Petersburg haggling over the terms of the official declaration by Maria Theresa, that would put an end to the painful separation. The document was published in *St. Petersburgische Zeitung*, the German-language Russian newspaper, on 22 November (3 December) 1744.<sup>22</sup> In May 1745, Rosenberg had his farewell audience at the Russian court and left by sea for Lübeck at the beginning of September and then returned to Vienna. While Rosenberg came to Russia in the “humble” role of ambassador of the Queen of Hungary, his successor in Russia, Baron Johann Pretlack, arrived in St. Petersburg in December 1745 without any official status, delivered the notification of the election of Francis of Lorraine as Holy Roman emperor, and in May 1746 he was accredited as the extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador of the new Emperor and the Empress. It was due to his endeavours that Russia and Austria became allies again in June 1746,<sup>23</sup> and for

<sup>18</sup>Duchhardt (1995).

<sup>19</sup>Liechtenhan (1998).

<sup>20</sup>Maria Theresa to Elisabeth, Vien, s.d., AVPRI, F 32, Inv. 2, D. 132.

<sup>21</sup>AVPRI, F. 6, Inv. 2, 1743–1762, Austria, D. 1, fol. 92r-92v.

<sup>22</sup>St. Petersburgische Zeitung, 22 November 1744, Anhang, pp. 2–4. <https://www.difmoe.eu/view/uuid:21f6009e-2c27-48c1-878b-2000beae2c16?page=uuid:72250141-427a-469c-9481-bcc2730341d0>

<sup>23</sup>Martens (1874), 147–176.



Nikolaus Esterházy this meant stepping up his efforts to persuade the Dresden court to join the alliance. This would have required his permanent presence at the court and deep involvement, but Esterházy was more concerned with private matters. For most of the second half of the year 1746 he excused his absences on the grounds that he had to attend to Maria Theresa. In November 1746, the minister informed the state chancellor: “I hope that this will be all the less difficult as, under the present circumstances here, there will not be much business to be done or to be discovered here, consequently my absence cannot cause the slightest disadvantage to the highest service, as well as my own interests, since my concerns on Prince Lubomirski’s estates there are now to reach their conclusion, and my presence in Vienna for a short time is unavoidable.”<sup>24</sup>

The Dresden court was informed of the Austro-Russian treaty (without mentioning the secret articles) as late as October 1746, but Saxony was reluctant to openly join the anti-Prussian coalition: from its point of view, the bilateral treaties with Austria and Russia were sufficient.<sup>25</sup> In early 1747, both Vienna and St. Petersburg were eager to formalise the triple alliance, which is why Esterházy was needed in Dresden to act in cooperation with Mikhail Bestuzhev-Ryumin. However, the Hungarian count was arranging his personal affairs in Vienna and the impatient Russian minister wrote to St. Petersburg: “Count Esterhazy, the Holy Roman Emperor’s Minister still has not returned from Vienna, and as soon as he arrives, we shall set in motion the common issue of inviting the local court to a treaty and to separate articles.”<sup>26</sup>

## DYNASTIC PROJECTS OF THE WETTINS

Meanwhile, the Dresden court sought to strengthen its links with France and Bavaria. An important milestone in the Franco-Saxon rapprochement was the marriage of Frederick Augustus’s daughter Maria Josefa to the Dauphin of France, Louis Ferdinand, first in Dresden in January 1747 and then in Versailles in February. He had been widowed the year before when his first wife Maria Teresa Rafaela, daughter of King Philip V of Spain, died in childbirth. To prepare for the new dynastic union, the plenipotentiary French ambassador Charles-Hyacinthe de Gallean, Marquis des Issarts, was accredited in Dresden and Warsaw. In November 1746 Esterházy reported to his court that the French ambassador had solemnly asked Princess Josefa’s for the Dauphin’s hand: at dinner he solemnly offered her a drink on a plate and kissed her hand as the future Dauphine, thus publicly declaring the impending marriage.<sup>27</sup>

The Spanish court had hoped that the Dauphin’s new bride would be the younger Infanta Maria Antonia, who had already been unsuccessfully proposed to Louis in 1744. News of the Franco-Saxon rapprochement angered the newly enthroned Ferdinand V., who had reason to expect that the Dauphin would marry Maria Antonia this time. The Spanish minister reportedly said: “The Dauphin marries the daughter of that very sovereign who had dethroned the

<sup>24</sup>Nikolaus Esterházy to Anton Coritz Ulfeld, Warsaw, 9 November 1746, ÖStA, HHStA, Staatskanzlei, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Sachsen. 1742–1743, Kt 4, No 63.

<sup>25</sup>Horn (1929), 43–44.

<sup>26</sup>Mikhail Bestuzhev-Ryumin to Elizabeth I, Dresden, 28 February (11 March) 1747, AVPRI, F. 79, Inv. 1. 1747. D. 6, fol. 48r.

<sup>27</sup>Nikolaus Esterházy to Anton Coritz Ulfeld, Warsaw, 5 November 1746, ÖStA, HHStA, Staatskanzlei, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Sachsen. 1742–1743, Kt 4, No 62.



Dauphin’s grandfather”, – meaning that Frederick II August, Maria Josefa’s father, had emerged victoriously from the rivalry with Stanislaus Leszczyński.<sup>28</sup> The new Spanish king threatened to break up the Franco-Spanish alliance, but was eventually forced to reconcile.

The Wettins’ other impressive dynastic project was meant to link Dresden and Munich. Elector Maximilian III Joseph Wittelsbach was to marry the Saxon princess Maria Anna Sophia, while her brother Prince Frederic Christian was to marry the Bavarian princess Maria Antonia. To underline the importance of the event, Emperor Franz I symbolically raised Esterházy’s diplomatic rank from envoy to ambassador for the duration of the festivities. This decision, which put the Saxon court into a deadlock, nevertheless had at least one precedent. When Prince Anton Ulrich of Brunswick married Czarina Anna’s niece,<sup>29</sup> Charles VI, whose wife Elisabeth Christina was the groom’s aunt, wrote in his credentials to the minister in St. Petersburg, Marquis Botta d’Adorno: “In order that I may show my utmost joy—which I shall have from this most desirable event—in the clearest possible manner, I have provided the character of my ambassador for the present marriage celebration to Marquis de Botta [...], since time will not permit anyone to be sent there on purpose for this matter.”<sup>30</sup>

The credentials were signed on 31 May and arrived in Dresden on 4 June. Esterházy immediately informed Count Brühl of this symbolic gesture of friendship from his sovereigns and received a most courteous reply: “He made me aware of his immense pleasure in this by countless obliging expressions, and at the same time assured me how the king would certainly recognise the right value of this very special attention, and, since the imperial court had been quite generous to him with courtesies and demonstrations of friendship, would certainly know how to recognise it, and since I asked him to communicate the ceremonies that were otherwise customary here on such occasions, he assured me that he would issue the appropriate orders.”<sup>31</sup>

The news of the Austrian minister’s temporary ambassadorial status caused irritation and anger in the French minister. As the Wettins and the Bourbons had recently become allies, des Issart represented not only the allied but also the allied court and considered himself the most important guest at the forthcoming celebrations. Since Versailles had not yet recognised the results of the election of Francis of Lorraine as emperor, the (officially only) Hungarian and Bohemian minister Nikolaus Esterházy, was able to take his place, albeit temporarily, above all other members of the diplomatic corps. The symbolic humiliation of France, Saxony and Poland could have even have been reflected in the seating of the guests at the wedding table. The imperial ambassador could claim a more honourable place at the wedding table than the chur princes and princesses, the foreign ministers and the local nobility. The royal couple could not allow Countess Maria Anna Esterházy - the illegitimate daughter of the Voivode of Cracow - to “have precedence” over their own wives and daughters.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Reported by the Russian minister in Vienna Ludwig Łączyński to Empress Elizabeth on 12(23) June 1746, see: AVPRI, F. 32, Inv. 1, 1746, D. 4a, fol. 121v.

<sup>29</sup>Plate (2022).

<sup>30</sup>Charles VI to Anna Ioannovna, Wien, 12 April 1739, AVPRI, F. 32, Inv. 2, 1739, D. 104, fol. 3r-v

<sup>31</sup>Nikolaus Esterházy to Anton Corfiz Ulfeld, Dresden, 7 June 1747, ÖStA, HHStA, Staatsakanzlei, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Sachsen. 1746–1749, Kt 7, No 87.

<sup>32</sup>For a reconstruction of the scandal surrounding the elevation of the imperial envoy’s status, based on documents from the State Archives in Dresden, see: Lippert (1908).



Frederick August was faced with a difficult choice. If the Marquis des Issart had been staying in Dresden since 1746 and had already enjoyed the status of ambassador, the organisation of Esterházy's first audience as imperial ambassador could not be a matter of a few days. Moreover, the French ambassador was the only diplomat of any rank in Dresden, and to challenge his unquestioned superiority over all other members of the local diplomatic corps was to jeopardize relations with a desirable ally. At the same time, not accepting the special grace of the emperor leads to misunderstandings, complications and deadlocks of no less magnitude. In a desperate search of handwritten letters to Emperor Francis and Empress-Queen Maria Theresa from 6 June, the embarrassed Saxon elector tried to explain the complexity of the situation in which he had unwittingly found himself. He wrote the letters in French as a sign of what he considered to be his special devotion to the French-speaking emperor. In Vienna, however, there was little desire to sympathise with the situation in which Frederick Augustus II found himself, and even less to make concessions to France, which demanded exclusive preferential treatment only for its ambassador. According to Chief Court Marshal Count Johann Joseph Kevenhüller-Metsch, when the State Chancellery became aware of the contents of the letters, Vice-Chancellor Johann Christoph Bartenstein suggested, on the pretext of breach of etiquette (the language of correspondence with the emperor was Latin<sup>33</sup>), to refuse to accept the epistles from the Saxon minister Count Christoph Loos.<sup>34</sup>

On 10 June Thomas Robinson, the British minister, wrote to his fellow diplomat Charles Hanbury-Williams in Dresden: "Count Loos had been admitted that afternoon to an audience of the emperor, to execute his commission verbally, without being allowed to present the king of Poland's letter, upon the pretext of its being written in the French language, but in reality upon the account of the extraordinary subject of it, that he would likewise have had an audience of the empress but for the accident of the elderly archduchess having been taken so ill at dinner as to have made her life he despaired of for some time."<sup>35</sup> Similar information was later conveyed by the Russian envoy Ludwig Lanczynski (Łączyński) to Empress Elizabeth: "Count Loos received the royal letters in French to be handed to the Emperor and the Empress, in which—as it followed from the copies [submitted to the State Chancellery]—it was presumed that Count Esterházy's ambassadorial character would embarrass him, or tie his hands. Count Loos was advised not to submit those letters, but that the audience inform orally of their contents, and of everything that was prescribed for him; for Emperor in the matter of such importance cannot accept a letter in French."<sup>36</sup>

In his turn, Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin in Dresden, during a conversation with Count Brühl and the elector's confessor Guarini, heard a plethora of grievances and perplexities: "In the lifetime of the king's father, many times such letters, not only from him, but also from the present king, when he was still a Chur-prince, were written to Emperor Charles VI, and answers were also given in French, which letters and the originals are herewith found, and that the Roman emperor, whom the king of Poland had enthroned, dealt with him as with his

<sup>33</sup>Hochedlinger (1997), 71–72.

<sup>34</sup>Kevenhüller-Metsch, Schlitter (Eds.), (1908), 162.

<sup>35</sup>Thomas Robinson to Charles Hanbury Williams, London, 10 June 1757, TNA, Secretaries of State: State Papers Foreign, Holy Roman Empire, SP 80/177, fol. 224r-v.

<sup>36</sup>Ludwig Lanczynski to Elizabeth, Vienna, 17 (28) June 1747, AVPRI, F. 32, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 5, fol. 159r.



subject, ordering his minister, [...] either to be received at an audience in the ambassadorial character, or to take the letter of recall.”<sup>37</sup>

In his reconstruction of the chronology of the dramatic events, the German historian Wol-demar Lippert advanced the position that the Austrian government was solely responsible for the breakdown of diplomatic relations. On 9 June, Emperor Francis I reassured Count Loos that, should Esterházy not yet have accepted the ambassadorial title, the matter could be revisited in one or another way. This was the same day that the courier with recredential letters was on his way to Dresden and arrived as early as 11 June. As Loos found out later, the return of the Saxon courier with his report was deliberately delayed by several hours so that the Austrian courier would arrive in Dresden sooner.<sup>38</sup> This is consistent with the information provided by Robinson to Williams: “It was only while we were talking [with Count Ulfeld] of this affair, that Count Loos sent to have a passport for his courier so that the Austrian courier may arrive as much sooner at Dresden than the Saxon messenger.”<sup>39</sup>

Waiting for the news from Vienna, Esterházy again and again tried to arrange a conversation with Brühl, spending hours in his anteroom: “Despite my explicit request that he should appoint an hour and a more convenient place for me, so that I could discuss this delicate matter with him in detail, he tried to avoid the opportunity to talk to me, [...] tried to get rid of me with all kinds of bad digressions, and cited such bad raisons, which I am ashamed to bring to Your Excellency; In the end he suggested to me that I should also write to the court through the departing courier, but this also revealed his unequal and false testimony, as the courier has already left at the hour Count Brühl was talking to me.”<sup>40</sup>

As late as 11 June, Esterházy received the recredential letters of Francis and Maria Theresa. The primary rationale for his dismissal was cited as Saxony’s partiality towards France, which rendered his continued tenure in Dresden untenable. By the same token, the letter required the avoidance of any spectacular scandal: “You must [...] show the king and queen, then the entire royal family, as well as the ministry, in a decent, but not disgraceful manner, how sorry you are not to be able to attend the forthcoming festivities. You are not to break out into reproaches or heated arguments, but to remain within the bounds of the content of our letter”,<sup>41</sup> – underscored Maria Theresa. In accordance with the rescript, Esterházy did not participate in the wedding ceremony. Consequently, the royal bride was accompanied by Prince Joseph Wilhelm Fürstenberg, the imperial commissar at Regensburg, in a solemn procession.

Similarly, the Austrian minister at the Bavarian court, Count Rudolf Hotek, was in a comparable position. He was also granted a rescript temporarily upgrading his status to that of ambassador on the occasion of the elector’s wedding.<sup>42</sup> However, Maximilian III was able to persuade him not to accept the ambassadorial character, even if it were given for the sake of honour and respect, because he foresaw a ceremonial conflict between the imperial ambassador, who was entitled to “precedence” at the table, and his own uncle, the Cardinal Bishop of Liège,

<sup>37</sup>AVPRI, F. 79, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 6, fol. 179v-180.

<sup>38</sup>Lippert (1908), CXLIII.

<sup>39</sup>Robinson to Williams, fol. 225r. (as Footnote 36)

<sup>40</sup>Esterházy to Ulfeld, (as Footnote 32).

<sup>41</sup>Schlitter, Khevenhüller (Eds.), (1908), 436.

<sup>42</sup>Grypa, Schmid (2000), 616–618.



“who will not yield to the ambassador; whereby coldness, nastiness and indecency instead of merriment will result.”<sup>43</sup> Then he proposed to his court that he should leave Munich for some time in order to arrange some private affairs, to which the Viennese court agreed. So Count Hotek left for Augsburg, but returned to Munich after the wedding festivities.<sup>44</sup>

Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin, a witness to these events, analysed the causes of the conflict in his report to Empress Elizabeth, blaming the Viennese court, and especially Esterházy himself, for selfish inflexibility. In the encrypted part of the letter, he reasonably remarked: “If it had been the direct intention of the Viennese court to take part in this joyful event and to have an ambassador to it, it would have been necessary to determine—and make known about it beforehand—another more agreeable minister, and not to provide Count Esterhazy with that character, who instead of a great affirmation of friendship and good agreement between the two courts was only able to lead them into coldness and disagreement”. In recounting his confident dialogue with Prince Fürstenberg, he asserted that he and numerous other Austrians disapproved of the actions of Count Esterhazy, holding him responsible for instigating a rift between the two courts. It would be remiss not to mention the role played by Countess Esterházy in the unfortunate discord that ensued. Her notorious arrogance rendered the couple unpopular with the locals.<sup>45</sup>

In order to circumvent further complications, Frederick August sought to expedite Esterházy’s resignation. Despite apparent readiness of the count to accept the ambassadorial title following the conclusion of the main festivities on 15 June, and regardless of the British minister Williams’ role in facilitating a mediation between him and Brühl, both the royal couple and the princes and princesses received the diplomat on 12 June at noon for his farewell audience. The same afternoon he made his last visits to foreign ministers. Frederick Augustus, annoyed that the Austrian diplomat had quarrelled with the emperor and spoilt the wedding celebrations, humiliated the irate Esterházy by presenting him with a ring of insignificant value. To refuse a gift would have resulted in a breakdown in relations between Vienna and Dresden.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Esterházy chose to express his displeasure to the diplomatic corps, indicating that he felt shamed by this gesture.

## CONCLUSIONS

The incident involving the last-minute granting of the ambassadorial title to Nikolaus Esterházy by his court demonstrated how the language of monarchical correspondence could be transformed into a means of exerting power by the more dominant party to compel the lesser ally to adhere to the dictates of the stronger party. The French language was declared unsuitable for the private correspondence of the Holy Roman Emperors with European sovereigns on the grounds of a formal requirement to correspond in Latin. This stratagem, presumably devised by Vice-Chancellor Bartenstein, was designed to subdue the Polish king and Saxon elector. However,

<sup>43</sup>Lanczynski to Elizabeth, AVPRI, F. 32, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 5, fol. 159v.

<sup>44</sup>Bestuzhev-Riumin to Elizabeth, Dresden, 9 (20) June 1747, no 34, AVPRI, F. 79, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 6, fol. 185r.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., fol. 185v.

<sup>46</sup>Duchhardt (1975), 356.



it ultimately demonstrated Vienna's inability to prevent the rapprochement between Dresden and Versailles. This corroborates the assertion made by Cardinal Richelieu, as evidenced in his political testament, that when two powers are bound by a treaty, and one is more powerful than the other, the risk of being abandoned is higher for the stronger side. A powerful sovereign's reputation is of greater value, whereas a weak sovereign will prioritize gain over honour.<sup>47</sup>

When Minister Lanczynski met Chancellor Ulfeld on 26 June, the latter argued that the revocation letter was written not to aggravate, but to extinguish the conflict.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, it symbolically expressed deepest discontent, for instead of signing it with the usual "Your Majesty's benevolent friend, cousin, brother and neighbour", the emperor just wrote briefly "Franz".<sup>49</sup> Nikolaus Esterházy literally followed the imperial order and at the same time put his own presumable humiliation above common interest. In early June, he devised a plan to preside over the diplomatic corps during the festivities and escort the bride to the spectacular carousel, with the generous additional subsidies from Vienna. However, due to a series of unfavourable events and Esterházy's missteps, he found himself in a position where he was required to deviate from the rule formulated by the theoretician of the early modern diplomacy Abraham de Wicquefort to be agreeable to the court where he was negotiating.<sup>50</sup> The diplomat's behaviour also contradicted another recommendation: "If ambassadors are obliged to be present at all sorts of ceremonies [...] they must not raise their pretensions too high".<sup>51</sup>

The scandal revealed that Esterházy was rather a vain courtier than a wise negotiator. Long before these events, he had alienated the local court society against him and gained a reputation as an inept diplomat. Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin reported that the Dresden court was reluctant to inform the Hungarian count of the secret articles of the Austrian-Russian treaty of 1746, due to concerns that he might either intentionally or unintentionally divulge them.<sup>52</sup> In 1751, when Esterházy was sent to the Madrid court, cabinet-secretary Ignaz Koch wrote to Kaunitz, who was at the time minister in Paris, that the Vienna court doubted whether Esterházy had "the skills and experience necessary for such delicate negotiations", preferring to act through the secretary of the mission.<sup>53</sup> In this respect, the scandal preceding the royal wedding was more of a natural consequence, rather than an unfortunate exception.

It is reasonable to posit that the sensation of wounded dignity did not provide a sense of stability for an extended period of time. Upon his return to Vienna 14 years later via Warsaw, following eight years of service in St. Petersburg, he once again visited the court of his erstwhile adversary. On behalf of the monarch, Count Brühl presented Esterházy with a snuffbox adorned with gemstones and a diamond ring featuring a portrait of Frederick Augustus II. The count listened to the monarch express regret for the "unfortunate circumstances" under which he had

<sup>47</sup>Du Plessis Armand, cardinal duc de Richelieu (1688), 44.

<sup>48</sup>Ludwig Lanczynski to Elizabeth, Vienna, 17 (28) June 1747, *AVPRI, F. 32, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 5, fol. 159r.*

<sup>49</sup>Lippert (1908), CXLIV.

<sup>50</sup>Wicquefort (1715), 175.

<sup>51</sup>Wicquefort (1715), 339.

<sup>52</sup>Bestuzhev-Riumin to Elizabeth, Dresden, 28 February (11 March) 1747, no 12, *AVPRI, F. 79, Inv. 1, 1747, D. 6, fol. 48r.*

<sup>53</sup>Schlitter (Ed.) (1899), 86–87.



treated the diplomat in an unfavourable manner and subsequently dismissed him without offering a suitable gift.<sup>54</sup>

## ABBREVIATIONS

AVPRI	Archives of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, Moscow
D.	Dossier
Inv.	Inventory
HHStA	Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv
ÖStA	Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna
TNA	The National Archives

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<sup>54</sup>Nikolaus Esterházy to Wenzel Anton Kaunitz, Krakow, 2 November 1761, OeStA, HHStA, StA, Russland II, Kt. 45, fol. 417r.



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