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THE INTERMARIUM PARADOX

Abstract:

The paper concerns the concept of Intermarium from a historical perspective, seen from the Polish point of view. The author presents the genesis of this concept, its historical premises, unsuccessful attempts to build a collective safety system in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century, and finally reflects on the chance of contemporary integration initiatives in the area between the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea. In his speech, the author focuses on the title Intermarium paradox, indicating that in the twentieth century integration attempts had no chance of success, because none of the countries in this part of the continent was a sufficient centre of power – while the unification of Central and Eastern Europe was undertaken by external centres of power, on by the coercion principles.

Keywords:

Intermarium, Central and Eastern Europe, Józef Piłsudski, Jagiellonian idea

Introduction

I will begin this essay with a short historical anecdote. After the Second World War, there was a fierce debate among the Polish political emigration in the United Kingdom on the vision of post-war Europe after the liquidation of the Soviet empire. Among the various concepts, the Intermarium concept was relatively popular. In 1948, in one of the discussions in the émigré press, Polish émigré journalist and conservative politician Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz

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admitted that Intermarium is a very beautiful and noble idea worthy of popularization. But the problem with this idea is that it is currently being implemented by Joseph Stalin².

Let's take a closer look at this amazing conclusion. Historically, the Intermarium doctrine takes into account the vision of building an alliance of Central and Eastern European countries, symbolically located between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas, which are intended to create a regional security system, constituting an effective barrier against an external powers (by the way, one of researchers who introduced the concept of Central and Eastern Europe to scientific discussion, was a Polish medievalist Oskar Halecki)³. In the 20th century, despite attempts made, such an alliance was not successfully built. On the other hand, there was a real, though temporary unification of this geographical and political region made three times – the first one was the German concept of 'Mittleuropa' during the Great War; the second one – a partial vassalisation, and the partial conquest of Central and Eastern European countries by the Third Reich, the third one – the sovietization of Central European countries after the Second World War as a part of the Eastern Bloc. In each case, domination over the region was achieved through an external power centres – German or Russian. So, are we not facing a historical paradox? To implement the concept of Central European integration, there was needed a centre of power able enough to bring together smaller state entities. Because in the 20th century in the Intermarium area there was simply no such power centre, only the external power centres conducting policy of a superpower nature were able to unify this part of the continent – by the method of conquest.

So where do the dreams about Intermarium come from?

From the Polish perspective, the natural reference to all federal concepts in Central and Eastern Europe was the so-called Jagiellonian idea. In the Middle Ages, under the scepter of the Jagiellonian dynasty, it was possible to implement the geopolitical concept, which many historians compared to the Carolingian universum or the concept of Otto III. Thanks to the personal union, and then the real union between the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it was possible to create a state organism that became a real center of power, a late-medieval superpower capable of expanding north, east and south. The area of influence of the Jagiellonian monarchy included: Poland, the vast territory of Lithuania at that time, including the lands of today's Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, while the political influence of this state organism

² S. Mackiewicz, *Dywagacje prasowe*, „Lwów i Wilno”, 18.01.1948, No. 56, p. 1.

³ See more: O. Halecki, *The Borderlands of Western Civilization. A History of East Central Europe*, New York 1952; Idem, *The Limits and Divisions of European History*, Notre Dame 1962.

additionally extended to the principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, and therefore today's Romania. The Polish-Lithuanian state was located between the Baltic and Black seas, and took into account the Jagiellonian dynastic offensive – it extended its influence to the south, towards the Czech and Hungary, to the Adriatic coast. At the same time, taking into account the organizational formula of the Polish-Lithuanian state, it was an ideal model for later federal concepts, as it was an example of a voluntary union of two independent states.

The Polish-Lithuanian experiment, however, consisted not only of the brilliant political strategy of the Jagiellonian monarchs. After all, the civilizational development of medieval Poland, not to mention the historical development of Lithuania, which can safely be called one of the youngest European nations, did not promise a rapid transition from the phase of building the foundations of statehood to the phase of the empire. After all, the Jagiellonian dynasty managed to do what the Premyslid dynasty in the Czech failed to do – to create a state much more durable than the life of its creators. It was possible due to the fact, that at the end of the fourteenth century the area that we call Central and Eastern Europe was a kind of geopolitical void, there was no competitive center of power that would be able to dominate the area between the Smolensk Gate and the Moravian Gate, or the power which would be able to interfere the newly formed Polish-Lithuanian monarchy to dominate the region. Certainly it was not Germany, which was in the age of defragmentation, it was not Ruthenia – which had just liberated itself from Tatar rule, it was not the Teutonic Order – which was a well-organized state organism, but due to the nature of its statehood it was deprived of the possibility of becoming a power, it was not Hungary – entering the era of finally losing rivalry with Turkey for dominance in the Balkans. Not only space but also time played its role. 50 years earlier, a Polish-Lithuanian union would not be possible due to the lack of internal cohesion of Poland. 50 years later, Lithuania would probably be in the orbit of Moscow's influence and Orthodoxy, and the history of this part of the continent would have been completely different. The Alliance of Poland and Lithuania was born in the only possible time.

The geopolitical prosperity I wrote about did not last long and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was influenced by external powers, which eventually led to the partition and collapse of statehood at the end of the 18th century – although this phenomenon had both external and internal causes. It was an event of great importance for the geopolitical system in Central and Eastern Europe – it was no coincidence that Edmund Burke wrote that the partitions of Poland were a shock to the European system based on the balance of power⁴. It should be noted, however, that this balance of power was again achieved with the end of the Napoleonic era, and the Congress of Vienna in

⁴ E. Burke, *The History of Europe*, „The Annual Register for the Year 1772”, 1773, p. 2.

1815 stabilized the limits of the influence of the great powers – Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in Central and Eastern Europe. This stabilization resulted from the balance of power, but also from a partially community of common interests in maintaining the geopolitical status quo.

The end of the Great War, the defeat of Germany, the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, and the revolution in Russia drastically changed the political map of Central and Eastern Europe. Historical countries – such as the Czech and Poland – have returned on to the arena of history, and new countries have emerged. After stabilizing the borders, a discussion emerged on the creation of a security system that would unite the countries of Central and Eastern Europe against external powers seeking to revise the borders set by the Versailles Treaty. In this way, the concept of Intermarium was created in Polish political thought, referring in the sphere of ideas to the tradition of the Jagiellonian dynasty policy, focused on seeking allies against revisionist tendencies from the West and East – from Germany and Russia, and then from the Soviet Union. In its most mature form, it adopted the name of the ‘Third Europe’ project, developed by the Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck in the second half of the 1930s⁵.

But did such a concept have any chance of success?

I think that the answer to this question is definitely negative, for at least three basic reasons.

First of all, the concept of collective interest of the Intermarium area countries in relation to the interwar period is a false, ahistorical one. From today's point of view, it is easy to state that the course of events between 1918 and 1945 was, in principle, unfavourable to all, without exception, medium and small players on the political map of Central and Eastern Europe. But this is a *post factum* statement that in any way reflects the diagnosis of the political situation formulated at that time. It should be noted that Versailles Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe, was characterized by a strong division into winners and defeated, which caused different countries to formulate the strategic goals of their policy in a different way. A classic example of this was the Little Entente, an agreement signed by Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, originally directed against Hungary and the possibilities of restoring the Habsburg dynasty. In this way, Polish policy faced an unsolvable dilemma – the interests of the two Central European countries most favourable to Poland, namely Romania and Hungary, were contradictory, and their antagonism was a much greater determinant of their foreign policy than seeking alliances against other European countries. A similar problem occurred in the case of possible Polish-Yugoslav cooperation – although it was possible

⁵ See more: M. Kornat, *The Polish Idea of ‘The Third Europe’ (1937–1938): A Realistic Concept or an Ex-post Vision?*, „Acta Poloniae Historica” 2011, vol. 103, pp. 101-126.

de facto only within a larger political and military bloc (although Yugoslavia had largely foreign policy priorities other than Poland – primarily neutralization of Italian danger – this certain rapprochement between the two countries took place in the era of the office of Prime Minister of Yugoslavia by Milan Stojadinovic in 1935-1939)⁶.

An even greater challenge for Polish policy was (caused by border conflicts) aversion (or even hostility) of countries such as Lithuania or Czechoslovakia. The freezing of relations with Kaunas hindered the construction of some military-political bloc with the Baltic States and Finland, while the mostly bad relations with Czechoslovakia basically paralyzed the effectiveness of Polish foreign policy in the Balkans. Both of these countries did not intend to build any alliances with Poland, because in Poland itself they saw a threat to their international interests or even territorial integrity. For most of the interwar period, Czechoslovakia did not treat the German issue as a real threat, but was focused on seeking agreement with the USSR. Also the Ukrainian issue and the real support that Czechoslovakia provided for the Ukrainian independence movement against Poland should be added to this complex matter. While, political relations with Lithuania improved scarcely 1938, in the face of the increasingly unstable political situation in this part of the continent.

Balkanization, conflicts of interest and mutual conflicts of Central and Eastern European countries basically prevented their mutual agreement. To this should be added autarchy and a lack of deeper understanding for deepening economic unification. This meant that, for example, Little Entente did not have a chance to become something more than just a diplomatic combination without major integration aspirations. And this is one of the reasons why – in my opinion – this alliance has brought more disintegration than consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe.

The second factor in minus is the issue of foreign policy priorities. Well, for the Polish diplomacy, the construction of the Intermarium was not to be an alternative to the Versailles-Riga system, based on alliances and guarantees with the former Entente countries, but it was to complement it. Unfortunately, Poland's disadvantage here was a complete misunderstanding of the essence of the policy of Western countries, especially French policy. Paris was not interested in either Poland replacing Russia as an ally flanking Germany or in the construction of the Intermarium block. The interwar French security system – *barriere de l'Est* – was based on the same principles as it was based in the 17th and 18th centuries – interventions in Poland, instrumental support of the Bar Confederation and anti-Habsburg uprisings in Hungary. The French did not need a partner in Warsaw, just as they did not need a partner in Prague or

⁶ See more: B. Simić, *Poseta pukovnika Jozefa Beka Jugoslaviji maja 1936* [in:] *Jugoslavija i Poljska u XX veku*, M. Pavlović, A. Zaćmiński, P. Wawryszuk (ed.), Beograd 2017, pp. 129-142.

Bucharest, while these capitals played a role in the great game that France played on the political map of interwar Europe.

The third factor against Intermarium, and in my opinion the most important one, was the issue of strength. I wrote in the introduction of my article that the Intermarium paradox is that in the twentieth century it was influenced by external powers, and there was no power centre in Intermarium itself, which would be able to bring together smaller state entities. Poland was certainly not such a centre of strength. French historian Louis Eisenmann wrote: "It was a misfortune of Poland that it was revived at the same time too weak to be a superpower, and too strong to be satisfied with the position of a medium state"⁷. These are true words. Poland had ambitions to play a real policy in the Intermarium area, but Poland lacked of strength, resources and economic potential. In the interwar period, Poland was too weak to, for example, counterbalance the strong German influence in Finland or in some Balkan countries, and this weakness prevented the implementation of effective foreign policy. Whether in the federal or confederate variant, limited to independent states or related to the idea of Prometheism – Poland was simply too weak to become a regional centre of power capable of integration activities. Even in the case of an alliance with Romania, a country with which Poland would seem to have specific political interests, Polish politics did not manage to go beyond ultimately worthless gestures. This was, among others, because Romania, especially when Nicolae Titulescu (1932-1936) was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, adhered to the doctrine that Europe is divided into large and small countries. In this division, neither Poland nor Romania were included in the great states, and Romanian security depends on its neutralization⁸.

Such was the geopolitical reality of the 1921-1939 period. Why 1921, not 1918? I believe that the only chance for Poland to achieve the status of an European power, and thus achieve the position of strength, was the victory of the Józef Piłsudski federation concept from 1918-1920, including first of all the victory in the play for Ukraine. The situation that occurred in the Intermarium area in 1918 can be compared to the situation described in the second half of the fourteenth century, at the time of the conclusion of the Polish-Lithuanian Union. For several years, as a result of Germany's defeat and the revolution in Russia, there was a geopolitical void. If Polish politics managed to fill this void by implementing federal policy, including Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga, Minsk and Kiev, and extending its influence on Hungary and Romania, towards the Black Sea and Adriatic Sea, history could have taken a different course. At that time, there could be a repetition of the situation in which Russia would be pushed away from the Smolensk gate and removed

⁷ L. Eisenmann, *La Question de Teschen*, "La Vie des Peuples" 1920, vol. 1, p. 837.

⁸ C. V. Bianu, *The historical Background of Russian-Romanian Relations*, "Eastern Quarterly", 1949, Vol. 2, No 2, pp. 11-12.

from influence on European politics, and the recovery tendencies in Germany would be effectively stopped by the strong guarantor of the Versailles system, which would become the Intermarium federation. Of course, these are only speculations, but in my opinion if we are talking about the Intermarium concept at all, then Poland's winning the Eastern issue was a *conditio sine qua non* of implementing this concept. This did not happen – while in the fourteenth century Krakow beat Moscow in the race to rule over Vilnius, in the early twentieth century Moscow proved to be stronger than Warsaw in the struggle for Kiev. This determined the history of this part of the continent for the next 100 years.

Conclusion

Passing from historical considerations to the present, it should be noted that the latest history of integration initiatives in the Intermarium area does not give any particular optimism. All kinds of regional pacts that were created or attempted to create were in fact of little value, while the real unification of the region was carried out under *Pax Germanica*, *Pax Sovietica* or recently *Pax Americana* – naturally not making equality between the first two and the third. Does this mean that the Central and Eastern European nations are doomed to be an object and not a subject of history? And are any regional integration initiatives doomed to failure?

I don't think so. In 1947, the Polish émigré journal titled “Intermarium” noted: “The meaning of almost all disputes on Intermarium can be embraced and reduced to a fairly simple formula: these disputes result from the contradictions between historically justified aspirations and the current ethnic reality”⁹. Currently, this problem has largely – though not entirely – disappeared. Countries in the Intermarium area can, in configurations that were unthinkable in the interwar period – such as the Visegrad Group – shape and redefine the principles of cooperation and collaboration. Despite the fact that we are still dealing with the primacy of national interest over thinking in community categories, this part of the continent is slowly being unified. Unification is taking place in the political but also in the economic field. And although there are still more questions than answers and still centrifugal factors play an important role, thinking about the integration of this part of the continent into a larger community, which is the European Union, has shifted from the category of idealistic concepts towards a real, perhaps visionary political doctrine. 40 years ago, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, wrote about the borders of Europe: “I am convinced that the division into Western and Eastern Europe, which has been dominant for over 30 years, has, to some extent, displaced the average way of thinking and expressing the

⁹ *Nasze spory*, „Intermarium. Biuletyn”, 1947, No 7, p. 13.

identity of Central Europe”¹⁰. Since then, a lot has changed and it is hard to doubt that the integration of the Intermarium area must take into account the common political and economic interest of the region's states, but must be based on something deeper and more stable – the acceptance and understanding of the historical identity and unity of this part of the continent.

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¹⁰ K. Wojtyła, *La frontiera l’Europa:dove?*, “Vita e pensiero”, 1978, No 4-6, p. 162.