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THE LITTLE ENTENTE – EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Abstract:

This article presents information concerning a European regional pact, formed during the interwar period – the Little Entente. The aim of the study is to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of an alliance between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the history of its creation. The influence that the Little Entente made on the history of Europe is very often overlooked. Though the alliance ultimately did not survive the strong pressure of the European powers, effective organisational structures and the successes of common foreign policy were a guideline for the integration of the Central and Eastern European countries in the future. The deliberate way in which foreign policy was conducted improved significantly alliance members position on the international area. The first part of the article relates to the historical background and describes both the historical and political environment of interwar Europe as well as indicates the most important moments during the process of the creation of an alliance. The next part describes links between the Little Entente and the French government. The main part of the study refers to the successes this alliance achieved as well as to the events that contributed to the collapse of this pact. This paper contains also a part connected with the heritage of the Little Entente. The last part of an article summarises the considerations of the content.

Keywords:

the Little Entente, Edvard Beneš, Hungarian revisionism, Czechoslovakia, European regional pacts,

Introduction

The creation of the Little Entente happened during the interwar period. This alliance can be appraised among other European regional pacts that were

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signed during that time. Besides the Little Entente, there were created also the Balkan Pact and the Baltic Entente². Each of these alliances was located in the Central and Eastern Europe region. The foundation of each alliance was based on different backgrounds, however, some typical and common aims for this group of pacts can be specified.

First of all, gaining defence abilities. Cooperation between European countries in the military field was obvious. The First World War changed the perception of military conflicts and created the direction for both: internal and foreign affairs. Namely, regional pacts were established often in order to provide mutual protection in the case of armed conflicts.

Secondly, the economy was another reason for building an international alliance in interwar Europe. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire caused a massive revolution on the socio-political stage. The creation of new borders and dividing territory of the old empire as well as changes on economical grounds gave a perspective for European leading powers to expand their incomes. The alliances' main intention was to prevent the biggest European states from gaining a monopoly in this area at that time.

Finally, states which were linked by alliances could achieve more on the international stage. The countries of each regional pact were forced to take up a common direction of their foreign policy with the aim of pushing through valuable ideas. Alliances which appeared as a community toward an international audience was more effective.

This paper contains information about political background connected with the foundation of the Little Entente as well as indicates the main political aims of the alliance. The information that the following paper contains, also describes the real outcomes of the Little Entente and their impact on international politics. This article also discusses the heritage of this pact, pointing out to the subsequent regional alliances in Europe that were based on the models created by the Little Entente.

Historical background

The peace treaty between the Entente Powers and the Kingdom of Hungary was signed on the 4th of June 1920 in Trianon (France). This was an official end of the First World War between these countries. As result, new borders of Hungary were established and its territory reduced by 2/3's. 25 percent of the population found themselves in neighbouring countries. Members of the Little Entente were inheritors of the Kingdom's territory. In consequence, Hungarian revisionism was the main trend in the foreign policy

² H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami 1919 – 1939. Zarys historii dyplomatycznej*, Kraków 2001, p. 179.

of Hungary after 1920. Shared perspective on Hungarian revisionism was uniting countries of the Little Entente for almost 17 years³.

Budapest remained the only place in the region apart from the Soviet Union, in which the communist system was preserved. As part of the protest following the announcement of the peace agreement, the liberal government resigned. Hungarians were reluctant to think about the prospect of losing Slovakia and Transylvania. The nationalist sentiments, that were increasingly common in the Hungarian society utilized by Béla Kun, a communist leader. He led to the takeover of power by the communists, with no opposition from social democrats or military representatives. As a result, the Hungarian army launched an offensive against Slovakia. The new constitution was approved at a rapid pace and numerous references were announced. The obligation of forced labour was imposed on peasants and clergy. All branches of industry were nationalized. The Hungarian Soviet Republic did not receive the support of Soviet Russia, so the Romanian army entered Budapest and the Hungarian Soviet Republic came to the end⁴.

The failure of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was caused by categorical reforms. Communists turned intelligence and entrepreneurs against their Government. The gradual political disaster which resulted in desertions in the army was the beginning of the end for the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Afterward, Miklós Horthy came to power and headed a provisional government. Even though the monarchy was still a mandatory political system, nobody was elected. M. Horthy as a regent was in power during the interregnum time⁵.

The European environment was an active background influencing the creation of a new alliance. What should be mentioned, some disproportions and conflicts appeared among the Allied Powers. France had to find a stable partner in Eastern Europe to fulfil both its political and economical needs. On the other hand, the United Kingdom wanted to weaken French policy in the region to the disadvantage of defeated Germany. This was a chance to establish an export of its goods to Germany and restore trade relations with Russia. Germany did not want to resign from revisionism aimed at the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, particularly Poland. Bolsheviks wanted to conquer entire Europe, masking coercion and tyranny with slogans of freedom and progress presented on the international area⁶.

The Little Entente was not an initial idea in the terms of unification of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. First references to the idea of the United States of Middle Europe appeared during the First World War⁷. In

³ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁴ N. Davies, *Europa. Rozprawa Historyka z Historią*, Kraków 1999, pp. 991-992.

⁵ A. Czubiński, *Europa dwudziestego wieku. Zarys historii politycznej*, Poznań 1997, pp. 91-92.

⁶ W. Roszkowski, *Historia Polski 1914- 1990*, Warszawa 1992, p. 40.

⁷ P. Wandycz, *Z dziejów dyplomacji*, Wrocław 1989, pp. 124.

autumn 1918, Romanian politician, Take Ionescu presented a similar idea during his performance in Geographical Society in Paris. He supported the concept of uniting nations within the region, which would have been established after the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy. The core of his idea was a strong alliance between Romania and Serbia. Lack of communication and different foreign policy aims contributed to the failure of this concept⁸.

Even if the idea of the Little Entente appeared much earlier, Edvard Beneš became known as the founder of this regional alliance. In 1919, Czech statesman founded a scheme of a military pact, which linked Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Romania against the threat from vindictive Empire of Hungary⁹. Beneš never admitted that this alliance is intended mainly to prevent the members of the Little Entente from Hungarian aggression. He justified the creation of this pact mainly for ideological and economical reasons. Despite his efforts and proactive attitude, talks and negotiations with other allies took some time and ended with the common statement in peace treaty conferences in Saint-Germain, and Trianon¹⁰.

During the entire process of forming a new alliance, E. Beneš was the most active politician, who led to the final organisational success. The signing of the Defence Convention with Yugoslavia on the 14th of August 1920 was a very important event during the whole Little Entente's history. It guaranteed mutual help in case of an unprovoked attack from Hungary. Soon after the meeting in Belgrade, Beneš conducted talks with Romanian government, but at that point, due to indecisiveness of Romanian politicians, negotiations were postponed¹¹.

A crucial moment, that occurred in the early stage of the Little Entente's existence happened on the 26th of March 1921. It was an attempt of restoration for the Habsburgs on the Hungarian throne. Romania and Yugoslavia officially protested in front of the Hungarian government. French officials also supported the alliance in this matter. The most aggressive attitude toward this case was presented by Czechoslovakia. Prague even considered the use of armed forces to prevent Charles I from attempting to return to the throne. As the historical facts show, this attempt was not successful, however, it strengthened the ties between the alliance states. Romania realised afterward that Hungarian threat is possible and increased its efforts to formalise the alliance by signing a paper with Czechoslovakia¹².

The Romanian Government reached an agreement with the First Czechoslovak Republic decision-makers on the 23rd of April 1921, when they signed

⁸ A. Essen, *Polska a Mała Ententa 1920 – 1934*, Kraków 1992, pp. 14.

⁹ B. Bankowicz, M. Bankowicz, A. Dudek, *Leksykon historii XX wieku*, Kraków 1996, pp. 332.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ A. Essen, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 54-55.

the formal papers. On the 7th of June 1921, Yugoslavia signed an agreement with Romania. A few months later, on the 22nd of February 1922, as a result of the conference in Geneva, a significant document was signed. Its content gave the impression that there was a political conflict between the countries forming the alliance. The main problem was an unrelated activity of Beneš. He considered himself a representative of the Little Entente during talks in the capitals of Great Britain and France. The Prime minister of Romania, Ion Brătianu made it a point of honour to discredit Beneš during the conference in the European area due to his self-proclaimed decisions¹³.

Eight years later, on the 27th of June 1930, Yugoslavia and Romania have completed formal political and economical arrangements. During the conference in Štrbské Pleso, members of the alliance were debating mainly about the measures which were needed to be taken in order to improve the economic situation of the Little Entente. It was founded that trade treaties between each member need to be formalised. What are more, allies regulated the issue concerning cyclical meetings of the foreign affairs ministers¹⁴.

An Organisational Pact was signed on the 16th of February 1933 in Geneva. This document became a formal and stable connection between the states. This action was taken to protect their safety from the consequences of Benito Mussolini's plan, who wanted to redirect German territorial conquests toward Eastern European countries and the Balkans¹⁵. This document confirmed the cooperation of three states, which until then were linked only through bilateral agreements. This action was taken also in order to set the alliance's foreign policy details in a more precise way¹⁶.

The Organisational Pact created three important elements of the organisational structure: The Permanent Council, The Secretariat of the Permanent Council and The Economic Council of the Little Entente¹⁷. The most important result of the creation of those instruments was the unification of obligations, which united Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia with other countries as well as the extension of the validity of the alliance conventions¹⁸.

An expression – the Little Entente was used for the first time in Hungarian newspaper, *Pesti Hírlap* as a result of the first public appearance of those three allied countries in front of the Supreme Council of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers on the 25th of February 1920. This name was created in

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 228.

¹⁵ H. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 211.

¹⁷ *Pact of Organisation of the Little Entente. Signed at Geneva, February 16, 1933*, Mfa.gov.rs, 5.10.2009, <<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/diplomatic-tradition/historical-diplomatic-papers/1299--16-1933>> (31.12.2019).

¹⁸ A. Essen, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-268.

intention to underline the weakness of the new European pact, compared with powerful members of the Triple Entente. Even if this term had an unfavourable meaning, it was shortly established in official diplomatic language¹⁹.

French influence

French diplomacy wanted to strike while the iron is hot. First and foremost, they wanted to keep and secure the territorial states that arose after the peace treaty in Versailles. Opinions about French influence on the Little Entente are still divided. France wanted to tighten the knots with Eastern European countries to expand their influence: both in political and economical areas. To prove these words, in 1920 a French motor company, Schneider-Creusot became a shareholder in Škoda company and French economic influences began to be noticeable also in the clothing industry²⁰.

France has given their support for the Little Entente, among other things to prevent stability in Europe from the Hungarian revisionism²¹. The culmination point of the change of French diplomatic attitude towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a result of the disintegration of the empire, it created a gap in French foreign policy which was needed to be filled with a strong partner²².

The process of supporting the Little Entente by France was confirmed by several formal agreements. The first of them was signed on 25th of January 1924 with Czechoslovakia. Its core was connected with mutual defence from potential aggression of the Soviet Union²³. To improve its' position in this part of Europe, France also signed agreements with Romania (1926) and Yugoslavia (1927). However, they were not as binding and formal as the one signed with Czechoslovakia²⁴.

Another linking factor for France and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was the failure of the White Movement in Russia, which meant that Bolshevism became a direct danger for European countries. In order to prevent the spread of communism, France wanted to create some kind of barrier, consisting of Central and Eastern European countries. France showed great political commitment to the liberation of the countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania during the First World War, therefore these countries had a debt of gratitude towards France. To execute

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

²¹ H. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²² A. Essen, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²³ H. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

that plan, France started to insert its foreign policy aims to among those key countries²⁵.

One of the most important aims was preventing Austria from being incorporated by Germany. The effort was profitable because the provisions on prohibiting Austria from being annexed to Germany were included in the peace treaty document. The political future of Austria was one of the topics of the conference in Prague, attended by foreign ministers of Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland on the 28th of August 1922. Representatives also decided that a split between France and Great Britain should be avoided. Decision-makers concluded that close contacts with the Polish government should be maintained²⁶.

France wanted to support Hungary in the area of economics after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During unofficial negotiations, French politicians suggested, that peace treaty from Trianon can be reconsidered, strengthen a war weakened state²⁷.

French diplomacy was pushing through the conception of a new pact which would link Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia together. The political direction of the new pact was intended to be strongly anti-German²⁸. Poland presented a warm attitude towards France in this case. In the aftermath, on the 19th of February 1921, both sides signed a declaration. This agreement guaranteed help in the case of German military aggression, as well as cooperation during peacetime. The alliance with France ruled out cooperation with Great Britain, where the echoes of German anti-Polish propaganda could still be heard²⁹.

The successes of the alliance

It is needed to be underlined, that the Little Entente was the first regional pact formed after the First World War. It was created in order to become a strong barrier against Hungarian revisionism, contributing to preserving the stability of stormy interwar Europe. Even if the result did not fully meet initial expectations, the very process of creating and introducing organisational structures was a breakthrough in the integration of European countries³⁰.

Through the establishment and several years of alliance's activity, the opinion about Central and Eastern European countries has improved a lot. This was a clear signal that the members of the alliance could be treated on an equal footing with Western European countries and that they are able to conduct an independent foreign policy and establish economic relations. The concept that

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ A. Essen, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

²⁷ H. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁸ A. Essen, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁹ W. Roszkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 41.

³⁰ P. Wandycz, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not capable of living independently and are not able to achieve their political objectives has been denied once and for all. The founding of the Little Entente created an opportunity for leaders of member states to develop their countries. As history has shown, Edward Beneš made a great benefit of this, turning Czechoslovakia into a major player in the region³¹.

Undoubtedly, this alliance laid the foundations for the process of integration of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Considering the turbulent history of Yugoslavia and the dynamic history of this part of Europe, it should be appreciated that this alliance has established some common standards for members of the Little Entente. It was the beginning of the process of forming future regional alliances. Thanks to the Little Entente, consolidation of next regional alliances was accompanied by an efficient organisation and effective structures which enabled to consolidate seemingly different interests³².

It should be underlined, that mainly for Czechoslovakia, partnership in the Little Entente was very valuable. It tightened the cooperation with France and was helpful to pursue interests in the political area of Europe. Czechoslovakia has become an axis of alliance and major player in the European area. E. Beneš is seen as an author of the success of Czechoslovakia foreign policy, thanks to his ability to anticipate favourable opportunities and consistency in action. Not without importance is also the achievement of the main objective, namely assured safety from Hungarian revisionism, which was a binder for the Little Entente³³.

The fall of the Little Entente

The process of collapse of the Little Entente was influenced by several political and economical factors. First and foremost, the growth of importance of the monarchical system in each member state, as well as the pursuit of isolationism, presented particularly by Czechoslovakia caused deterioration of cooperation within the Little Entente. Economical weakness was caused, among other things by the unprofitable plans for the movement of goods between the countries. Czechoslovakia provided machines and vehicles, however, Yugoslavia and Romania did not have funds for the purchase of such goods. On the other hand, these two countries had better opportunities for agricultural production and Czechoslovakia could not buy the surplus harvest³⁴.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 130.

³³ A. Essen, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

³⁴ P. Wandycz, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

The significant human losses caused by the participation in the Balkan Wars (more than 100 thousand victims) and the First World War did not stop the high demographic growth of the Balkan countries. The people living in the area lived mainly from agriculture and animal breeding. It should be underlined, that in Yugoslavia a very small percentage of the area was urbanised³⁵. The issue of a high margin of trading goods was also a problem for the partner countries. That vicious circle has led to a deterioration in the economic situation and a loosening of the ties between the states³⁶.

The issues connected with political systems in Yugoslavia and Romania were bone of contention for ruling powers in Czechoslovakia. Representatives of industry preferred an authoritarian monarchy because existing unofficial connections and trade privileges could be still guaranteed. An opposition represented like Beneš – intellectualists and politicians, perceived democracy as a golden mean on the road to the unification of the Little Entente. One thing is certain – as a result of ambiguous internal policy of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania slowly became economically dependent from Germany³⁷.

In the late period of the Little Entente existence, different conceptions, intended to recover its' high position in world politics appeared. First of them was a plan created by Milan Hodža. He presented the idea of economical cooperation between countries of the Little Entente and what is interesting with Austria and Hungary. The idea was to create an alternative to the influence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Germany, as the biggest economic forces, however, the plan has not been successful³⁸.

Beneš tried to transform the existing pact into a powerful superpower, with its foreign policy and military abilities. This conception was presented soon after the German offensive in Rhineland. This plan intended to encourage France to the convergence of interests in the international area. French government saw the alliance with the Little Entente as a clear dissociation from Germany. In the long term, Beneš's plan can be seen only as a bluff against Germany, which had no chance of success from a military point of view³⁹.

Remilitarisation of Rhineland was a key point of future events in Europe. In practice, Germany armed and prepared this zone for the war. This area closed the way for the French army to help its allies in Central and Eastern Europe if necessary. Yugoslavia has refrained from maintaining an alliance with France because the government considered France to be a country that had given up part of its territory to the Germans without a fight and which, in

³⁵ P. Eberhardt, *Między Rosją a Niemcami. Przemiany narodowościowe w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XX w.*, Warszawa 1996, p. 285.

³⁶ P. Wandycz, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 127-128.

the case of aggression, would not provide any support to the countries such as Yugoslavia and Romania. Even with strong commitment of E. Beneš, who hoped to modify the alliance's objectives to adapt it to the existing threats, these were unfeasible assumptions⁴⁰.

The faith in France as a hope for protection against German expansion collapsed. The last session of the Little Entente in Bled resulted in accepting the remilitarisation of Hungary, which was the exact opposite of the Little Entente's *credo*. Czechoslovakia, which in 1938 was in direct danger of German aggression, still believed in the strong intervention of France, which had not carried out an independent foreign policy for a long time⁴¹.

The heritage of the Little Entente

According to international integration theories, principles of the pact can be associated with Charles Deutsch's theory of communication. The foundations on which the alliance was based were to result in the achievement of security and peace in practice, and not only in terms of a formal union of nations. The integration of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, in line with the communication theory, was intended to minimise the likelihood of armed conflicts, while preserving the distinctiveness and independence of the member states. The creation of the Little Entente resulted in an increased sense of security for the inhabitants of these countries. This alliance retained the independence of the member states. In line with Deutsch's theory of communication, independent nations and their inhabitants are an important part of social life. Communication theory places the integration of states as the most important element to reduce the risk of armed conflict. The difference between the communication theory and the functional integration theory lies in the formulation of the essential objective of uniting countries. Deutsch's theory considers security and peace to be an overarching objective, as opposed to functionalism theory, where the most important aspect of integration is economic prosperity. Foundation of the Little Entente led to the unification of the objectives of the societies of Central and Eastern European countries and the creation of common political institutions and economic ties⁴².

The foundation of the Little Entente led to the creation of communication and mutual contacts between member states. The founding of the alliance allowed the establishment of a political and economic community, as well as to the exchange of arts and culture. In Deutsch's integration theory, war is not a way of conducting politics. The exchange of views and culture of supranational

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 128-129.

⁴¹ H. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁴² P. Borkowski, *Polityczne teorie integracji międzynarodowej*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 81-85.

societies is a factor that strengthens further the sense of integration⁴³. Creation of the Little Entente gave rise to a social movement that promoted the idea of a community of Balkan states. Between 1930 and 1933, four Balkan conferences were held, attended by representatives of the field of culture, science, economy, and politics. Representatives of Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria discussed the common problems of the Balkan countries, which in turn led to the establishment of numerous relations in the field of politics, culture, and economy. These events were not formal, they were based on a spontaneous willingness to cooperate and exchange experiences among the peoples of Balkan culture circles⁴⁴. The Balkan conferences also focused on various forms of economic cooperation. Participants shared a common interest in the export of cereals, tobacco, and other products and as well to facilitate the means of trade communication. A couple of efforts have been made to formalise economic cooperation. As a result, a draft of the Balkan Customs Union, the Balkan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Chamber of Agriculture were founded. The Balkan conferences contributed to the establishment of Balkan Entente in 1934⁴⁵.

This alliance united Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Turkey. The main reason for the establishment of the Balkan Entente was the intensification of the fascist tendencies in Germany and Italy. Security of borders and the maintenance of the current territorial order were at the heart of the new pact. The Little Entente was a point of reference for the newly formed alliance, both in its statutory and organisational dimensions⁴⁶.

The Little Entente was a model for the subsequent trilateral collaboration between the Kingdom of Romania, the Independent State of Croatia and the Slovak Republic during the Second World War. The reason why these countries allied was the fear of a further danger from the Hungarian revisionism. The loss of substantial territory in favour of Hungarian expansion led to the creation of a pact between the countries in May 1942. Hungary had the support of Germany and therefore the agreement failed. What makes the alliance of 1942 similar to the Little Entente is the fact that it was also directed against Hungarian revisionism, and included three countries that belonged to the group of Central and Eastern European countries⁴⁷.

⁴³ M. Zając-Fraş, *Teorie i modele integracji europejskiej*, "Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie" 2011, No 852, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁴ W. Dobrzycki, *Historia stosunków międzynarodowych 1815-1945*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 418- 419.

⁴⁵ J. Tomaszewski, Z. Śladek, *Próby integracji ekonomicznej Europy Środkowej i południowo-wschodniej w latach 30 XX w.*, „Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka” 1979, No 3, p. 381.

⁴⁶ W. Dobrzycki, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

⁴⁷ M. Tejchman, *Attempts to Form Antirevisionist Alliances inside the Axis: Croatian, Slovak and Romanian Collaboration against Hungary (1941–1943)*, "West Bohemian Historical Review" 2012, No 2, pp. 147-158.

The idea of integration of the Balkan states was intensively taken up by the authorities of Yugoslavia and Greece – in-exile during the emigration era in Great Britain. It was planned to create the Balkan Union to guide the foreign, defence, and economic policies of both countries. The British Government was involved in helping to organize the future grouping in the form of consultations of an expert group, addressed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Unfortunately, mutual mistrust and the desire to push through the interests of individual nations led to the failure of the idea of integration, which was present in immigration circles during World War II⁴⁸.

The Balkan states were once again called upon to cooperate closely with Czechoslovakia in 1955 when the Warsaw Pact was established. Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania, together with the Soviet Union, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, and Poland, allied to respond to the threat of strengthening the combat readiness of Western Germany. The Warsaw Pact gave way to the defence policy of the Eastern Bloc countries for almost 40 years. The organization was a counterweight to NATO and continued to exist until 1991⁴⁹.

The Little Entente was an excellent manifestation of regionalism, a process of cooperation between countries located in geographical proximity. Regionalism is by no means a static process. It is a dynamic influence of countries that, apart from geographical proximity, are characterized by an equal political system, common history, or cultural patterns. The cooperation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe within the framework of the Little Entente led to the creation of transnational organisational structures and the formulation of several documents and treaties. This is another fact confirming the classification of this alliance as a manifestation of regionalism. Actions implemented by the states led to the cooperation of member states above the political threshold. Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia represented the same objectives and interests. Regionalism is characterised by the implementation of cooperation in one or more areas of state functioning. The Little Entente, as an alliance, was formed for primarily defensive reasons. Attempts at economic integration of the Little Entente countries were a secondary goal for the politicians of these countries⁵⁰.

The factors that characterised the majority of regional alliances (geographical proximity, similar history, politics), bringing countries of the Little Entente closer in the interwar period, gave a push to the integration of Central and Eastern European countries in the late 20th century. The earliest form of such cooperation, founded at the end of the last century was the Central European Initiative (CEI). It was established in 1989. Initially, it consisted of

⁴⁸ K. Łastawski, *Historia integracji europejskiej*, Toruń 2008, pp. 43.

⁴⁹ J. Barcz, E. Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, K. Michałowska-Gorywoda, *Integracja Europejska*, Warszawa 2007, p. 39.

⁵⁰ A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice 2018, pp. 28-31.

four countries – Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary, and Italy. Today, it brings together 18 Central and Eastern European countries, among them: Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Italy. The overarching goal of the Central European Initiative is to support the development of the countries that used to belong to the Communist Bloc. Establishing contacts, assistance, and dialogue on many levels was supposed to help develop a market economy, support the development of democracy and equal opportunities. The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is an example of an organization that unites the Balkan and Central European countries, inheriting the legacy of the Little Entente. Initially, the signatories of the agreement were Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, while in its current form CEFTA includes Northern Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Participating in CEFTA was to prepare the countries applying for membership of the European Union economically. Another objective was to overcome stagnation in trade between the countries of the Eastern Bloc and to increase their political cooperation⁵¹.

The present-day organisation, which consists of three member states, located close to each other and sharing common traditions, culture, and political objectives, is the Visegrad Group. On the 15th of February 1991, the authorities of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary signed a declaration that gave rise to close cooperation between these countries in pursuit of European integration. Besides, the countries undertook an effort to create a free trade area to support economic development in Central and Eastern Europe. In the defence sphere, they aimed to obtain membership in NATO. The Visegrad Group links nowadays Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia with common goals, which include promoting democracy, abolishing all forms of remnants of the totalitarian system, supporting the development of modern democratic countries, striving for integration with the European political and economic system. Additionally, sessions or meetings of ministers of these countries are held before the meetings of the Council of the European Union. The Visegrad Group inspires as well as the integration efforts of the Balkan States. Following the example of the Visegrad International Fund, the Balkan states created the Western Balkans Fund, whose resources are used to finance economic, cultural, and social projects. The unquestionable benefit of the Visegrad Group is the creation of a multinational European Union Battle Group called the Visegrad Battle Group, which is on standby duty within the European Quick Reaction Force under Polish command. In addition to soldiers of the Visegrad countries, it also includes a Croatian component⁵².

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 48-50, 150.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 75-78, 163, 214.

Conclusion

The Little Entente can be considered from many perspectives. This alliance existed in the troubled interwar period and was located between the two biggest aggressors on the continent. Founded for a variety of reasons, it became a strong and resilient political formation. Its formalised structure, divided to achieve specific goals that transcend national boundaries was a milestone on the road to the integration of European countries in future.

The concept of integration of Central and Eastern European countries was invented by Tomáš Masaryk, however, his prominent student and successor, E. Beneš, put this idea into practice. Throughout the alliance's lifetime, Czechoslovakia was the strongest link in this pact, while Beneš was without doubts the most influential politician.

Focusing on the aims of the alliance, many of them were achieved. The Little Entente protected its members from Hungarian revisionism and contributed to peacekeeping in this part of the world. The Little Entente strengthened the position of the member states in the international area, enabling them to establish political and trade relations with the European Powers. The Little Entente brought the countries of Eastern and Central Europe closer to France. Thanks to mutual interests and economic correlations, it showed that those countries could be perceived as valuable allies. This alliance inspired afterward countries in the Central and Eastern Europe to integrate, in many dimensions. Many alliances and organisations formed in this circle of civilisation were based on the concept of the Little Entente. This process of integration was a manifestation of regionalism and influenced significantly integration processes of countries from similar cultural circles.

The collapse of the Little Entente was reinforced by economic weaknesses. Differences in economic policies caused difficulties in mutual trade between the member states. A big crisis in the European economy forced Yugoslavia and Romania into the embrace of the German economy. What is more, the political position of the monarchy in those countries strengthened, which was as an opposition to the vision of Beneš democracy as the most favourable system for the unification within Europe.

Even though the Little Entente did not survive and was not the longest alliance in history, it should be underlined that it was a milestone to the process of integration of European countries and peacekeeping tools in the interwar period. Its organisational structures and political competencies helped to achieve significant successes in international policy and to maintain border security.

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