

## MIĘDZYMORZE AS A POLISH GEOPOLITICAL CONCEPT

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**Abstract:** *At the end of the 30's, when Polish statehood was endangered, its geopolitical thinking was dominated by the concept of Międzymorze. The concept followed the project, advocated by J. Piłsudski during the time of formation of independent Poland. Polish foreign minister J. Beck attempted to implement the renewed project but he did not succeed. Similar projects proposed by Polish politicians during the World War II and after 1990 failed too. The study deals with geopolitical aspects of the Międzymorze concept and it is a research introduction to this topic.*

**Key words:** *geopolitics, Central Europa, Poland, Miedzymorze*

### INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical concept of *Międzymorze* (in Latin *Intermarium*), called also the “Third Europe” is less known, but the very interesting project, which emerged at the Polish foreign policy during the 30's of the last century. The roots of the concept are during the era of formation of the Polish state after the World War I. Its implementation has not been successful and therefore it was discussed within the Polish historical research as the part of the Polish diplomatic history as well as the part of the Polish political thinking. However, the concept is also an integral part of the Polish geopolitical tradition. Similar ideas emerged also within the intellectual environment outside the Central Europe, e.g. in the French project of A. Tardieu (1932), in the Eastern Pact (1934-1935), or in variants of the Danubian Pact (1932-1936).

Interwar Poland was the largest country in the Central-East Europe and therefore Polish politicians considered it as a natural leader in the region. For that reason, it would take initiative for the organization of this geopolitical region. One of such models represented the creation of “wall” between Germany and Russia (the Soviet Union), called by its location *Międzymorze* (region bounded by the Baltic, Black and the Adriatic Sea). Geopolitical concept of *Międzymorze*, developed in the late 30's linked to ideas that were developed in the Polish political thinking not only after 1919 when Poland gained its independence but also prior to that date.

### Polish geopolitical projects in the context of *Międzymorze*

Polish authors found the roots of the *Międzymorze* concept as early as in the policy of Polish monarchs and statesmen during the Middle Ages. As the greatest success in

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promoting the integration of this area is considered the implementation of the so-called Jagiellonian concept, which has resulted to the connection of four countries: Poland, Hungary, Bohemia and Lithuania under the rule of one dynasty in the 15th century. Thus, the case of *Międzymorze* is a long-lasting idea, which was based on geopolitical factors affecting that area.

In the middle of the 19th century Polish Count Czartorysky presented the plan for the federal union of the Central European nations, reaching to the Caucasus aimed against Russia. Implementation of this plan would, in his opinion, help the emergence of the Polish state in the form of the regional power (Hacker, 1996).

The roots of modern *Międzymorze* concept can be found just after the World War I. Polish general and politician J. Piłsudski (1867-1935) tried to find possibilities to strengthen independence of the newly created Polish state. The geopolitical situation as well as the very existence of a young country was threatened by its close and strong neighbours – the Soviet Russia and Germany.

Piłsudski considered its eastern neighbour more dangerous and therefore he saw the prospect of Polish independence in the way of weakening Russia by secession of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine and their merging with Poland in the form of federation or any other kind of union. Provisional emergence of independent Ukraine (1918-1922) did not foster that project because its policy was not aimed at cooperation in Poland. Tense Polish-Lithuanian relations did not permit the establishment of the union so, particularly when Piłsudski talked about the incorporation of Lithuania into the Polish state (Nowak, 2008). Thus, this attempt to revise geopolitical arrangements of the Eastern Europe was not successful and Piłsudski's intention to restore Poland in the form of great power, equivalent to Russia, failed too.

Although the new State has successfully maintained its independence, the target geopolitical concept, formulated by his birth, were not fulfilled. Piłsudski's motto "Poland will be a great or nothing" reflected the interwar Polish foreign policy in search of Polish "size" in unfavorable geopolitical conditions. Nevertheless, during the interwar period Poland tried to present itself as a great power in the area of Central and Eastern Europe and tried to carry out an independent foreign policy.

### **GEOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS FOR THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF MIĘDZYMORZE**

The revival of Piłsudski's concept came with changes in geopolitical conditions during the 30's. The foreshadow of its resumption was the book by S. Gużkowski "Imperium Jagellonicum" in 1931, in which the author proposes to create a confederation of states from Finland to Greece and even with Turkey (Marczak, 2005).

Polish politicians became increasingly aware of the increasing danger because of the place of their country between two powers. German military capability has grown according to its power ambitions and traditionally had the eastern direction. The Soviet Union could not be regarded as a reliable neighbor so, especially because of its revanchistic plans.

Thus, for Poland it was necessary to assess the geopolitical layout of the Central Europe and to seek a way out of this situation by promoting the implementation of „policy balance“ (P. Lossowski, cit. Kornat, 2008). As a consequence various geopolitical scenarios resulted:

- to search for an understanding with one of the neighboring powers,
- an agreement with two neighboring powers,
- to set up a defensive block of small states in the region under the leadership of Poland, aimed against threats of Germany and the Soviet Union.

Polish diplomacy of the 30's followed the second and the third scenario. On July the 25th, 1932 Poland concluded the nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union and on January the 26th, 1934 with Germany (but without guarantees of the common border). However, it was obviously only a short-term solution for the unfavorable geopolitical situation of the Polish state and therefore it was necessary to strive for the realization of the third scenario.

The initiator of the revival of the *Międzymorze* geopolitical concept was the Polish foreign minister J. Beck (1894-1944). In his opinion, the best way how could Poland face these threats is to balance between two neighboring powers, to bring Poland closer to the United Kingdom instead to France, to cooperate with Turkey and Japan and especially to develop a firm collaboration with smaller countries of Central Europe. The concept was promoted in Polish foreign policy especially during the tensed years of 1937-1939. As M. Kornat (2008) observed, the principle of that politics is very difficult to reconstruct, since it has not been implemented and J. Beck has never explained its principles. Similarly, his opinion about the territorial scope of *Międzymorze* has not been fully clarified.

Beck based his policy on a pragmatic calculation of geopolitical changes in Europe during the 30's when two power blocks started to form: the fascist block led by Germany and the bloc of Western powers, led by Great Britain and France. Therefore, according to him, it was necessary to create the third group of Central European States, which could become „the third Europe“. (He did not consider the Soviet Union - Russia as a European power.)

#### **THE NATURE OF THE *MIĘDZYMORZE* CONCEPT AND THE ATTEMPTS OF ITS REALIZATION**

The creating of *Międzymorze* should elevate Poland to the level of a regional power able to influence the situation in the Central East Europe. The concept should, at the same time, respond to the question about ensuring Polish security, sovereignty and its national interests. M. Kornat (2008) argues, that J. Piłsudski and J. Beck were convinced that the Central East Europe is Balkanized because of a number of small countries, which are only a subjects of an external powers. Therefore it is necessary to pool their potential under the natural leadership of Poland.

Beck saw the solution is grouping of states between the Baltic, Black and the Adriatic seas. These states were, as well as Poland, also threatened by the two dominant powers - Germany and the Soviet Union. Poland should stand at the forefront of the group, which would hamper the imperial ambitions of powerful neighbors.

The pragmatism of Beck's political thoughts is reflected also in his deideologized approach to security issues, based on geopolitical determinants, which are, according to him, set regardless the political orientation of the ruling governments. Therefore he assumed the pragmatic understanding between the mentioned states, which will accentuate the preservation of their independence. Such a premise was, according to him, sufficient for their interest for the mutual cooperation.

According to M. K. Kaminski and M. Zacharias (1993), Poland calculated for the implementation of the *Międzymorze* project with the support of the third power – Italy, which would result to the creation of an axis Warsaw - Budapest - Bucharest - Belgrade - Rome. The backbone of this alliance should be the cooperation between Poland, Hungary and Romania, with support of Yugoslavia and Italy. As Beck assumed, Italy is solidary with Germany only in relation to the Western powers, while in the eastern direction it is its rival. This assumption, however, proved to be wrong.

The *Międzymorze* concept did not count with the inclusion of Austria and Czechoslovakia. One of the reasons for that was an assumption that these countries will be objects of the German expansion soon and therefore they can not be considered as permanent geopolitical entities in the Central Europe. In case of Czechoslovakia, there were also other reasons stemming from its geopolitical position and its problematic relation with Poland.

However, the area between the Danube and the Balkans was geographically remote from the Polish policy, because its political thinking was traditionally dominated by the main European geopolitical axis, which ran horizontally on the east – west line. Polish interests were, in such a context, directed especially to the Baltic States. *Międzymorze* was, with its vertical geopolitical direction which has been out of the traditional Polish ambitions, essentially a new concept. This was also reflected in the intensity and the quality of relations with most countries lying in the area south of the Polish border. However, it should be noted that these relations (with the exception of Czechoslovakia) were essentially good and developed also on the basis of Slavic solidarity, while Poland strived to present itself as the most reliable defender of the Slavic patriotism.

The activity of the Polish diplomacy was focused especially on the creation of the basis for *Międzymorze* project, which has been seen in the close cooperation between Poland, Hungary and Romania. This effort, however, was not successful. Polish-Hungarian relations have been positively affected especially by their common hostility to Czechoslovakia. Creating a common Polish-Hungarian border after the break up of Czechoslovakia had not any significant effect on the geopolitical preconditions for implementation of the *Międzymorze* concept. Relations with Romania have been affected by its different interests and its membership in the Little Entente. After its breakup, Romania was focused on the cooperation with Germany. The failure of the Polish rapprochement with Hungary and Romania reduced the importance of the Balkan States for building the compact partnership of the *Międzymorze* concept. The improving contacts with Latvia and Estonia did not bring the desired effect. Other Scandinavian countries have been reluctant to engage themselves in the complicated Central European issues.

Thus, the feverish Polish efforts to gain allies during the period of escalation of the external pressure were not successful and Poland had to face the German aggression alone. From the geopolitical point of view it was considered a barrier to German expansion to the east and as such was condemned to doom. It seems that the Polish diplomacy nor its political thinking were not able to build and implement a real geopolitical concept, which would lead the Polish state to survive.

### THE EVALUATION OF THE *MIĘDZYMORZE* CONCEPT AND THE REASONS FOR THE FAILURE OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION

The *Międzymorze* project can be viewed as an ambitious and courageous. However, we must point out its unreality, which is sometimes regarded also as a political mistake (H. Roos, cit. Kornat, 2008). Moreover, it is questionable whether the creation of such a bloc would have a sufficient power potential, able to face Germany, or the Soviet Union (Russia), not to mention the option of their common pressure. The *Międzymorze* project was significantly weakened by ignoring Czechoslovakia with its industrial and military potential.

Factors not favorable for realization of this geopolitical idea can be summarized as follows:

1. Some authors stress the fact that Poland was not able to influence the smaller countries around, because of its limited power potential in terms of carrying out this objective. Polish politicians obviously overestimated the material power and the potency of their country, which also resulted to the failure of the *Międzymorze* project. Another reason to distrust the Polish initiative was the attitude of neighboring countries, which perceived Poland to be an expansionary state. It was associated especially with its annexation of Vilnius (Vilnius) in 1922 from Lithuania and Zaolzie and with events concerning Czechoslovakia in 1938. Even a famous expert H. Seton-Watson described the *Międzymorze* project as the expression of "Polish imperialism" (cit. Kornat, 2008). In addition to that, Central European politicians considered refusal of the close relations with Poland as the way how to avoid conflict with Germany or/and the Soviet Union, respectively.

2. In the area of Southeast Europe and the Balkans the *Międzymorze* project clashed with the geopolitical objectives of the Little Entente and Italy. However, the efforts to create a grouping of states in the area of Central Europe led by Poland, collided especially with the interests of Germany, which were presented under the long-term geopolitical code of Mitteleuropa. As it was pointed out by a Polish journalist W. Spring (1867-1953), who was a supporter of the discussed project, its creation without backing of Germany could not serve as a barrier against a potential aggression from Russia (Eberhardt, 2006). He promoted an establishment of the Central European bloc, where Poland meets Germany in the partner's role within the concept of Mitteleuropa. Such an idea was supported also by A. Bocheński (1909-1944). According to him, the deepening of the Polish-German cooperation would give Poland a significant position within the project of Mitteleuropa.

3. Another complications for Polish diplomacy in terms of an implementation of the *Międzymorze* project came from mutual relations of states to be part of it. The course of history, especially after the World War I., created many animosities among them, which were difficult to overcome. These were reflected especially in a border disputes and in a various inter-ethnic tensions. In addition to that, the *Międzymorze* countries were too heterogeneous in terms of levels of their political and economic development.

4. Therefore, each state primarily reflected its own situation and tried to solve the problems by itself. One of the solutions was the rapprochement with Germany and the fascisation as was the case of Hungary and Romania – countries that were intended to be a backbone of the *Międzymorze* project. Thus, Piłsudski's pragmatic and deideologized approach was not successful.

5. Geopolitical conditions for the creation of the *Międzymorze* project were unfavourable also because of Poland's tensed relations with Czechoslovakia, whose territory limited the Polish contact to the south. According to H. Roos (cit. Kornat, 2008) the Polish refusal to cooperate with that neighbor was one of the major causes of the failure of the discussed concept. The effort to destroy Czechoslovakia was in fact a short-sighted, because it only confirmed the German hegemony in the Central Europe. Although the breakup of Czechoslovakia created the common Polish-Hungarian border which was the help for realization of the *Międzymorze* project, the subsequent course of events deprived Poland of any chance to push for its own geopolitical concepts.

### **THE POLISH CONCEPTS FOR THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN INTEGRATION SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD WAR II**

The *Międzymorze* concept remained a part of the Polish political thought during the World War II and between the years 1939-1942 became one of the most discussed projects of the postwar geopolitical arrangement for Europe. The reason for that was especially in the reflections of the exiled political elites from Central and Eastern European countries, to the existing situation. Politicians came to the conclusion about the necessity to create a grouping of states in the area between the Baltic, Black and the Adriatic seas.

The idea of creating a Federation of Central and Eastern European states was discussed in the *New Europe* magazine by Polish diplomat A. Mühlstein and by the U.S. military experts. They were supported by P. H. Cross, who was an advisor to President F. D. Roosevelt (Sadowsky, 2005). Ideas about its definition were different, but the presence of Poland, however, was considered necessary. According to P. Eberhardt (2006), the concept of a union between the Carpathians and the Baltic Sea was supported also by journalist I. Matuszewski (1891-1946), the author of „O co walczymi“ (transl. „What we are fighting for“), published in 1942.

The 10th session of the Polish Government on October, 10 1939 called for the creation of the Central European power center led by Poland, which would counterweight Germany and the Soviet Union. In November 1939, the Polish government in exile expressed its interest for the wider cooperation of the Central and Eastern European countries. The statement was supported also by President W. Sikorski in his letter to homeland (Sadowsky, 2005). The emphasis was placed on military and political cooperation with Czechoslovakia.

On November, 11 1940 the Polish and the Czechoslovak governments-in-exile signed a join declaration affirming their intention to deepen their postwar co-operation and to form a confederation. They also expressed the hope that this collaboration would attract other Central and Eastern European countries to join in. The planned confederation included also the Baltic States, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece (Kobeszko, 2005). The intention of the establishment of the Confederation was confirmed by the common Polish-Czechoslovak declaration, signed on January, 19 1942.

According to the Polish Prime Minister in exile W. Sikorski the realization of the *Międzymorze* project in form of confederation between the Central and Eastern European states would help to consolidate the European postwar situation with defeated Germany and strengthened Soviet Union. Polish politicians in exile introduced the concept also to the Allies. However, the opinion divergences between Poland and Czechoslovakia halted



the project soon. While the Polish party pressed for creation of a close union (federation), Czechoslovak politicians spoke about loose confederation. In addition to that, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile headed by President E. Beneš pursued the cooperation with the Soviet Union, which does not support this concept.

An effort to implement the *Międzymorze* concept remained part of the Polish political thinking until the end of World War II. The Polish Council of National Unity, declared in July 1945 that the Polish nation is attached to a large family of the Central European nations by its geopolitical location and the common history and thus it is eager to create the closest political, economic and cultural unity with them. (cit. Kobeszko, 2005). These words, however, became for a long time a symbol of unrealized Polish initiative to create a union of the Central and Eastern European states.

After 1945, the realization of the concept became impossible because of the bipolar world and the Soviet control of the *Międzymorze* area. The idea of this concept was maintained only within the Polish emigrant circles in Paris, where „The Convention of the *Międzymorze* countries“ was adopted in 1948 (Konarski, 2005). It presented a union of sixteen Central and Eastern European states.

The revival of the *Międzymorze* concept during the 90's is associated with activities of L. Moczulski and his party Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej (transl. Confederation of Independent Poland). The concept they are trying to pursue is based on geopolitical assumption that close cooperation of the Central and Eastern European countries could give them multilateral benefits, including their better recognition within the wider European policy. Sovereignty of the individual states, however, would be untouched. According to Moczulski the „new“ *Międzymorze* project would include eighteen Central and Eastern European countries, with area of more than 2,2 million km<sup>2</sup> and with nearly 200 millions inhabitants (Moczulski, 1999). As he expected, *Międzymorze* could act also as a some kind of interstage prior to accession these states into the European Union.

Another assumption was based on the idea that Poland as the largest body of such union would serve as a representative of the countries negotiating their accession to the European Union. In addition to that, the new *Międzymorze* with its strong human and economic potential would gain a significant position within the European as well as world politics (Kobezko, 2005). During the accession process into the European Union, however, the concept stayed out of any serious interest.

Thus, the idea of regional cooperation under the leadership of Poland was not implemented in that period. One of the main reasons for that lies in the fact that Poland does not have sufficient potential to be accepted by these countries as a regional power (Konarski, 2005). Such a prospect is above all coming from its cooperation with France and Germany (within the Weimar Triangle); however, it is a copy of „horizontal“ direction of the Polish geopolitical interests.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the geopolitical situation during interwar era Beck's *Międzymorze* was not a realistic concept. The reasons were already mentioned factors, as well as lack of time for its implementation. Perhaps it could be viewed as an idea for a future. But the course of events after the World War II did not create favorable conditions for this form of cooperation in the Central East Europe.

By laps of time, it could be easy to evaluate the project as an unrealistic or even a naive. But, as M. Kornat (2008) wrote, what seems to be naive or anachronistic now might be logical and natural within the historical and geopolitical categories of that time.

The *Międzymorze* project was certainly one of the most original geopolitical concepts created within the Polish foreign policy ever. Its implementation was designed to address the problem of adverse geopolitical position of Poland during the interwar period and after the World War II. Although the present state of the European integration process made it outdated, its research certainly contributes to the mapping of geopolitical aspects of the history of the Central and Eastern Europe.

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## MEDZIMORIE AKO POĽSKÁ GEOPOLITICKÁ KONCEPCIA

### Zhrnutie

Geopolitická koncepcia Medzimoria (po poľsky *Miedzymorze*, po latinsky *Intermarium*), nazývaná aj „Tretia Európa“, je menej známym, ale o to zaujímavejším projektom, ktorý vznikol na pôde poľskej zahraničnej politiky v 30. rokoch minulého storočia. Medzivojnové Poľsko bolo najväčšou krajinou stredovýchodnej Európy a poľskí politici považovali svoj štát za prirodzeného hegemonu tohto regiónu. Preto by to malo byť práve Poľsko, ktoré by malo vyvíjať iniciatívu na geopolitické usporiadanie tohto priestoru. Korene modernej poľskej koncepcie Medzimoria možno hľadať tesne po skončení prvej svetovej vojny. J. Pilsudski (1867 – 1935), poľský generál a politik, intenzívne hľadal možnosti upevnenia samostatnosti novovzniknutého poľského štátu. Pilsudski považoval za nebezpečnejšieho východného suseda a preto videl perspektívu poľskej nezávislosti v oslabení Ruska cestou odtrhnutia Litvy, Bieloruska a Ukrajiny, ktoré sa mali spojiť s Poľskom vo forme federácie alebo iného zväzku. Renesancia konceptu J. Pilsudského prebehla v 30. rokoch minulého storočia. Poľskí politici si čoraz viac uvedomovali rastúce nebezpečenstvo, vyplývajúce z polohy poľského štátu medzi dvoma mocnosťami. Iniciátorom renesancie tejto geopolitickej koncepcie bol minister zahraničných vecí Poľska v rokoch 1932 až 1939 J. Beck (1894 – 1944). Tento politik videl riešenie ohrozenia Poľska v udržaní rovnováhy medzi oboma susednými mocnosťami, v zbližení s Veľkou Britániou, ktoré bude nadradené spojenectvu s Francúzskom, v spolupráci s Tureckom a Japonskom a najmä v aktívnej politickej činnosti v zmysle priblíženia sa k menším štátom v stredovýchodnej Európe. Poľsko sa vytvorením Medzimoria malo dostať na úroveň mocnosti, ktorá bude schopná ovplyvňovať vývoj v stredovýchodnej Európe. Projekt Medzimoria možno hodnotiť ako ambiciózny a odvážny. Zároveň sa však poukazuje na jeho nereálnosť, dokonca je niektorými autormi považovaná za politický omyl. Možno konštatovať, že geopolitický projekt Medzimoria je jedným z najoriginálnejších koncepcií, ktorá sa vytvorila počas vývoja poľskej zahraničnej politiky. Jeho realizácia mala slúžiť na riešenie problému nepriaznivej geopolitickej polohy Poľska v medzivojnovom období, resp. aj po druhej svetovej vojne. Aj keď je v súčasných podmienkach európskych integračných procesov Európy je už neaktuálny, jeho výskum však určite prispieva k mapovaniu geopolitických aspektov histórie stredovýchodnej Európy.

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