

ROMANIAN-POLISH GOALS AND STRATEGIES IN RELATION TO THE USSR AND THE BLACK SEA IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

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1. *Medieval Premises*

The political and military realities of the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries indicate a particular view of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility in relation to the Moldavian state: the political control given by the specificity of the vassalage of the Romanian princes to the Polish sovereigns, and the Polish supremacy over the commercial road linking the Baltic Sea and Lwów to the Black Sea and the Danube Mouths. The fall under Ottoman domination of the Moldavian ports (at the end of Stephen the Great's reign) and the gradual turning of the Black Sea into a "Turkish lake", the anarchy created in Poland by the political systems of *liberum veto* and electivity of the sovereign, and, on the other hand, the loss of a great part of its independence by Moldavia (at the beginning of the eighteenth century the process was already completed) led to a weakening in bilateral relations¹.

The placing of Ieremia Movilă on the Moldavian throne (1595), undertaken by Jan Zamoyski on behalf of King Sigismund III, marked the beginning of one of the most dynamic stages in the evolution of bilateral relations: reference is made here especially to the successful efforts of the Republic to integrate Moldavia into an ample institutional construct destined to function in the space between the Baltic and the Black Sea. Through the dynasty of the Movilescus, with overt Polish sympathies, Poland achieved a project formed by the end of the fourteenth century, in her well-established quality of "bastion of Christendom"². Moreover, the historical experience thus gained became the fundament of the projects of Piłsudski (1919–1921) and Beck (1933–1939) concerning a central-eastern federation led by Poland, in which Romania would have been included.

2. *Reason and Pragmatism in the Settling of the Romanian-Polish Alliance in the Inter-War Period*

The Romanian-Polish relations officially established shortly after the end of World 110

¹ From the ample and consistent bibliography, I have selected, as an example: N. Iorga, *Relațiile comerciale ale țării noastre cu Lembergul*, București, 1900; idem, *Polonais et Roumains. Relations politiques, économiques et culturelles*, București, 1921; P.P. Panaitescu, *Drumul comercial al Poloniei spre Marea Neagră în Evul Mediu*, în *Interpretări românești*, ed. Ștefan Gorovei, București, 1994; Șerban Papacostea, *Geneza statului în evul mediu românesc. Studii critice*, Cluj-Napoca, 1988; Polish authors: Oscar Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilisation*, New York, 1951; Ilona Czamańska, *Moldawia, Wołoszczyzna wobec Polski, Węgier i Turcji w XIV-XV wieku*, Poznań, 1996.

² For an excellent de-constructivist project as to the European "barriers"/"channels" see Chantal Delsol, Michel Masłowski, Joanna Nowicki (ed.), *Mituri și simboluri politice în Europa Centrală*, Chișinău, 2003.

War One (January 1919)³ were based on strategic and security interests: joint action against an unprovoked attack by Soviet Russia and the reopening of the road linking the Baltic to the Black Sea.

During the conflict with the Red Army (1919–1920)⁴, the Polish diplomacy targeted the creation of a strategic north-south axis between the two seas, which would have enabled efficient communication between Romania and Poland. A program drawn up by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 1919 was putting forward the setting up of what Quai d'Orsay had termed a *cordon sanitaire*: “it is essential, in the interest of peace and of Europe, that a strong barrier should separate Europe from Russia and Russia from Germany”⁵.

An analysis (or even a simple reading) of the Romanian-Polish defensive military plans (founded on the military conventions signed in 1921 and 1922) shows pretentious initial political projections, weaknesses in points of organization and logistics, as well as a lack of a unitary or even realistic vision of a possible conflict with the Soviets. The Polish officers, far more temperamental, were suggesting an advance to the Dnepr banks (under the occurrence of an unprovoked attack by the Red Army on one or both allies), whereas the Romanian generals, more moderate, were considering an advance no further than the Boug. However, none of the military variants or simulations answered or prepared for situations such as the victorious offensive of the Red Army towards Warsaw and/or Bucharest or an advance to the banks of the Dnepr or the Boug⁶.

These Romanian-Polish plans actually did not solve the question of how and under which circumstances the swamp of the Pripet could be crossed. Despite all hurdles, in the twenties, the Polish government strove to convince Bucharest of the imperativeness of a semantic reinterpretation of the *Convention of Defensive Alliance* of 3 March 1921, in order to obtain the consent of the Romanians to a possible and sought for military attack on Lithuania, a country considered by the Poles “undesirable” for the geopolitics of the European central-northeast region and a “Soviet pawn” planted on the border of the “civilized and democratic world”. The syntagm “present eastern borderlines”, such as it appears in the *Convention*, was a mutual official recognition that Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina, and respectively Eastern Galitia and the Vilna region (Pol. Wilno, Lith. Vilnius) were

³ The Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (further quoted AMAE), fund 71/1914, vol. 190, f. 4; ibidem, Problema 82 fund, vol. 94, f. 5. For the chronology, see Florin Anghel, *Construirea sistemului „cordon sanitar”*. *Relații româno-polone, 1919-1926*, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, pp. 55-56.

⁴ For a thorough and objective approach, see Norman Davies, *White Eagle-Red Star. The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920*, London, 1972.

⁵ Archiwum Akt Nowych (further to be quoted AAN), Warszawa, Minister Spraw Zagranicznych fund, vol. 6370, ff. 296-306.

⁶ Marian Chiriac Popescu, *Relațiile militare româno-polone în perioada interbelică (1919-1939)*, București, 2001, pp. 420-428; Henryk Bulhak, *Materialy do dziejów polsko-rumuńskiego w latach 1921-1931*, in “Studia historyczne”, 3, 1973, pp. 419-430; idem, *Konferencja wojskowa polsko-rumuńskiego-francuska w Warszawie (7-8.IV.1924)*. *Geneza, przebieg, rezultaty*, in “Studia z dziejów Z.S.R.R. i Europy Środkowej”, 25, 1990.

parts of the states in question. The terms *Soviet* or *Soviet Russia* did not circumscribe, in the incriminated text, the potential enemy in the East, and it is exactly on this imprecise definition that the Polish diplomacy and military tried to capitalize⁷. However, not even fiercest Polish partisans of a reinterpretation of the diplomatic document could argue for the exaggerated pressures exerted in Bucharest to prevent the official recognition or the establishment of bilateral relations between Romania and Lithuania: the Romanian diplomacy would be the last European state, with the exception of Poland of course, to recognize Lithuania in 1924⁸.

Several years later, on 8 March 1937, in a discussion with the Romanian Minister in Kaunas, Vasile Stoica, the Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona openly evoked this situation, and explained, one more time, that the only source of tension was the aggressive policy of Poland. "The road between Poland and Lithuania is blocked – said Smetona – by the important and uncomfortable question of Vilnia. It is a Lithuanian region, wrested arbitrarily from our country (reference being made to the military action of General Lucjan Zeligowski of October 1920, who, by the direct order of Marshal Piłsudski, had marched into the Vilnius region, proclaiming initially a Republic of Central Lithuania and subsequently incorporating it into Poland – *n.F.A.*)⁹, which we cannot forget, and it is also the brutal suppression, against all international obligations, of a compact Lithuanian population with whom our entire nation has tight bonds. [...] There can be no normal relations between Lithuania and Poland, to say nothing of friendly relations, as long as our brothers living in the former capital of Lithuania and in the neighboring region are denied the right of education in their schools and the use of their mother tongue in all institutions"¹⁰.

To the Polish political and diplomatic efforts to control the Pontic-Baltic space under the pretext of a (real) Soviet threat were added ambitious projects of strategic and commercial expansion. In 1920, at a time when Warsaw was being encircled by the Red Army, the Polish decision makers were submitting to Bucharest, for analysis and immediate application, several generous projects of partition and joint administration of Ukraine, with the Romanians receiving Crimea, and the Odessa port¹¹. In addition, Poland was forwarding her ally a fairly well structured project regarding an extension of bilateral interests in the direction of the Black Sea and the Balkans, including the following points:

⁷ For a detailed approach, see Florin Anghel, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

⁸ AMAE, fund 71/1920-1944 Lituania, vol. 4, ff. 251-254.

⁹ Classical in this respect are the works of Alfred Erich Senn, *The Great Powers, Lithuania and the Vilna Question*, Leiden, 1966; idem, *On The State of Central Lithuania*, in "Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropa", 10, 1964.

¹⁰ AMAE, fund 71/1920/1944 Lituania, vol. 8, ff. 217-226. Most of the text was also published by Ioan Lăcustă, *1937-1938. Culise diplomatice la Riga și Ankara (II)*, în „Cultura”, Year I, no. 31, 13-19 October 2004, pp. 9-10.

¹¹ Florin Anghel, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-68.

a) Regulation (through the bilateral *Trade Convention* signed on 2 July 1921) of the transit between the Baltic and the Black Sea, on railroad and navigable rivers;

b) The granting by the Romanian party, to the Polish state, of a *porto-franco* regime in Galați and/or Brăila, and of fiscal facilities for the railroad transit from the Danubian ports to Poland;

c) Construction, based on joint projects and funding, of a navigable channel between the two states. The Vistula and the Dneestr, the latter being the Romanian-Soviet border, would have been the most feasible options¹².

Romania supported most of the Polish projects aiming to gain influence and wrest advantages in the Pontic and Balkan space, more exactly in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Turkey. The central Polish idea – to which Bucharest rallied – was to coordinate a joint foreign policy in relation to the USSR and to the European Powers, who were trying to circumscribe some controlled/controllable areas in the Balkans and the Black Sea region (Germany, Italy, Great Britain).

The fundamental operating principle of the Romanian-Polish alliance was synthetically defined in 1936 by another Polish higher official, Senator Jerzy Iwanowski, President of the Chamber of Commerce: “The utmost political goal of the two states, Romania and Poland, is unlimited control of the two allies over the entire road linking the Baltic to the Black Sea”¹³.

For the application of this concept – to begin with 1919, as anticipated – two major variants of *transport corridors* (regional strategic axes), meant to facilitate both peaceful (trade, passenger transport) and military activities, were put forward:

a) The building of a navigable channel, from the point where Vistula flowed into the Baltic Sea, with the port of Gdynia as a point of reference, along the Vistula – the confluence with the Dneestr – the Prut – the maritime Danube, up to the small Bessarabian port of Reni, over a total distance of 1,560 sq.km¹⁴. Both parties considered this variant extremely advantageous, both strategically and in points of security, since the channel, built exclusively on their territories, would have bypassed the USSR, that is the Dneestr.

b) The introduction of a *railroad cordon* between the Baltic and the Black Sea, more exactly between Gdynia and Constanța (through Lwów–Cernăuți), with secondary branching in the direction of Bucharest (and, further on, of Giurgiu–Rousse–Sofia), Brăila–Galați and Chișinău, was also considered and partially

¹² Nicolae Dascălu, *Relații româno-polone în perioada interbelică (1918-1939)*, București, 1991, pp. 101-110; Elżbieta Znamierowska-Rakk, *Koncepcje dróg strategiczno-tranzytowych na obszarze Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w polityce polskiej i międzynarodowej okresu międzywojennego*, in “Studia z dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej”, XXX, 1995, pp. 65-68. For the text of the Trade Convention, see “Monitorul Oficial”, no. 182, 19 November 1922, pp. 8449-8461.

¹³ Jerzy Iwanowski, *România-Polonia. Perspective economice*, in “Buletinul Uniunii Camerelor de Comerț și Industrie”, Year XI, 1936, no. 9, p. 561.

¹⁴ For a detailed approach, see Florin Anghel, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-158.

implemented¹⁵. High speed freight and passenger trains, called *Rompol* and *Polrom*, would have covered the distance between the two seas in less than 24 hours¹⁶. Poland was also requesting that the Romanian party should modernize the roads linking Romania to several European capitals. The statistics of the Romanian Ministry for Public Works show that at the end of the twenties only eight percent of the roads in Romania met the European standards. Among these, only three *corridors* ensured a direct link with European capitals:

1. Bucharest–Craiova–Orșova–Belgrade;
2. Bucharest–Brașov–Cluj–Satu Mare–Halmeu–Bratislava–Prague (with a branching in the direction of Budapest and Vienna);
3. Bucharest–Focșani–Roman–Cernăuți–Lwów–Warsaw¹⁷.

The railway programs *Rompol* and *Polrom* included the modernization of the Warsaw–Bucharest railway, the building of a parallel railway and road¹⁸, and the development of a system of communication by water, through channels linking the Vistula to the San, the Dnestr, the Prut, and the Danube.

On the verge of the outbreak of World War Two, in 1938–1939, these *transport corridors* gained considerable strategic and military importance: reference is being made here, for instance, to the beginning of works on a military port on the banks of Tașaul, north of Constanța, several kilometers away from the Black Sea coast. In the summer of 1939, the government in Warsaw offered logistic and financial support to the finalization of the project, in exchange for the right to use the port. Lake Tașaul would have been, in the opinion of the Polish military and diplomats, an excellent observation post on the Pontic shore, and could have also provided the means to take prompt and coordinated action against a possible Soviet naval provocation/intervention¹⁹. The partition of Poland by Germany and the USSR in September 1939 put an end to this project.

3. *Międzymorze/Intermarium*

The geopolitical concept of *Międzymorze/Intermarium* (“between seas”, “A Third Europe”) defines the projects developed by Warsaw mostly in the thirties and authored by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Józef Beck, by which the states geographically situated between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, and between Germany and the USSR, would have been joined into an ample political and military association/confederation meant to prevent expansion from the West or the East and hegemony in the two seas. The states targeted by the Polish project –

¹⁵ AAN, Warszawa, Minister Spraw Zagranicznych fund, vol. 450, ff. 3-5.

¹⁶ “Buletinul Uniunii Camerelor de Comerț și Industrie”, 1936, no. 9, p. 566.

¹⁷ N. Hoiescu, *În ce măsură se pune pentru România problema șoselelor moderne*, Cluj, 1928, p. 6.

¹⁸ *La presse Polono-Roumaine. Proces verbaux, rapports, vœux et statut*, Galați, 1926, pp. 161-167.

¹⁹ AAN, Warszawa, fund Ministry Spraw Zagranicznych, Ambasada Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Bukareszcie, vol. 450, ff. 251-254.

established for the most in 1918–1919 and showing clear signs of weakness in points of institutions and authority – were to place themselves under the leadership of Warsaw, and, in addition to their defensive mission, would have strived to promote strategic, economic and military interests, through the Black Sea towards the Near East, the Mediterranean, and North Africa.

The *Intermarium* seems to have come to life even before the proclamation of the independence of the Polish Republic. Thus, in October 1918, in New York, Ignacy Paderewski (Prime Minister in 1919) put forward the topic of the “integration” into a “political and military group” of Poland, Lithuania (to the north), Czechoslovakia (at the center), and Romania and the Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom (to the south). This formula, in Paderewski’s opinion, was liable to provide the new bloc with positions and ports of considerable strategic importance (Gdańsk/Danzig, Klaipeda/Memel, Constanța, the Adriatic ports of Rijeka and Split), increase the armed resistance against an attack by Russia and/or Germany, and facilitate transport in the direction of Asia Minor, the Middle East and even the Far East²⁰.

Basically, this concept cannot be considered well circumscribed within the Polish external policy doctrine, as it often lacked coherence and realism. For example, after the exclusion from the government of the Romanian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nicolae Titulescu, in August 1936, Beck initiated an ample program of rapprochement between Romania and Hungary, including through the good offices of his Yugoslav counterpart, Milan Stojadinović²¹. These variants of geopolitical configuration ruled out, *ab initio*, any chance of success; further on, after the fall of the Polish State (September 1939), Beck vehemently denied that Warsaw would have considered assuming a leading role in such an association of states and insisted on its partnership nature²².

The *Intermarium* can be defined as a *geopolitical* and, at the same time, *ideological* concept, since the diplomacies invited to adhere to it (especially the Polish and Romanian parties) rejected unequivocally the ideological or structural influences of the neighboring totalitarian states of right orientation (Germany) or left orientation (the USSR). Even a state perceived – through the propaganda led by Warsaw – as an unconditioned ally of Moscow, more exactly Lithuania, avoided any (political or ideological) traps that may have annulled its independence and integrated it into the Soviet space. Thus, in March 1937, the Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona reminded the Romanian Minister Vasile Stoica that the Baltic republic “was the first European state to take drastic measures against communism

²⁰ B. Dopierala, *Wokół polityki morskiej Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Poznań, 1978, pp. 25-27; Elżbieta Znamierowska-Rakk, *Polska-Balkany. Źródła inspiracji i zainteresowań w polityce Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, in *Rola i miejsce polski w Europie, 1914-1957*, ed. Andrzej Koryn, Warszawa, 1994, p. 96.

²¹ Anna Garlicka, *Polska-Jugosławia. 1918-1939*, in “Studia z dziejów Z.S.S.R. i Europy Środkowej”, XII, 1976, pp. 115-120; eadem, *Polska-Jugosławia, 1934-1939. Z dziejów stosunków politycznych*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk, 1977, pp. 213-216.

²² Józef Beck, *Ostatni raport*, Warszawa, 1987, p. 116.

immediately after the war, and one that continues to eradicate this movement in all severity (reference being made here to the effects of the coup of December 1926 by which left-wing parties, sympathizers of the Kremlin, were declared illegal – *n.F.A.*).²³

The *Intermarium* – or rather the efforts to build it – fostered, for several years, a détente in regional relations, eliminated tensions, and even ended wars. Thus, Poland signed pacts of nonaggression with the USSR (July 1932) and Germany (1934), Romania established diplomatic relations with the USSR (1934), Poland put an end to its state of war with Lithuania and established diplomatic relations with this country (1938), and the Baltic Entente (1934) and the Balkan Entente (1934) were created.

Under the circumstances, in the efforts to create the *Intermarium*, an increase in the economic, diplomatic, military and geopolitical interest in the littoral of the Black Sea became evident, especially in the last years of peace. The opening of the Polish Consulate in Constanța (1934)²⁴ was a decisive step in this respect: Polish companies and groups of interests were now able to establish direct contact with representatives of the targeted states and territories. Warsaw put forward the most ambitious projects: transport corridors between the Baltic and the Black Sea (more exactly, between the ports of Gdynia and Constanța) on navigable channels or on railroad were to challenge and eventually undermine the strategic axis of the Oder – the Danube – the Black Sea, controlled by Germany and her interests. It was suggested, even at the time, that the *Intermarium*, beyond its defensive role, was also meant to oust Germany from the positions she had secured in Central and East Europe as early as the nineteenth century²⁵.

After 1934–1935 (with the psychological comfort created by the signing of the nonaggression pacts with the USSR and Germany), Poland put in great efforts to regulate its political and economic relations in South-East Europe and the Pontic region. Thus, on the political level, Warsaw took firm action towards eliminating the main obstacle to the *Intermarium*: the Romanian Foreign Minister Nicolae Titulescu, who had negotiated the relations between Bucharest and Moscow in June 1934²⁶.

Poland invested considerable energy in developing the project of a railway bridge over the Danube, between Giurgiu and Rousse, which would have ensured the transit towards Thessaloniki and fostered better bilateral relations between Bucharest and Sofia²⁷. Her efforts brought about the organization in Bucharest, in

²³ AMAE, fund 71/1920-1944 Lituania, vol. 8, ff. 219-220.

²⁴ For the activity of the Consulate in Constanța, see the 21 files housed at AAN, Warszawa, MSZ fund, Konsulat RP w Konstancy.

²⁵ AAN, fund MSZ, Konsulat Szczecinie, vol. 2, ff. 52-53.

²⁶ See Florin Constantiniu, Ioan Chiper, *Din nou despre cauzele înlăturării din guvern a lui Nicolae Titulescu (29 august 1936)*, in “Revista română de studii internaționale”, 1969, no. 2 (6).

²⁷ Elżbieta Znamierowska-Rakk, *Polska-Balkany*, p. 105. The Polish press of the time also brought into discussion the extreme weather conditions, unfavorable to navigation by ferry between

December 1938, of a conference of experts in transport and river and land means of transport from all the Balkan states (and Poland). The conclusions of the meeting – considerably influenced by Warsaw – were the *building of a road and railway bridge over the Danube*, between Giurgiu and Ruse (the project would be carried through only in 1954), and the establishment of *two strategic corridors of transport*, one linking the Baltic Sea to the Aegean Sea (Gdynia-Thessaloniki), and the other one the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea (Gdynia–Constanța)²⁸. Despite all political differences, Poland achieved an unexpected consensus, the targeted states (Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey) accepting to collaborate and the Polish party assuming the task of coordinating the design and building of the river and railway sections. These projects were arrested by the outbreak of war several months later.

Poland's interest in the Black Sea (and, henceforth, in the neighboring regions of the Black Sea) – characteristic of the Polish political thinking even before the conceptual crystallization of the *Intermarium* – can also be seen in the willingness of the most reliable allies of Warsaw to assert themselves in the area. Thus, Latvia, with no trading ambitions as to the Black Sea and the South-East, opened in 1925 a consulate in Galați, and, in 1926, a vice-consulate in Constanța, both operating until 1940²⁹, when the Baltic republic was occupied by the USSR. Likewise, Estonia, a smaller state, was diplomatically active in the Black Sea region and in the maritime Danube area in the 1930s³⁰.

Poland's breakaway from the project of the Little Entente in 1923–1924 and the development of the trilateral alliance (Romania-Yugoslavia-Czechoslovakia) into an effective diplomatic community led, a few years after the end of World War One, to the creation of two blocs of victorious states in Central and Eastern Europe, centered on the Vistula (the Romanian-Polish alliance) and the Danube (the Little Entente). Although each of these blocs had as a main goal the preservation of the *status-quo*, this simple fact was not enough to make them unite. The *Intermarium* sought to capitalize as much as possible on the alliance between Bucharest and Warsaw, and to attract in the 1930s all the potential forces (of the “Third Europe”) that may have been affected by the strategies and interferences of the neighboring totalitarian powers, Germany and the USSR. The disintegration of Poland in September 1939 and the profound changes that occurred in the geopolitical configuration of Central and Eastern Europe (as a result of a direct agreement between Berlin and Moscow in the case of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) annulled all these projects and forecasts.

Giurgiu and Ruse: the Danube froze in winter, whereas in summer, the drought would have made sailing across impossible; Jerzy Zagórski, *Interesy polskie a most na Dunaju*, în “Drogi Polski”, Warszawa, tome 2, 1938, no. 6, pp. 359-370.

²⁸ Elena Damianova, *Ekonomiceskaia politika Polše na Balkana v. 1918-1939 g.*, in “Bulgarian Historical Review”, 2, 1974, pp. 86-90; E. Znamierowska-Rakk, *Polska-Balkany*, pp. 105-106.

²⁹ *Latvijas ārlietu dienesta darbinieki, 1918-1991*, ed. Eriks Jēkabsons, Valters Ščerbinskis, Riga, 2003, p. 387.

³⁰ Silviu Miloiu, *România și Țările Baltice în perioada interbelică*, Târgoviște, 2002, *passim*.