

Marek Kornat

THE POLISH IDEA OF 'THE THIRD EUROPE' (1937-1938): A REALISTIC CONCEPT OR AN EX-POST VISION?

The concept of 'the Third Europe' – or 'the Intermarium Bloc' – was certainly an interesting political project invented by the Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck in the years 1937-8. It was bold and ambitious, but quite controversial, therefore it was merely mentioned in many works devoted to the foreign policy of the interwar Poland. There can be no doubt today that without a careful analysis of the assumptions of this concept, it is impossible to grasp the real meaning of the Polish 'policy of balance' between Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union, as well as the way of thinking of the Polish leaders about international affairs towards the end of the 1930s.

The idea of concentrating the smaller states of East-Central Europe around Poland was one of the most essential and independent political concepts of Beck, although, quite naturally, it referred to various similar ideas put forward by Polish political thought and in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the dawn of Poland's independence.

Had this project any real basis in the political reality of the Europe of the 1930s? What was its essence? What were its concrete prospects? What aims did Józef Beck connect with it – who was regarded, not without reason, as a firm adherent of bilateralism in international relations and a critic of the concept of 'bloc-building' as a method of finding security? What were the possibilities of Polish diplomacy in the realities of the late 1930s? Was it a real political project, or maybe only a concept described by historians *ex post*? What determined its failure? The present study is devoted to reflection upon these questions. We try to analyse the concept of 'the Third Europe' both as a problem from the history of diplomacy and the history of Polish political thought. Therefore the source basis of this study consists mostly of our researches into Polish foreign policy, ones taken up on various

occasions, conducted at the archives that preserve the records of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the period of interwar Poland.

Despite our research we have not found any document that contains a comprehensive exposition of the concept of 'the Third Europe' bloc. This does not mean of course, that such a document did not exist, all the more so given that the records of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs are far from complete. On the other hand it is possible that no such document was drafted, since the whole project – as we shall see – was a loose outline of stipulations. It also cannot be expected that the sources will fully show the designs, feelings and political calculations of the Polish leadership. Diplomacy does not usually allow one to express one's designs and opinions without constraint or control. One cannot expect that every thought would find its reflection in writing, especially at a time of such turbulent and dramatic international transformations as those of the late 1930s.

Even though no special study of the Józef Beck's project of 'the Third Europe' has appeared so far, it seems necessary to analyse the existing literature concerning the history of Polish diplomacy of the interwar period. Generally, in People's Poland historiography adopted the opinion that the idea of 'the Third Europe' was the main cause of the bad Polish-Czechoslovak relations. This opinion is partly justified, but from the point of view of history it would be wrong to attribute all Polish-Czechoslovak antagonism to this cause, since there were many other reasons that we need not discuss here. Western historians, who were much less sympathetic to the foreign policy of reborn Poland, saw the concept of 'the Third Europe' merely as the delusive strivings of 'Polish imperialism' (to quote the expression used by the British researcher Hugh Seton-Watson).¹ Beck's idea of a Central-European bloc is considered as anti-Soviet. 'He sought to create a Beck system, a Third Europe that would keep the Russians – whom he hated – at bay while enabling him to bargain with Germany', wrote Alan Palmer in his new synthesis of the history of the Baltic nations.²

The first historians of Polish diplomacy who tried to reconstruct the political plans of Józef Beck concerning the Central-European

¹ Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe Between the Wars 1918–1941* (Cambridge, 1945), 320.

² Alan Palmer, *The Baltic: A New History of the Region and Its People* (Woodstock, NY, 2006), 311.

bloc were the German researcher Hans Roos and the Polish historian, Henryk Batowski, whose works appeared almost simultaneously. Hans Roos is one of those foreign historians who has devoted the most attention to Polish foreign policy, and his now classic work *Polen und Europa. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik 1931–1939* was the first reliable monograph of Polish foreign policy in the interwar period to appear in the West. The concept of ‘the Third Europe’ did not find his approval. It appeared to him as both ambitious and unrealistic, a typical example of Polish political romanticism and an application of the slogan ‘let us find in us powers to suit our designs’. In his opinion Poland could not concentrate around herself the smaller states of East-Central Europe, for as a state she was too weak. She could only do it by co-operating with Germany in the construction of *Mittleuropa*, on the condition that Germany would not be a Nazi state.³ While striving for the destruction of Czechoslovakia, she lent a hand with the abolishment of a barrier necessary for preserving peace. Henryk Batowski’s standpoint does not essentially diverge from this opinion. He is definitely critical of the concept of ‘the Third Europe’. He first formulated this opinion in his article ‘Beck’s Rumanian Trip of October 1938’, published in 1958 which – though now rather out-dated in its interpretation – was certainly important.⁴ He sustained his appraisals in his next works devoted to the European political crisis of 1938–9.⁵ In his opinion this idea was ‘completely unrealistic’.⁶ He placed great emphasis on Józef Beck’s ‘pathological anti-Czechoslovak complex’. A similar interpretation was given to the Polish policy towards Czechoslovakia by Stefania Stanisławska, whose books *Wielka i mała polityka Józefa Becka (marzec – maj 1938)* [The great and little policy of Józef Beck (March–May 1938)] and

³ Hans Roos, *Polen und Europa. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik 1931–1939* (Tübingen, 1957), 400.

⁴ This article is included in the volume of Batowski’s studies *Z polityki międzynarodowej XX wieku. Wybór studiów z lat 1930–1975* (Cracow, 1979).

⁵ Henryk Batowski, *Kryzys dyplomatyczny w Europie. Jesień 1938 – wiosna 1939* (Warsaw, 1962); *idem, Zdrada monachijska. Sprawa Czechosłowacji i dyplomacja europejska w roku 1938* (Poznań, 1973). Batowski’s studies of 1938 in European diplomacy have been summed up in his *Rok 1938 – dwie agresje hitlerowskie* (Poznań, 1985) (on the anti-Czech attitude of Beck, p. 437), and *idem, Europa zmierza ku przepaści* (Poznań, 1977).

⁶ Batowski, *Z polityki międzynarodowej*, 226.

Polska a Monachium [Poland and Munich] were the first attempts at reconstructing, on the basis of sources, the role of Polish diplomacy in the European crisis of 1938.⁷

A few remarks were devoted to the concept of 'the Intermarium Bloc' by Kazimierz Piwarski, who drew attention to the fact that if it had been realised, this would have been a group of five states with an anti-German and anti-Soviet aspect. It would have embraced Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia and Italy.⁸ Much more attention – and from a different interpretative perspective – was devoted to the project of 'the Third Europe' by Anna M. Cienciala. In her book *Poland and the Western Powers 1938–1939*, a work of essential significance for the historiography of Polish diplomacy, she devoted to this concept many valuable remarks, although she did not analyse it as a whole, since it went beyond the scope of the subject of her monograph. In the first place she recalls that Foreign Minister Beck more or less concretely referred in it to a certain tradition that the concept of integration enjoyed in the Polish policy towards the states of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe.⁹ Among Polish historians one who devoted the most space to the project of 'the Third Europe' was Piotr Łossowski, in his book *Polska w Europie i świecie 1918–1939* [Poland in Europe and the world 1918-1939].¹⁰ He goes on the assumption that this concept was logically linked to the idea of balancing between Germany and Soviet Russia and was to be a logical complement of the 'policy of balance', which would strengthen the position of Poland and make this policy more effective and more stable.

Michał J. Zacharias – in a synthesis of Polish interwar policy, written jointly with Marek K. Kamiński – devoted more attention to Beck's political concepts. He wrote there:

The idea of an 'Intermarium Bloc' was not a new concept. It referred to the actions taken up in the previous decade. It expressed a conviction that

⁷ The first book appeared in Warsaw in 1962, the second in 1967.

⁸ Kazimierz Piwarski, *Polityka europejska w okresie pomonachijskim (X 1938 – III 1939)* (Warsaw, 1960), 38.

⁹ Anna M. Cienciala, *Poland, and the Western Powers 1938–1939: A Study in the Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe* (London and Toronto, 1968), 55, 88.

¹⁰ Piotr Łossowski, *Polska w Europie i świecie 1918–1939. Szkice z dziejów polityki zagranicznej i położenia międzynarodowego II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 1990), 203–9.

the states situated between the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black Seas should co-operate under the general direction of Poland. The co-operation of those countries was to counter-balance the growing influence of Germany and the Soviet Union.¹¹

Andrzej Skrzypek's remarks in 'History of Polish Diplomacy' do not throw any new light, based on sources, on the concept of 'the Intermarium Bloc', although this should be one of the aims of this synthetic work. While discussing Beck's plans, Skrzypek merely concludes that the possibilities of the co-operation between the states in this part of Europe in the spirit outlined by Beck were only 'theoretical'.¹²

In Czechoslovak historiography the opinion of the project of 'the Third Europe' was definitely negative. In his book on the concepts of foreign policy of the states of Central and South-Eastern Europe in the interwar period, Zdeněk Sládek even contends that

the Polish ruling circles did not intend to reduce the area of Czechoslovakia, but to destroy her completely. Let us suppose that such a policy resulted from the programme of the Third Europe which was to be a barrier against the further offensive of Germany. Be it as it may, the rationalistic concept went hand in hand with an irrational idea that the best way of its realisation was through the destruction of a neighbour state.¹³

II

Marshal Józef Piłsudski and Foreign Minister Józef Beck were convinced that East-Central Europe post 1918 was a region of chaos where Poland could find no support. While talking to the Italian Foreign Vice Minister Fulvio Suvich in Venice on 20 April 1935, Beck recalled Marshal Piłsudski's thesis formulated in his talk to Minister Dino Grandi in August 1930 that 'Europe has now been

¹¹ Marek K. Kamiński and Michał J. Zacharias, *W cieniu zagrożenia. Polityka zagraniczna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1918–1939* (Warsaw, 1993), 213–14.

¹² Andrzej Skrzypek, 'W obliczu wojny (październik 1938 – sierpień 1939)', in Piotr Łossowski (ed.), *Historia dyplomacji polskiej, iv: 1918–1939* (Warsaw, 1995), 499.

¹³ Zdeněk Sládek, *Pozycja międzynarodowa, koncepcje polityki zagranicznej i dyplomacja państw Europy Środkowej i Południowo-Wschodniej w okresie międzywojennym* (Warsaw, 1981), 129.

Balkanised up to the Carpathian Mountains'.¹⁴ Minister Beck added that 'by Balkanisation he understands a disintegration into small state organisms which become instruments in the hands of external powers'.¹⁵

What lay at the basis of the integration policy in East-Central Europe was in the first place Józef Piłsudski's federal programme of the years 1919–20. The moment, however, a new government team came to power and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was headed by Konstanty Skirmunt (1921–2), Polish diplomacy definitely broke with the concept of the creation of 'the Intermarium Bloc'. Another Polish Foreign Minister, Count Aleksander Skrzyński (1922–3 and 1924–6) trusted more in the effective influence of the League of Nations on global order than in the efforts towards a political re-integration of East-Central Europe.¹⁶

The assumptions of the concept of 'the Third Europe' are – as already mentioned – not easy to reconstruct. Nor do we know how detailed they were. And this is for two basic reasons. The first is that Józef Beck was not a man who would expound his political concepts broadly and in detail. In this he followed, as it seems, the style of work of his superior, Marshal Piłsudski, who was a born conspirator. In the second place, the idea of 'the Third Europe' had never reached even an initial stage of realisation. The key to the whole concept can be sought in the conviction of the Polish leadership that the German expansion in South-Eastern Europe would come up against counter-action on the part of Italy. Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Szembek wrote to Tadeusz Romer, the Polish ambassador in Tokyo, on 28 January 1938 that

as regards the problems of Western Europe, it was hard to say the same thing about it as about the matters of the Danube region. It was an undeniable fact that Italy had re-activated her Danube tactics, and this found its expression in the latest conference of the Rome Protocol States in Budapest, as well as in the endeavours of Italian policy centred round Rumania in

¹⁴ The term 'Balkanised Europe' was developed by Paul Scott Mowrer (American journalist), *Balkanized Europe: A Study in Political Analysis and Reconstruction* (New York, 1921).

¹⁵ Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warsaw (hereafter: AAN), Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych (hereafter: MSZ), 108A.

¹⁶ See Aleksander Skrzyński, *Poland and Peace* (London, 1923).

connection with the take-over of power by Goga's government and the growing influence of nationalists there.¹⁷

Polish diplomats hoped for a Italian-Yugoslav *modus vivendi* in the face of German expansion. Thus the interests of Poland were to converge with those of Italy.

Another, not less basic assumption, was the conviction that Hungary would conduct an active foreign policy aimed at a change in the correlation of forces in Danube Europe. Jerzy Kozeński's contention that by lifting the restrictions on Hungarian armament at Sinaia on 4–5 May and at Bled on 21–22 August, the states of the Little Entente had caused Hungary's passiveness in the autumn of 1938, does not carry conviction.¹⁸

In what circumstances did the term 'the Third Europe' first appear to denote the projected Intermarium Bloc? We should recall that Europe of the late 1930s seemed to be falling into two camps: the bloc of the co-signatories to the Anti-Comintern Pact (Germany, Japan, Italy and the states that gravitated towards them) and the bloc of the Western democracies – that is Great Britain and France. In such a constellation the European continent appeared divided into two camps: fascist and democratic. The 'ideological war' produced 'two Europes'. Poland had to play a delicate game between them.

According to Beck a 'Third Europe' was necessary. It would be an organised bloc of states 'from Scandinavia to the Adriatic'. Beck clearly did not consider Soviet Russia to be a European country. For him this was a separate world. In 1938 he expressed the view that 'the Soviet state had entered the period which for a Western state would constitute a phase of danger. Still, the reactions it aroused in Russia are specific to that country'.¹⁹ The situation and politics of Soviet Russia cannot be conceived in Western-European terms – this was the basic thesis of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Beck was consistently against any ideological 'blocs'. He thought that the division of Europe into two camps: of the anti-Comintern states and the Western democracies (which, however, followed a policy of concessions) was

¹⁷ *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne. 1938*, ed. Marek Kornat (Warsaw, 2007) (hereafter: PDD/1938), 54.

¹⁸ Jerzy Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941* (Poznań, 1979), 37–8.

¹⁹ Ambassador Edward Raczyński's note of Beck's oral instructions of 29 Nov. 1938, PDD/1938, 800.

both for Europe and Poland a great misfortune. Sooner or later it would inevitably lead to the outbreak of a new war, in which Poland, because of her central geographical situation, would not be able to retain her neutrality and would become one of the battlefields. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered such a course of events 'very inconvenient'.²⁰

Foreign Minister Beck, who since 1936 had frequently spoken about the increasingly ideological character of international politics, wanted to counter-act this tendency by taking a possibly 'non-ideological' approach to international affairs.²¹ The struggle for a 'non-ideological' character of Polish foreign policy was an important motive in his political concepts, and we cannot understand this policy without taking this factor into account. Beck considered his postulate of a 'non-ideological' approach to be a matter of supreme importance and devoted a lot of attention to this issue. He believed that the ideological character of international politics should be opposed by non-ideological pragmatism.

Thus the Central-European bloc, created by the 'Intermarium' countries, was certainly meant to bear a non-ideological character. It was to be an informal and pragmatic agreement of its member-states, confined to the acceptance of the fact that they had to retain their independence so as not to become the 'clients' of the Great Powers. In principle, the bloc would be based only on its creators' similar understanding of the basic notions of international politics. Beck did not plan any formal alliances, at least at that initial stage. Perhaps he assumed they might develop in future, by way of some natural evolution.

We do not know what territory such a bloc was envisaged to embrace. No document specifies it. Only three points of this plan are clear for historian.

²⁰ This is the formulation of Szembek in his letter of 15 Sept. 1937 to the Polish ambassador in Tokyo, Tadeusz Romer, AAN, MSZ, 18A.

²¹ What lay, in Beck's opinion, at the basis of the split of Europe into ideological blocs was the intensification of the foreign policy of USSR after the 7th Congress of Comintern in August 1935. The civil war in Spain additionally kindled the antagonism between 'democracy and fascism', as was declared by Soviet propaganda. This was also the way the development of Soviet policy was appraised by the Polish ambassador to Moscow, Wacław Grzybowski, see *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)*, vol. 2, ed. Tytus Komarnicki (London, 1967), 333.

1. The new configuration of forces was to arise on the ruins of Czechoslovakia. Józef Beck – just like Marshal Piłsudski – did not consider the Czechoslovak state a permanent element in the correlation of forces and the political balance in Central Europe.²² Nor did he think Czechoslovakia was a factor that would stabilise the *status quo* in our region of Europe; no political co-operation between the two countries had been established in the whole interwar period, either, and this was not only Poland's fault. The Polish envoy to Prague (1935–9), Kazimierz Papée, recalled years later that 'for the whole of my mission in Prague the Czechoslovak side avoided essential topics: neither Beneš nor Krofta entered into such talks'.²³

2. What was necessary for the success of the plans of 'the Third Europe' was a Hungarian-Rumanian *détente*. There was also a need for a Polish-Yugoslav rapprochement, as well as for a climate of co-operation between Budapest and Belgrade. Józef Beck evidently reckoned that if Hungarian revisionism would find vent in an anti-Czechoslovak policy, the Hungarians would more easily accept their new border with Rumania, established at Trianon.

3. Beck did not give up on trying to make the Scandinavian countries more interested in Polish political concepts, doomed to failure, as they were. The German historian of diplomacy, Josef Anderle, said that in accordance with Beck's ideas Poland would head a group of national states from Finland to Greece.²⁴ Anna Cienciala, on the other hand, developed a more conditional vision of the planned bloc. She wrote:

The new bloc was to extend from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and perhaps even to the Aegean, and its foundation was to be the common Polish-Hungarian border; the close co-operation of those two countries was to ensure them independence both from Germany and Russia.²⁵

²² Waław Grzybowski's account concerning the instructions he received from the Marshal before leaving as an envoy for Prague leaves no doubt that Piłsudski held this view as early as the 1920s; see Waław Grzybowski, 'Spotkania i rozmowy z Józefem Piłsudskim', *Niepodległość*, 1 (1948), 98.

²³ Kazimierz Papée, 'Epilog do "kroniki kilku dni"', *Wiadomości*, 17/891 (1963), 4.

²⁴ Josef Anderle, 'The First Republic, 1918–1938', in Hans Brisch and Ivan Volgyes (eds.), *Czechoslovakia: The Heritage of Ages Past: Essays in Memory of Josef Korbel* (East European Monographs, 51, Boulder, 1979), 107.

²⁵ Cienciala, *Poland*, 55.

Minister Beck was not isolated in his views concerning the re-arrangement of the correlation of forces in East-Central Europe. In March 1925, that is during Minister Aleksander Skrzyński's term of office, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared an *aide-mémoire*, under the direction of Jan Ciechanowski, chef de cabinet of foreign minister, 'On the current situation of Poland in the context of the so-called "Border Question"'. Its authors stipulated the 'consolidation of relations in Central Europe that would be effected with the conscious co-operation of Poland', and which 'should find an external form in some impressive catchword, like Quadruple Alliance, or The New Entente'. The authors of this document thought that 'an alliance with Yugoslavia would strengthen the position of Poland in Italy and would lead to a Hungarian-Yugoslav *détente*, which does not seem impossible'.

The reaching of a *détente* between Hungary and the succession states would be an act of great political significance. It would strengthen the position of Poland versus Czechoslovakia and perhaps lead to a *détente* between Hungary and Rumania. A Poland linked by bonds of friendship with Bucharest and Belgrade, a Poland which due to those alliances could render some services to Budapest, a Poland supporting the separateness of Austria, and due to that being a support indispensable to Czechoslovakia and valuable to Italy, will quite openly become a great and indispensable European Power ... Poland will draw benefit from such a policy before it finds its formal shape...²⁶

These thoughts have a lot in common with Józef Beck's political ideas of the late 1930s, the only, and basic difference being that Beck built his concept of the Central-European bloc without including in it Czechoslovakia, and one constructed on her ruins.

It is worth recalling here that in the 1930s Polish political thought put forward various projects for the re-organisation of East-Central Europe. Their common denominator was the thesis that the consolidation of Poland's independence and the maintenance of the independence of other nation states of that region requires the co-operation

²⁶ 'Aide-Mémoire of Polish Foreign Ministry of 28 March 1925' (the authors were: Juliusz Łukasiewicz, Tadeusz Romer, Adam Tarnowski, and Dr. Tadeusz Skowroński). See 'Memorandum programowe polskiego MSZ z 1925 r. (w związku z rokowaniami lokarneńskimi)', ed. Marek Kornat, *Zeszyty Historyczne*, 168 (2009), 219–20.

of the states which had gained independence after World War I. The basic assumption of the authors of various projects was that the policy of each state is determined by its geographical situation, that this is the factor each state must take into account, regardless of its changing system. On this basis it was argued that Russia – regardless of its internal system – is above all a geo-political organism, and the directions of her expansion are determined by her geography. Geopolitics assumes that political systems and ideologies may change, but what counts in the long-term, are above all geographical conditions.

European diplomacy of the first half of the 1930s was marked by the birth of various projects for the re-organisation of East-Central Europe. Let us mention such concepts, which have been well-analysed by historiography, as the Plan Tardieu (1932), the Eastern Pact (1934/5), the Bloc of Roman Protocols (to a limited extent realised in March 1934), or several variants of the Danube Pact (1932–6). We cannot overlook, either, the concept of ‘The United States of Europe’, formulated by the French statesman Aristide Briand in 1929/30.²⁷ All these initiatives form the context of the idea of ‘the Third Europe’, which differed from them essentially by the fact that it came latest of all (1937–8), at the moment of the total disintegration of the Versailles system and the end of a European balance of power. In fact, both the European and Polish political élite had long been convinced that the disintegration of East-Central Europe into national states, immersed in mutual conflicts and conducting their separate policies, was extremely harmful in the first place for those nations themselves. The problem was that finding an effective remedy for this state of affairs was very difficult. Each nation state of this region understood its own interests in an exclusive way.

III

The essence of the concept of ‘the Third Europe’ was to be Polish-Italian co-operation and the creation of an ‘axis’ Warsaw – Rome. Józef Beck and the leadership of Polish diplomacy were convinced that ‘German-Italian relations are marked by a certain solidarity only in the West, while in the South-East of Europe we rather observe

²⁷ Recently this project was discussed by Elisabeth du Réau, *Histoire de l'unité européenne* (Paris, 2004).

a rivalry and competition of influences', as Beck, after his talks with French Foreign Minister Ivon Delbos in Geneva, wrote to the Polish ambassador to Paris, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, on 27 January 1937²⁸.

To consolidate the Polish-Italian rapprochement, Beck set out for Rome in March 1938. In his letter of 23 February, the Polish envoy in Belgrade, Roman Dębicki wrote to Szembek: 'I think this is the perfect moment for the minister's visit to Italy. Besides, this is a wonderful occasion for counter-acting the Pact of Four'.²⁹ The Polish side expected a lot from this visit and its aim was not only to counter-act the tendency to construct a quartet of the Great Powers. The results of this trip, however, did not give ground for optimism. In his talk to Mussolini and the Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano on 9 March 1938 in Rome, Beck obtained from the Italian leader an assurance that Italy would not suggest 'the creation of an international formation', 'but if I put forward such a project, it will not be a Pact of Four, and I will never propose it without Poland, *et même je ferai de cela une condition préalable*'.³⁰ In the matter of Czechoslovakia Mussolini said that 'Italy does not care about the existence, or non-existence of that country'. While in appraising Hungarian policy,

the reaction to the Hungarian affair was at the beginning weak. Mussolini said that he would enter no negotiations with other countries without coming to an understanding with Hungary. (Formulations of a rather defensive character.) Hungary would be given by Italy economic and diplomatic assistance. Mussolini described Italy's relations with Russia as definitely bad, despite her economic interest. It was, however, impossible to reach an understanding with Russia. Russia had nothing to do in Europe.³¹

Beck's visit to Rome can be considered as totally unproductive from the perspective of 'the Third Europe' project. Polish diplomacy calculated on Italy's resistance to German domination in Central Europe. These hopes had no ground.³² On 12 April 1938 Szembek wrote to Dębicki that Józef Beck was convinced that

²⁸ AAN, MSZ, 108A.

²⁹ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka 1935–1945. Materiały uzupełniające*, ed. Waclaw Jędrzejewicz, *Niepodległość*, 15 (1982), 68–71.

³⁰ PDD/1938, 123.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 124.

³² For this phase in Polish-Italian relations see Stanisław Sierpowski, *Stosunki polsko-włoskie w latach 1918–1940* (Warsaw, 1975).

the Czech problem will be solved within a year and he wants to have the field so prepared as to avoid any surprise and gain the maximum benefit. The Polish side has not yet created its complete plan or concept. We only think that Germany obtaining control of the whole of Czechoslovakia, even if in the form of making it dependent on the Reich, with the gaining of far-reaching autonomy for its German parts, would be for us the worst solution,

and added that in his opinion 'the solution of the Czech problem will not come about by way of aggression, but by an internal disintegration of Czechoslovakia'. Szembek also underlined that 'we are putting our utmost effort into improving Rumanian-Hungarian relations. We are assisted by the Italians. This is, however, a gruelling matter'.³³

There were some signs that Great Britain would be favourable to the creation of a Central-European bloc of states under the leadership of Poland, while the French policy of the late 1930s was completely passive. On 19 May 1937, during his talk with the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in London, Beck noticed

the significance attached by [Eden] to the political system developed by Poland, based on Scandinavian countries and embracing the Baltic states in the North, and Rumania in the South. This 'neutral' belt, in his opinion, plays a significant role in the system of European relations. Only Lithuania is an undesirable gap.³⁴

On 11 April 1938 in a conversation between Tadeusz Gwiazdoski, the head of the Department of International Organisations of Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the British ambassador in Warsaw Howard Kennard, the latter 'as usually, very critical of the policy of totalitarian states' drew attention to the 'growing German menace'. He said he understood very well that Poland had to act so as not to endanger her relationship with Germany. However, he thought it would be good if the Polish leaders considered a possibility of creating a new system that might counterbalance the German influence. In fact at that very moment everything was in ruin and something new had to be created. Such a system could be based on Poland, Italy, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Closing his exposition the ambassador

³³ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka 1935–1945. Materiały uzupełniające*, 74.

³⁴ AAN, MSZ, 108A.

underlined once again that he understood very well that the Poles could not discuss such a concept even in the most private of conversations, but he thought they could start contemplating it.³⁵

From 1936 onwards – that is since the resignation of the Rumanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolae Titulescu – the enlivening of Polish-Rumanian friendly relations could be noticed, to the satisfaction of the Polish leadership.³⁶ This tightening of relations between Warsaw and Bucharest was also noticed by foreign diplomats, including the French.³⁷ The opinion of the Quai d'Orsay was that the mutual Polish-Rumanian obligations were not directed against the Little Entente.³⁸ Nevertheless, it was no secret that Polish diplomacy treated this organisation as non-existent.

In fact, however, the project of 'the Third Europe' could not be realised without an effective improvement both in the Hungarian-Rumanian and Hungarian-Yugoslav relations. The interdependence of those two aims cannot be questioned. The Polish-Hungarian rapprochement was expected to bring an essential improvement in the geo-political constellation around Poland. The most recent experiences had seemed to indicate that there was a need for Polish-Hungarian co-operation. But the foreign policy of Hungary in the years preceding the outbreak of World War II was a great disappointment to Beck and all the accessible Polish sources confirm this fact. 'It was extremely difficult to come with them to an understanding' – the minister was to write in his memoirs dictated in Rumania in 1940, trying to formulate his ex-post appraisal of the efforts of Polish diplomacy in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe at that time.

The crux of the matter was that the Polish plans for constructing an 'Intermarium Bloc' did not seem to face a possibility of realisation until the autumn of 1938. Polish documents – some of them so far unpublished – throw a new light on those efforts.

³⁵ PDD/1938, 212.

³⁶ Titulescu was dismissed in August 1936. His successor was Victor Antonescu. The first visit abroad he paid to Poland (in October 1936).

³⁷ Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris (hereafter: AMAE), Roumanie 180. On 30 October 1937 the French ambassador in Bucharest, Adrien Thierry, wrote that Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz's visit to Rumania was the crowning of the Polish efforts at tightening the relations between Poland and Rumania. This impression was of course wrong.

³⁸ AMAE, Roumanie 180, MSZ note of 12 July 1937.

Scandinavian states seemed to Beck a useful component of the future 'neutral zone' in Europe between two totalitarian Powers: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Russia. The Polish foreign minister assumed that the Baltic states, and probably also the Scandinavian countries, would feel menaced by the growth of the German power, and this would create a convenient basis for an exchange of views on security with the participation of Poland.³⁹ Beck's attempts at reaching a rapprochement of Poland with the Baltic and Scandinavian countries ended in complete failure. Poland was not an attractive partner for Stockholm, Oslo or Helsinki.

Beck's visits to Norway and Sweden as well as to Latvia and Estonia in May and in August 1938 did not produce any result except for an exchange of views with the foreign ministers of those states.⁴⁰ The Polish leadership pinned more hope on the territorial transformations in South-Eastern Europe and it focused the efforts of Polish diplomacy on this region. In the summer of 1938 Hungarian policy seemed to suit the wishes of the Polish leaders. Regent Horthy in his conversation with the Polish ambassador to Germany, Józef Lipski, during his stay in Berlin said on 24 August 1938 that he hoped their countries would have a common border.⁴¹

While explaining the assumptions of Polish foreign policy in South-Eastern Europe to the Polish envoy in Belgrade, Roman Dębicki, the Foreign Vice Minister Jan Szembek wrote in his letter of 12 July 1938 that what the Polish side was after was in the first place 'the realisation of an Hungarian-Yugoslav understanding'.⁴² According to the information obtained by Szembek from the Hungarian envoy to Warsaw, André de Hóry, the Yugoslav Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović admitted that it was necessary 'to establish friendly bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and Hungary', since this lay *dans le domaine de la réalité*. Szembek shared Dębicki's reservations that Stojadinović's attempts at

³⁹ This was how Beck explained his expectations to the American ambassador in Warsaw, Anthony Drexel-Biddle, on 19 June 1938, cf. *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War. The Diplomatic Papers of A. J. Drexel-Biddle Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland 1937-1939*, ed. Philip V. Cannistraro, Edward D. Wynot and Theodore P. Kovaleff (Columbus, 1976), 213.

⁴⁰ The most important was the visit in Stockholm on 24-28 May 1938.

⁴¹ PDD/1938, 433-4.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 374-5.

activating the talks with Budapest resulted in a large measure from the fear of Hungary's falling under the German protectorate. The same fear dictated the Italian attempts at helping Budapest and Bucharest to reach an understanding.

In his conclusion Szembek wrote:

I have no doubt that all those Italian efforts lead perhaps not so much to organising a formal barrier, but at any rate to creating some group of friendly countries who would use the same language the *leitmotiv* of which is the necessity of defence against an excessive German expansion.⁴³

In this context we have to add that the Polish endeavours at creating a Rumanian-Hungarian rapprochement were watched with much attention in Berlin. Beck tried to explain to the Germans that they were aimed at improving the external situation of Rumania, an ally of Poland, since this would strengthen Rumania in her policy of 'resistance' to the Soviet Union. This was the spirit of what he had said to Hitler during his talks in Berlin in January 1938; he added 'apart from that we do not conduct any high politics in the Danube Basin'.⁴⁴ It can be doubted whether the Germans believed these explanations. At any rate, the letter shows that the understanding which Poland tried to construct was to defend her against Germany. The fear of Soviet Russia – highly enfeebled at that time – was in Warsaw much smaller.

IV

Unfortunately, the Polish plans of the reconstruction of the balance of forces in South-Eastern Europe encountered a new and unexpected obstacle, that is the policy of Rumania, and above all her strong attachment to the Little Entente and Czechoslovakia, as well as her general passivity. On 12 July 1938 Szembek explained to Dębicki that

the latest political moves of Rumania show that she is afraid of Hungary being strengthened at the cost of Czechoslovakia, and at the same time of the weakening of her own position by the final collapse of the Little Entente and that is why she is looking for some protection on the south (there was

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 375.

talk of King Carol's visit to Sofia), and for the strengthening of the Balkan Entente which would replace the Little Entente as an instrument of the political influence of Rumania.⁴⁵

Undoubtedly, this was the correct interpretation.

And this was how the attitude of the Rumanian politicians to the Sudeten crisis was appraised in Warsaw in the autumn of 1938. Beck's instruction for the Polish ambassador in Bucharest, Roger Raczyński, of 27 September 1938 says that the Polish side

is surprised ... at the Rumanian government's anxiety about the perspective of a change of the borders in favour of Hungary at the moment when the principle of the Czechoslovak territorial cession in favour of Hungary has been acknowledged by the Great Powers with the clear consent of the Czech government.⁴⁶

The initiative of mediation taken by the King of Rumania on 1 October made a negative impression on Warsaw, which interpreted it as an offer of unnecessary interference in the Polish-Czechoslovak crisis after the Polish government had sent an ultimatum to the Czechoslovak government on 30 September. King Carol II delivered a suitable declaration in this matter to the President of the Republic of Poland transmitted by Ambassador Roger Raczyński.⁴⁷ The Rumanian monarch – the ambassador reported to Beck on 6 October –

feels obliged to draw attention to the fact that at the moment when the world was relieved at warding off the direct danger of the outbreak of war, it would be most proper, in his opinion, to avoid anything that could create an impression that Poland was reviving this danger. The King considers the Polish claims addressed to Czechoslovakia quite justified and recalls his identical earlier stand in this question to which he has already given expression.⁴⁸

The Rumanian political leaders seriously apprehended – as Szembek justly observed –

the strengthening of Hungary at the cost of Czechoslovakia, and at the same time the weakening of its position by the final collapse of the Little

⁴⁵ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka 1935–1945. Materiały uzupełniające*, 81.

⁴⁶ AAN, MSZ, 5511.

⁴⁷ PDD/1938, 645.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 667.

Entente, and that was why it sought protection in the south ... and the strengthening of the Balkan Entente, which would replace the Little Entente as a political instrument of the influence of Rumania.⁴⁹

In a letter to Dębicki Szembek agreed with his sceptical view of 'Slovak separatism'. Summing up his remarks, Szembek said:

Be it as it may, we have to do double work: to support the Slovak strivings for autonomy and to incline Hungary to a policy of far-reaching offers towards Slovakia.⁵⁰

Most probably, there was still another factor that motivated the Rumanian leaders. The government in Bucharest did not want to engage too much in co-operation with Poland against the will of Germany, so as to play it safe with the Third Reich.

The leaders of Polish diplomacy thought that in the forthcoming process of territorial transformations the crucial role should be played by Hungary as one definitely interested in a change of her borders.⁵¹ On 5–6 October 1938 the chef de cabinet of the regent of Hungary, Count István Csáky paid a visit to Warsaw.⁵² The talks between Beck and Csáky produced Polish-Hungarian agreement concerning the future steps of both countries in Central Europe. In the name of the Hungarian government he presented to Beck 'recalling the well-known friendship of Poland in general, and of Minister Beck in particular, towards the plan of Hungarian claims'. Hungarian stipulations embraced:

1. the southern areas of Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia compactly inhabited by a Magyar majority;
2. the rest of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia (Ruthenia understood not only as the then Ruthenian province of the

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka 1935–1945. Materiały uzupełniające*, 81.

⁵¹ Hungarian historian, Istvan Deák rightly supposes that the Polish minister did not want to manifest his too strong engagement in the complex problems of the Danube Basin so as not to arouse the anxiety of Berlin and not to encumber Polish-German relations which after Munich had entered a new stage. Cf. Istvan Deák, 'O problemach stosunków słowacko-polskich od Monachium do rozbitcia Republiki', in Ewa Orlof (ed.), *Stosunki polsko-czesko-słowackie w latach 1918–1945* (Rzeszów, 1992), 65.

⁵² For a note on the political conversation between Beck and Csáky see PDD/1938, 662–4.

Czechoslovak state, but also the eastern part of present-day Slovakia, inhabited by the Ruthenian-speaking population; 3. finally, as a further territory of incorporation, the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains which, though inhabited by the Slovak population, are so closely linked geographically (the floating of timber) and economically with the rest of Hungary that they should be annexed to it. Such an annexation is of strategic importance to Hungary, since it creates her border in the Carpathian Mountains.⁵³

Beck took cognisance of the contents of the Hungarian memorandum.

On 6 October 1938 Beck talked to Count Csáky once again and in the name of the Polish authorities gave him an answer.

The Polish government – said the Polish minister – is very much in favour of the Hungarian stipulations, especially of the idea of our common border in Ruthenia. We also assure you of our diplomatic assistance, and especially of taking upon ourselves the task of holding Rumania back.⁵⁴

Thus the standpoints of the two countries were co-ordinated. Beck also explained that an active engagement of Poland in Sub-Carpathian Ukraine was not possible, since

the Polish government sees no possibility of an armed inroad into this territory, having no sufficient moral motivation for such an action in the present circumstances.

In his talks in Warsaw Count Csáky did not conceal his apprehension of ‘German expansion’.⁵⁵

The designs of the Polish side at that time can be reconstructed on the basis of the letter sent by Tadeusz Kobylański (head of the Eastern Department in the Foreign Ministry) to the Polish envoy in Budapest, Leon Orłowski, of 10 October 1938. Szembek informed him that

1. In the matter of annexation of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia to Hungary Poland has taken a firm stand, and has given Hungary diplomatic and press assistance, strongly supported by the attitude of Polish society. We think that the process of liberation of Slovakia should considerably help Hungary in the annexation of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. It is very important, however, that the negotiations should be very energetic and accompanied

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

by a subversive action in the territory of Ruthenia. This method turned out to be very effective both in the actions of Germany and in ours. The complaints of Rumania and Yugoslavia or the Great Powers should not be taken into consideration, since they are merely platonic in character. 2. From the moment Hungary renounces any claims to ethnically Slovak lands, we support the process of the liberation of Slovakia. The present situation seems to be a transitory stage.⁵⁶

On 18 October 1938 Michał Łubieński – the closest associate of Józef Beck and his chef de cabinet – went on a mission to Budapest. The results of his talks did not satisfy the Polish side, which finds corroboration in his letter to the Minister. Łubieński thought that

[the Hungarians] are not yet prepared for direct talks with Bucharest and are afraid of Rumanian indiscretion which would disclose them too soon. They are less afraid of putting forward their non-ethnic claims addressed to Czechoslovakia than of revealing to the opinion of their own country that they cede a part of former Hungarian territory to Rumania. This, in their opinion, does not rule out, of course, our mediation in this matter.⁵⁷

Of great importance is the letter of the vice foreign minister to the envoy in Belgrade of 18 October.

The Hungarian question is becoming more and more complicated for three reasons: first, because of the way the Hungarians act themselves, *secundo* because of the stand of Rumania, and finally because of some catches in Slovakia. The Hungarians have turned out not up to their task, they were not able to take advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves, they lack determination and by delaying their decisions are allowing time to work against them. Instead of focusing their attention on Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, where they could be most successful, they have extended their claims too much, which would even make sense, if they earlier came to an understanding with the Slovaks. And they disgraced themselves completely when they posed an ultimatum and then turned for rescue to the Munich Four.⁵⁸

The arbitration held in Vienna on 2 November 1938 without the participation of the Western Powers, was received very negatively in

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 681.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 717–18.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

Warsaw. In this context it must be added that the leadership of the Third Reich rejected the proposal put forward by Italy and supported by Hungary, of granting Poland the role of one of the arbitrators in the question of Hungarian claims addressed to post-Munich Czechoslovakia.⁵⁹ This was an important political signal for Italy. In the letter cited above Szembek underlined that

we have assured the Hungarians that we are in favour of their aspirations and will not give any guarantees to the new Czech state before these aspirations have been satisfied and that we are ready to offer them both moral and diplomatic assistance. As regards Ruthenia (we are no longer striving for the incorporation of Slovakia into Hungary and will always respect the intentions of the Slovaks themselves) the minister is cautious because of Germany.

In his conclusion Szembek said:

Personally, however, I think that the moment our common border with Hungary becomes a *fait accompli*, especially if this takes place with the consent of Rumania, these frictions will gradually be assuaged, the more so because it will be better for Yugoslavia if Hungary is satisfied by Czechoslovakia rather than disappointed in her aroused territorial aspirations. Besides, our influence on Budapest may be some guarantee for Rumania and Yugoslavia that we will hold back the untimely Hungarian designs. Italy, at any rate, will certainly act in the same direction.⁶⁰

Józef Beck's mission to Galati, where the Polish foreign minister met Carol II and the Rumanian Foreign Minister Nicolae Petrescu-Comnèn on 18–19 October 1938, and tried to persuade the Rumanian politicians to support the policy of territorial transformations on the ruins of Czechoslovakia in the spirit of Polish-Hungarian agreements, was a complete failure.⁶¹ The endeavours of Polish diplomacy to reach a Polish-Hungarian-Rumanian rapprochement ended in a fiasco. The political leadership in Budapest – without renouncing its principal aim, that is the revision of the Treaty of Trianon – conducted a very cautious policy, motivated above all by a wish to play safe with the Western Powers.

⁵⁹ Piwarski, *Polityka europejska*, 38.

⁶⁰ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka 1935–1945. Materiały uzupełniające*, 88.

⁶¹ Note of the conversation on 19 Oct. 1938, PDD/1938, 709–11.

The words of Beck recorded as an instruction for the ambassador in London Edward Raczyński on 29 November 1938 are very eloquent and important:

It was the intention of the Polish Government to help arrange the Hungarian-Rumanian relations in a most favourable way. In the given case we were ready to start mediation and eventually guarantee the agreement reached. Our readiness even went beyond the obligations imposed by our alliance with Rumania. It was up to Rumania to make avail of our good will – however, this was not the case.⁶²

Beck and the Polish political leaders pinned too much hope on the activeness of Italy in East-Central Europe. This hope was a total illusion. In the realities of 1938 Italy was not able to become an effective partner of Poland in the construction of a 'Warsaw – Rome axis', as a counterbalance to the growing power of Germany.⁶³ Beck's calculations in this respect failed completely. His visit to Rome in March 1938 ended in failure.⁶⁴ One of the reasons for such a turn of events was the economic weakness of Italy – especially in relation to the economic power of the Third Reich. Mussolini and Ciano in fact conducted a policy of gestures, and in practice – a policy of conformity with the rules of the game imposed by Germany.⁶⁵

It has to be stressed that after the failure of Beck's mission to Galati the co-operation with Italy immediately weakened. Towards the end of October 1938 Italy refused to support the Polish endeavours to establish a common border with Hungary. According to Ewa Cytowska, who has examined this issue, this decision was personally taken by Mussolini.⁶⁶ Italy could not herself afford to antagonise Germany. Polish hopes for a real engagement of Italy in the East-Central Europe were unjustified.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 799.

⁶³ Italian foreign policy at the end of the 1930s is successfully discussed by Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino. La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940* (Rome, 2001) (see vol. ii).

⁶⁴ Ewa Cytowska, 'Próby współpracy polsko-włoskiej w Europie Środkowej (X 1938 – III 1939)', *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej*, xiv (1978), 154–5.

⁶⁵ The political caution of Italy was signalised by the Polish ambassador there, Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, in the political report to Beck of 30 July 1938, AAN, Ambasada w Rzymie, 2.

⁶⁶ Cytowska, 'Próby współpracy', 152–5.

Of course, the Italians did not intend to stop wooing Poland, but this did not come to much. As late as 9 February 1939 the French ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet wrote that Italian diplomacy wanted to establish 'special relations' with Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia. 'Une sorte de groupement politique orienté principalement vers Rome' was to be established under the patronage of Rome, and 'Poland was turning her back on France'.⁶⁷ François-Poncet still believed that Italy wanted to concentrate the said states around her and 'to draw benefit out of bringing about the death of Czechoslovakia', while everything was leading to Germany's breaking of the agreement with Poland and a Polish-German conflict, which 'in Rome would have the impression of a veritable catastrophe' – and here the French ambassador was right. In fact it was clear that all the moves of Rome would be calculated so as not to antagonise 'the Greater Germany'.⁶⁸

The year 1938 thus ended in an atmosphere of complete chaos to the south of our frontiers, with a complete breakdown of the prestige of the Western Powers in view of the Munich capitulation and the overly easy German successes, which raised general alarm

– wrote Beck in his political memoirs *Final Report*.⁶⁹ Finally, as is well known, Poland obtained a common border with Hungary in March 1939, but this was dictated by the Third Reich and happened without the help of Italy. It was an event of secondary importance.

German diplomacy considered Beck's project as a new idea in Polish foreign policy.⁷⁰ This is no wonder, for the Great Reich perceived East-Central Europe as a 'sphere of her influence' and did not want to allow for any 'competition from Poland'. Of course, Polish plans met with the resistance of Germany, and the diplomacy of the Third

⁶⁷ AMAE, Série: Europe 1918–1940, Sous-série: Pologne, 264.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ Joseph Beck, *Final Report* (New York, 1957), 168 (the French edition appeared earlier – Col. Beck, *Dernier Rapport. Politique polonaise 1926–1939* [Neuchâtel, 1951]).

⁷⁰ 'Die Begriffe: *Block, Achse, Front* oder *Hegemonie* seien der Terminologie der neuzeitlichen polnischen Politik fremd...', wrote the German ambassador to Warsaw, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, to the Auswärtiges Amt on 26 July 1938, commenting on the reevaluation of the ideas shaping the new phase in Polish policy – an attempt at constructing 'the Third Europe', Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, Polen, 1, R. 104143–2.

Reich closely watched and studied the Polish concepts from the very beginning (a fact historians have not given due attention to so far).

The strivings of Polish diplomacy did not gain the support of the Western Powers. They met with the symptoms of resentment on the part of allied France, and a reserved interest on the part of Great Britain. In the times of appeasement no real engagement of the Western Powers in East-Central Europe was possible. Only after the Munich Conference, did the British and French governments start to study a possibility of an Eastern Front in case of war against Germany.⁷¹ It was too late. At the end of 1938 East-Central Europe had disintegrated.

V

1. The aim of this study was to give a balanced appraisal of the views and concepts of the Polish leadership of the late 1930s concerning the so-called 'Intermarium Bloc'. This project not only was not put into practice, but did not even become the subject of diplomatic negotiations. We do not think that this was proof of a lack of political realism on the part of the creators of Polish foreign policy. It seems that restraint in appraising the views of Józef Beck and the Polish leadership is both necessary and justified. What seems anachronistic and naïve from the perspective of the few decades that have since elapsed, could have in former historical, mental and psychological realities been perceived as logical and rational.

2. The project of 'the Intermarium Bloc' was not a propagandist concept calculated to raise the prestige of our country. It was rather a symptom of a desperate search for an additional guaranty of Poland's security in the face of the disintegration of the political system that the League of Nations had tried to create, and of the ineffectiveness of the Polish-French alliance that was also falling apart in the 1930s, and not simply because of Poland.

3. The Polish leaders were well aware of the inevitably deteriorating international situation of Poland.⁷² In the realities of the late

⁷¹ Talbott Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938–1940* (Oxford, 2003).

⁷² On this subject see Marek Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotow. Problem zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w polityce zagranicznej II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 2002), chap. III.

1930s Poland could not expect much military assistance from the Western Powers. They followed a defensive military strategy and the policy of appeasement, and Poland, even though she had gained some concrete guaranties from allied France, would not obtain her military assistance. Józef Beck was aware of that. And this was the origin of the idea of 'the Third Europe'.

4. The idea of 'the Third Europe' was rather a general vision than a ready concept. This was rather an episode, or even an unfulfilled political alternative in the history of interwar diplomacy. In the history of Polish political thought this was certainly an interesting initiative that inscribed itself in the sequence of the various concepts for the reconstruction and integration of the area of East-Central Europe that were advanced in the interwar period.

5. From the long term perspective there can be no doubt that the project of 'the Third Europe' was unrealistic. Poland, relying solely on her own powers, was not able to achieve such a reconstruction of the correlation of forces in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe that would allow the outline of such a project to be even partly put into practice. On the other hand, however, little could be gained by remaining in a state of passivity or becoming subordinated to French policy.⁷³

6. The idea of a 'neutral zone' in Central Europe was not directed against Germany or Russia. Obviously it was a concept aimed at preserving this region from German or Soviet domination. Due to this, Nazi Germany started to overcome Beck's plans when he began his diplomatic activities in Budapest and Bucharest. The Soviet leaders considered Beck's project as a new sort of 'Polish imperialism'. Polish-Soviet relations at the end of the 1930s can be described as a 'cold war'.

7. Polish foreign policy in 1938 cannot be explained only in the perspective of Polish territorial pretensions to Czechoslovakia concerning the disputed area of Teschen Silesia. This policy had a broader aim. It was to rebuilt Central Europe organising a 'neutral zone' between Hitler's Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union.

8. The concept of 'the Third Europe', as designed, required, i.a., a change in the *status quo* in East-Central Europe, and more strictly speaking the elimination of Czechoslovakia as an independent factor in international politics, and the establishment of a common border between Poland and Hungary. Minister Beck certainly overestimated

⁷³ As was shown, for example, by the foreign policy of Czechoslovakia.

Poland's potential and underestimated the stabilising role of Czechoslovakia. It seems as if he had lost sight of – as was justly observed by Michał Zacharias – ‘the fact that the downfall of Czechoslovakia had to lead to the hegemony of the Third Reich in the whole of South-Eastern Europe’.⁷⁴ The assumption of the Polish foreign minister that the Czechoslovak crisis and the territorial changes it entailed could be used in line with Polish interests turned out to be mistaken. This is the principal lesson of Beck's ‘Third Europe’ idea.

⁷⁴ Kamiński and Zacharias, *W cieniu zagrożenia*, 226.