

Intermarium

From the battle of Varna to the war in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the concept of *Intermarium* (*The Land Between the Seas*) as a socio-political phenomenon still influencing the international relations in Central and Eastern Europe. The author presents its most important characteristics identified by scholars specializing in the matter. He also claims that the concept of *Intermarium* is the key to understand the current events in Ukraine.

Keywords: Intermarium, Central Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Poland, Adriatic Sea, Baltic Sea, Black Sea

RESUMEN

El artículo presenta el concepto de *Intermarium* (la tierra entre los mares) como un fenómeno socio-político que sigue influyendo hoy en día en las relaciones internacionales en el ámbito de Europa Central y Oriental. El autor explica sus características más importantes tal como fueron identificadas por los estudiosos especializados en la materia. También considera que el concepto es la clave para entender los acontecimientos actuales en Ucrania.

Palabras clave: Intermarium, Europa Central y Occidental, Ucrania, Polonia, Mar Adriático, Mar Báltico, Mar Negro

RESUM

L'article presenta el concepte de *Intermarium* (la terra entre els mars) com un fenomen sociopolític que segueix influint avui dia en les relacions internacionals en l'àmbit d'Europa central i oriental. L'autor explica les seves característiques més importants tal com van ser identificades pels estudiosos especialitzats en la matèria. També considera que el concepte és la clau per entendre els esdeveniments actuals a Ucraïna.

Paraules clau: Intermarium, Europa Central i Occidental, Ucraïna, Polònia, Mar Adriàtic, Mar Bàltic, Mar Negre

The revolution in Ukraine and the war that broke out in its effect became one of the most important elements of the European politics in 2014. The EU-aspirations of a large part of the Ukrainian society led to overthrowing the government and changing the entire doctrine of the state's foreign policy. A country that used to be considered one lying in the Russian zone of influence now wanted to become part of the West. This may seem surprising to some Western European societies but not so much to the Eastern ones. Collective historical memories provide some natural explanations of the phenomenon.

Some wider context of Central Eastern Europe must be presented in order to understand that. The concept of *Intermarium* is of crucial importance here. The lands between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas have their own specific sense of identity. At present this fact plays an important role in Ukraine.

The paper is divided in two parts. The first one briefly defines the region and its characteristics as described in the most notable monographs related to it. The second part presents three case studies illustrating the phenomenon.

***Intermarium* - what it is and how the term was coined**

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The term *Międzymorze* (*Intermarium*) officially refers to the geopolitical doctrine coined in Poland during the Interwar period. It was supposed to stand for the federation of the Central Eastern European states, from Estonia (or even Finland) in the North to Yugoslavia in the South, Czechoslovakia in the West to proposed Ukraine in the East. It was supposed to be a sort of reincarnation of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, which between the 16th and 18th centuries built a powerful state capable of resisting the political and military influence from the East (Russia), West (Germany) and South (Ottoman Empire). In the reality of the 20th century the main adversary was supposed to be the Soviet Union. This part of Europe was called "The Land Between the Seas", as *Międzymorze* literally translates into English. Then the term was Latinized to become "Intermarium". The seas between which the *Intermarium* lies are the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. However, with time the concept was broadened as Józef Piłsudski started to think of a more complex political bloc including also the Scandinavia and Italy. At a certain moment the idea of the "ABC seas" emerged - for the Polish expressions *Morza Adriatyckie, Bałtyckie i Czarne*, which stands for the "Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas". Piłsudski's and his political descendants' concept was thoroughly presented by Piotr Okulewicz¹.

¹ Okulewicz (2001). Same author's (2003)

This had a peculiar spillover effect as in the 1930s and 1940s several federalist concepts were coined in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Greece and Yugoslavia. There even existed plans to reestablish the Habsburg-led monarchy consisting of former Austria-Hungary and some other regions. However, it was not supposed to be just simple recreation of a fallen empire. This was to be a starting point for the united Europe after the Second World War. Jonathan Levy described them in detail and analysed thoroughly their impact upon the later European integration².

For further analysis, it is assumed that the *Intermarium* refers to the lands located between the three seas mentioned above. On many occasions, the area is simply called "Central and Eastern Europe". Whether they use the name "*Intermarium*" or not, there are numerous modern scholars who emphasize its specific character, as well as try to define its borders and identify the reasons of this distinction.

Piotr S. Wandycz in his book on the history of Central and Eastern Europe³ brings up the question of the permanent struggle for freedom that is so characteristic for the region. At first it was usually the question of foreign cultural influence or physical invasions from the East (Mongols, Russia) and South (the Ottoman Empire) and eventually the West, too (Germany). The social-economic issues were of great importance as well, since with time the existing oppressive political systems faced more and more resistance. In different time periods, in Poland, Bohemia, Hungary and Ukraine different forms of self-government of the "democracy of the nobles" emerged. This struggle would eventually define the historical paths of all the major states in the region - though in many details they differ from one another.

Samuel Huntington focused mostly on religious issues as defining the region. In his work *The Clash of Civilizations* he clearly draws a line between Western (including Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity. This leaves some of the countries divided (Bosnia, Ukraine). He argued that this might be the main explanation of conflicts that arose in the 1990s. Huntington also predicted that they might result in some kind of a major clash in Ukraine in the future. As we can see at the moment, he was right. Moreover, he correctly identified the main consequences of the Russian doctrine of the Near Abroad though he by far underestimated its territorial scope, narrowing it down to the Orthodox states only (and Kazakhstan)⁴. But if other parts of the former USSR were included (e.g.

² Levy (2007)

³ Wandycz (2001)

⁴ Huntington (1997): pp. 155-167

the Baltic states) as well as the Soviet satellites, they would once again suit the concept of *Intermarium*.

Timothy Snyder in his paramount *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*⁵ focuses on the latest history. According to him the most important factor that shaped identity of the regions was the Second World War and the traumatic atrocities brought by the two totalitarian regimes: national socialism in Germany and communism in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the list of horrors of the period is shocking: the revolution of 1917, the civil war in Russia and Bolshevik invasions, the Great Famine in Ukraine in 1933, the German racist ideology and its ultimate manifestation - the Holocaust, moving frontlines, uprisings drowned in blood, deportations to Siberia. Last but not least - 50 years of the communist dictatorship, which united the region but on the wrong side of the border by separating it from the West with the Iron Curtain.

Norman Davies proposes a somewhat combined approach to the problem. He notices that a big part of the Eastern European history is missing in the most popular American and English books on the Western civilization. Jewish and Muslim strands are of great importance to him - and those apply mostly to Southern and Central Eastern Europe. History of the Second World War (as a chapter title wants it, it was a *Misunderstood Victory*) and the politics of history are added as factors distinctive to Central Eastern Europe⁶.

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Probably the most complex analysis of the phenomenon of *Intermarium* was provided by Marek Jan Chodakiewicz. His work⁷ published in 2012 presents a detailed study of historical and contemporary aspects the region. The author focuses on collective memories of the nations living in the Central and Eastern Europe, focusing most on the heritage of the realm of the Jagiellonian dynasty and the Commonwealth of Both Nations (Poland and Lithuania). The first part of the book is a historical sketch starting with the beginnings of statehood in the First Millenium. Then the author presents the impact on the Mongol invasion on Ruthenia, the rise of medieval kingdoms, the Commonwealth mentioned, the partitions up to the First and Second World Wars. Later on he focuses on the issue, which he called the Armageddon and its aftermath - or in other words, the Second World War, the communist occupation and transition. In his opinion, the Intermarium for centuries was a "staunt defender of the European civilization". He concludes that studying history is indispensable to understand the *Intermarium*, as selective memories distort the perception.

⁵ Snyder (2010)

⁶ Davies (2006): pp. 46-60, 203-277

⁷ Chodakiewicz (2012)

None of the scholars mentioned above question the fact of the region belonging to the European (Western) Civilization. It may lie in the borderlands of it - exactly like Spain, Italy or Greece - but its history and traditions are definitely European. Below three little case studies of how the concept of *Intermarium* can be traced in different historical events are analyzed.

The memory of the battle of Varna

The beautiful Bulgarian city of Varna is recognized as one of the most important ports of the Black Sea and an important tourist destination of Bulgaria. However, in 1444 the city witnessed one of the most important battles of the Middle Ages. Sadly enough, it was severe defeat of the forces representing various regions of what we now call *Intermarium*.

The memory of the battle is still very vivid and is reflected by the Park-Museum of Military Friendship 1444 "Vladislav Varnenchik" in the Bulgarian city of Varna⁸. Vladislav III, who commanded the coalition Christian army and died in battle, got his nickname "Varnenchik", actually "Warneńczyk" in Polish (this literally means "the one from Varna") to commemorate that very fact. His sarcophagus is the key point of interest of the park, though his grave is only symbolic, as his body had never been found after the battle⁹. In the park around it, the monuments of the fallen knights and soldiers were built. On each of them there are crests of various lands from which they came from. Or, to be precise, of their modern descendants as some of the states did not exist in the 15th century: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine. There is a symbolic grave of all the warriors with an inscription in Bulgarian that says: "Eternal glory to the brave sons of the Bulgarian, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Czech, Slovak, Ukrainian and Croatian nations who died near Varna on 10th of November 1444 in the battle against the Ottoman invaders for freedom and independence".

⁸ More information on the museum can be found on its website, [online] accessed at the address http://varnenchikmuseum.com/Eng/Za_nas/Za_nas.html on October 24th, 2014.

⁹ This led to the emergence of a legend according to which the young king survived the battle but later on lived in hiding. Some of the scholars share that idea and from time to time publish research on alternative theories. The most resounding one recently was the work of the Portuguese historian Manuel Rosa who claims that Vladislav III survived the battle, died on Madera and... was a father of Christopher Columbus (sic!). See: da Silva Rosa (2009)

Although the story of the battle is by far more complicated, it contains a lot of diplomatic, political and personal aspects (including the fact that the king Vladislav provoked by the Papal envoy broke the armistice, whereas the Ottoman army was greatly supported by the Venetian and Genoan fleet), it was remembered as severe defeat of the one of the last crusades in Europe. It probably was also the first occasion when the Central European nations fought together united by one cause. This probably was only possible by the fact that at that time the Jagiellonian dynasty was ruling the most important states of the region: the Kingdom of Poland, the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. But from the point of view of the geographical space, the four monarchies in question covered approximately the territories of the contemporary Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia and Lithuania. Except Bulgaria and Serbia, that by that time had already been conquered by the Ottomans and Bosnia, it may be assumed that it was indeed manifestation of the political concept of *Intermarium*.

The speech of President Lech Kaczyński in Tbilisi in May 2008

A good example of how *Intermarium* still inspires political imagination is the speech of Lech Kaczyński, the late president of Poland. He delivered it in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 12th of August 2008, right in the middle of the ongoing Russian invasion of Georgia. Below it is cited in extenso:

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We are here today to express full solidarity. We are here, leaders of five states: Poland, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. We are here to take up the fight. For the first time for quite a long time, our neighbours from the North, and for us also from the North and East showed their face, which we have known for centuries. These neighbours are of the opinion that the nations living around them should be subordinate to them. We say "no". This state is Russia. This country thinks that the old times of the empire fallen less than 20 years ago will come back. That again the domination will be the feature of the region. It will not. Those times are over once and for all. Not for only 20, 30 or 50 years. All of us got to know that domination in the same or different times. It is a misfortune for this part of Europe. It is about breaking people's characters. It is about imposing a foreign political system on others. It is about imposing a foreign language. But how the situation today is different from the situation many years ago? We are here together. Today the world had to react even if reluctantly. And we are here in order for the world to react even stronger, especially the EU and NATO. When I initiated this visit some people thought that the presidents would be afraid. No one was afraid, all of them came here because the Central Europe has courageous leaders.

And I would like to say, not only to you but also to our friends from our common European Union that the Central Europe, and Georgia, and the entire region will count, and that we are an entity. And we know very well that today it is Georgia, tomorrow it will be Ukraine, the day after tomorrow - the Baltic states, and then there may even come time for my country, for Poland. We were deeply convinced that our membership in the NATO and the EU would terminate the period of the [growing] Russian appetite. But it turned out otherwise, we were wrong. But we are capable of opposing that. We can oppose that only if the values that are fundamental to Europe have any practical meaning. If they mean anything, entire Europe should be here. But there are only four states [represented] here belonging to the NATO and Ukraine, which is a big state. Also Mr. President Sarkozy is here, the head of the European Council, but in fact there should be 27 states present¹⁰

As it can be seen, although the speech itself does not use the expression *Intermarium*, it refers openly to the heritage of it as the frontline of the European civilization and calls for the European solidarity by this means. The president appealed to collective memories related to the Russian domination (although within the context the word "Soviet" probably would be more precise) and the nature of the communist totalitarian system. Moreover, the five presidents in question were those of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine - or of the countries whose heritage is deeply rooted in the history of the Commonwealth of Both Nations. The only one missing here is Belarus but this results in a different political system. What gives this story a particular meaning is the fact that on 10th of April 2010 the president Lech Kaczyński died in an air crash in Russia, while travelling to attend the 70th anniversary of the massacre of the Polish POWs by the Soviets.

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Euro Maidan and the war in Ukraine

As late as in December 2012 one of the analysts from the Centre for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich) stated that Ukraine was trying to balance between the European Union and the Customs Union led by Russia. That was the element of the Ukrainian foreign policy doctrine, which was focused around neutrality and maintaining some balanced relations with the East and West. In a way, it reflects the conclusions of Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*. The political elites were trying to avoid any kind of policy that might possibly lead to an internal conflict. Yet, the final decision of the government of Victor Yanukovich in No-

¹⁰ The text was transcribed from the archival records of the speech available on YouTube and translated by the author. It can be found in several user profiles, e.g. Basiorvip, *Lech Kaczyński w Gruzji (12.VIII.2008)*, YouTube, [online] accessed on 29 October 2014 at the address <http://youtu.be/ComH0h617Q4>

vember 2013 to postpone integration with the EU led to the outburst of public protests, which eventually resulted in overthrowing his government. It turned out that new generations of Ukrainians, who were raised in a free country, clearly consider themselves to be part of the West¹¹

The whole conflict soon became to be described as the clash of civilizations. The Ukrainian society in its overwhelming majority started to opt for a different form of government and the political, social and economic organization than the existing one. References to events from the past began to appear - the Mongol invasion, Holodomor (the Great Famine), etc. But the most impressive were the two elections of 2014: the presidential one in May and the parliamentary one in October. Both the turnout, as well as the results showing the overwhelming support for the European integration, clearly mean that Ukrainians define themselves as Europeans¹². This effect may be strengthened by the fact that the history apparently turned full circle. In the territory of modern Ukraine again a war is fought. And as some politics from the Intermarium state, it is a war in defence of Europe¹³.

Conclusions

Although the *Intermarium* states frequently may have different political interests (e.g. different attitude to the sanctions imposed on Russia)¹⁴, nevertheless they form a certain cultural and geopolitical entity. This is owed mostly to their historical and cultural tradition, which was shaped under the rules of similar legal and government models. There exists strong attachment and devotion to equality, democracy and independence. The sense of identity and belonging to the European civilization is also powerful. On the other hand, all of the *Intermarium* states experienced similar troubles and perils. The legacy of defence against the East and South, resistance against oppression, the eventually successful struggle for independence and the horrors of two totalitarianisms contributed enormously to shaping this identity. These themes resound frequently in political

¹¹ Sadowski (2012); Konończuk & Olszański (2014)

¹² Myroslav (2014); Olszański & Wierzbowska-Miazga (2014); Gregory (2014)

¹³ Marcin Świącicki, *Sprzedawać broń Ukrainie*, 19 September 2014, [online] accessed on 29 October 2014 at the address <http://swiecicki.blog.onet.pl/2014/09/19/sprzedawac-czy-nie-sprzedawac-bron-ukrainie/>. Dalia Grybauskaitė, *#Ukraine is attacked because of its European choice. It is not only defending its territory, but also #Europe and its values*, [Twitter post], [online] accessed on 29 October 2014 at the address

¹⁴ Alec Luhn, "Russia's turbulent ties in Europe" - *The Guardian briefing*, *The Guardian*, Friday 17 October 2014, [online]: accessed on 29 October 2014 at the address <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/17/-sp-russia-relations-europe-guardian-briefing>.

concepts and programs over space and time and remain appealing to the public. Thus, the lands between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas constitute part of Europe that cannot be understood without knowing their history and collective memory. And still, they remain the foremost eastern bulwark of the West.

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