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Poland's policy on Czechoslovakia in 1938 and plans of creating the so-called "Third Europe"

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Abstract: The article presents Poland's foreign policy towards Czechoslovakia during the crisis of 1938 against the background of Polish plans in Central Europe aimed at inhibiting the growth of influence of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union in this area.

Poland's policy on Czechoslovakia in 1938 was influenced by slightly earlier events, related both to the deterioration of the relations between the two countries since 1934, and to the new concepts in Warsaw's policy on Central Europe. The strained relations between Warsaw and Prague were affected by disputes over the situation of the Polish minority in the Czechoslovak Republic (CSR), subjected to assimilation enforced by the administration and Czechoslovakia's foreign policy, too much oriented to Moscow since May 1935 when the two states forged an alliance. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs believed that Czechoslovakia's international position was weakening due to the activity of a minority supported by Berlin.

These were probably the reasons why, in 1937, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs came up with a concept of a new configuration of the power system in Central Europe or, to be more precise, between Germany and the USSR, establishing and strengthening the cooperation between "the resistant to the powers" and striving to

maintain independence from the “ideological blocs” prevailing in the international relations in Europe in the late 1930s. Behind the basic assumptions was Józef Beck, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The attempts to implement the concept of the so-called Third Europe and Beck's policy on Czechoslovakia during the crisis of 1938 were important elements of the Central European direction in Poland's policy. At the same time, these were the last independent actions on the part of the Polish diplomacy to the south of the Carpathians that can be viewed as the closure of the Polish activity in this area before the outbreak of WWII.

In literature on the subject, the concept of the so-called “Third Europe”, or Inter-marium (Międzymorze), has been perceived as Józef Beck's original political concept, implemented in 1937. It is difficult to reconstruct the content of the concept because the documents of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs containing the initial plan have not survived. We can only try to reproduce it by analyzing the activities of the Polish diplomacy in 1937 and 1938¹. Is it right to assume that the concept of a Third Europe was originated in 1937, i.e. a time when Europe seemed to have split into two opposing blocks: the Axis powers (Germany and Italy) and a bloc consisting of the other Western powers and their friends in Central Europe and the Balkans: Great Britain and France, as well as Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Yugoslavia and Greece. Next to this group was the Soviet Union, at the time following the policy of supporting the League of Nations which was manifested by an alliance with France formed in 1935. However, Moscow also considered the possible benefits that may have arisen from a conflict between the “bourgeois states”. The Polish minister's opinion that these were “ideological blocks” distinguished mainly by certain ideological principles was only partly correct. In Poland's policy, attempts to start cooperation with selected Central European countries were made earlier, in the form of the so-called Agricultural Block confirmed by a document of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs from March 1934 on the Polish Republic's policy in Central Europe and the Balkans². Beck is likely to have taken into account the previously established concepts of a change in the balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe, more in line with Polish interests. The fundamental difference between the earlier concepts and the reality in which the idea

¹ Recently, Marek Kornat has extensively analysed the issue of a Third Europe in his *“Polityka równowagi” (1934–1939). Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem*, Krakow 2007, p. 103 and next; and: *Polityka zagraniczna Polski 1938–1939. Cztery decyzje Józefa Becka*, Gdańsk 2012, p. 307 and next. Both works discuss literature on the subject, the source of Beck's concept and attempts to implement it in 1938.

² Published by: J. Tomaszewski, *Przegląd Historyczny* 4 (1985).

of a Third Europe was originated, was a new situation in Europe: the previous stability and the dominating role of the Western powers were replaced in the late 1930s by a real threat to the status quo posed by Totalitarianism, accompanied by the ambivalent attitude of Paris and London. The change in the situation in Central Europe in the late 1930s required taking into account the anticipated German success in the basin of the Danube to which Austria and Czechoslovakia fell victim. Thus the fundamental difference between the earlier concepts and the idea of a Third Europe was the CSR's failure to become an important element on Central Europe's political reality. Polish politics seemed to benefit significantly from the decline in Czechoslovakia's significance in Central Europe in 1936–1938. Above all, the role of the Soviet Union was limited; it built its position in Central Europe on cooperation with Czechoslovakia. What is more, the weakening of the CSR involved a decline in the importance of the Little Entente and created a window of opportunity for rapprochement and cooperation between Hungary and Romania, welcomed by Warsaw. The weakening of Czechoslovakia, and even its likely disintegration, made it possible to reclaiming the Czech part of Teschen Silesia (Zaolzie) inhabited by Poles. It also allowed to satisfy Hungary's revisionist demands (southern Slovakia and Subcarpathia Rus), a shared Polish-Hungarian border and lower Budapest's aspirations towards Transylvania. Limiting the activity of communists and Ukrainians in the CSR aimed against Poland and depriving Prague of support for Polish political immigrants were additional benefits for Warsaw, significant at that.

However, the weakening of Czechoslovakia also had adverse consequences for Poland. After signing the Polish-German declaration of non-aggression on 26 I 1934, it was assumed in Warsaw that the German policy would be directed to the south (Austria and borderland CSR territories inhabited by a German population). Thus the Polish Corridor would be ignored, souring the relationship between Poland and Germany. Accomplishment of the objectives of the German policy in the south could have again directed Berlin's attention to the east. The success of the German policy in the Danube Basin further jeopardized Poland's strategic position and opened up new possibilities for Berlin. Back in 1938, nobody knew if it could be yet another Polish Corridor, not even Józef Beck.

Generally speaking, in the late 1930s the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs intended to create a "third power" consisting of smaller European states without any legal presentation of the obligations. It was to be bound mainly by its participants' reluctance to become clients a superpower or a group of powers and a shared perception of the international situation. Perhaps agreements between the participants

would have been concluded in a distant future. In 1937–1938, Beck did not plan any alliances, conventions or treaties, probably postponing them. He thought that a Third Europe could be created by eliminating the contradictions between the states to be incorporated, predominantly Poland, Hungary and Romania as well as Yugoslavia and the Baltic States³. Some publications indicate that Beck considered Italy's possible participation, or at least he expected Rome's support for the initiative. In this arrangement, a Third Europe supported by Italy could have protected Austria from the Anschluss. Beck also took into consideration the Scandinavian countries. This informal bloc, bereft of an ideological background, would have been a pragmatic agreement of the countries ranging from Scandinavia to the Balkans interested in maintaining peace⁴. Literature on the subject sometimes presents the utopian nature of the entire concept, related mainly to the lack of legal regulations. It seems that this line of criticism is wrong. In the concept of a Third Europe we deal with the initial phase of implementation; therefore elimination of contradictions and areas of conflicts between the hypothetical participants is by all means sensible⁵. Was the Franco-British-Russian alliance built up differently before 1914? However, the selection of the possible participants of the Central European Agreement and some of its assumptions call for criticism. The most difficult problem was the change in the relationships between Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. Closer cooperation with the Baltic States was hampered by the Polish-Lithuanian conflict. Similarly, close cooperation with the Scandinavian countries seemed illusive⁶. In literature on the subject, a part of Beck's plan is criticized for not having taken into account Czechoslovakia as a member of a Third Europe. What is more, he even intended to build up a group of "Europe's uninvolved states" on the rubble of Czechoslovakia. Perhaps that was his assessment of the situation in Central and Southeastern Europe in 1937 and 1938 when he failed to see any chance for Czechoslovakia to survive⁷.

There were some doubts as to whether a Third Europe was a concept introduced in the late 1930s, without reference to earlier activity, or maybe Józef Beck's sup-

³ M. Kornat, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski*, p. 103–110.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ The literature on the concept of a Third Europe is discussed extensively by M. Kornat in *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 309–319.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Critically about Beck's policy towards the CSR: H. Batowski, *Rok 1938, dwie agresje hitlerowskie*, Poznań 1985, pp. 437–438; S. Stanisławska, *Polska a Monachium*, Warszawa 1967, and *passim*.

port for the establishment of a “non-ideological block” of the “non-aligned block” of 1937 stemmed from the need for more dynamic and decisive actions in a specific international situation in relation to steps taken earlier⁸.

The concept of a Third Europe excluded Czechoslovakia as well as Austria. In Warsaw the opinion was that the fate of Austria had been sealed when the cooperation between Great Britain with France and Rome preventing the Anschluss was withheld in the autumn of 1935 after Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. For this reason, in 1936 and 1937 the Polish government did not get involved in the Austrian affairs. Poland’s lack of interest in Austria was confirmed by Beck in his talks in Berlin with Hitler, Neurath and Göring in mid-January 1938. The Polish minister reiterated that Poland’s interest in Austria was purely economic thus indicating that Poland would not oppose the annexure of Austria to the Reich⁹. Once the Anschluss became reality in March 1938, the Polish diplomatic and consular facilities in Austria were closed down; it was a clear indication that Poland accepted the obliteration of the Austrian state¹⁰. Obviously, Poland did not have any instruments to put a stop or at least temporarily postpone the Anschluss because the future of the Danube republic was in the hands of the powers. As long as Great Britain, France and Italy cooperated, the Third Reich’s Anschluss policy was challenged. For Poland, the most advantageous development with respect to Austria’s situation was postponing the final solution which never happened¹¹.

In the next stage of implementing the concept of a Third Europe, or “solving the Czechoslovak case” which hindered the détente between Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia and thus interfered with the intentions of Polish diplomats, Beck in fact did not aspire to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia from 1937. He only thought, like other influential employees of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that the

⁸ M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 86–87.

⁹ Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne* (further *Monachium 1938*), Warszawa 1985, doc. No. 3, 5–6. Also in *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne 1938* (further *PDD 1938*), ed. M. Kornat, Warsaw 2007, doc. No. 7, 9–10.

¹⁰ K.Z. Kołodziejczyk, op.cit., pp. 89–90; S. Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939*, Poznań 1998, p. 69.

¹¹ This is how Szembek addressed the problem in a letter to Dębicki of 5 III 1938 where he stressed that, in his opinion, the fate of Austria was sealed but it would be best for Poland if “Austria were a promised fruit for Germany as long as possible and that it was picked as late in the future as is possible”, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, ed. W. Jędrzejewicz, *Niepodległość* (New York, London) XV (1982), pp. 71–74.

country faced a serious crisis in a near future or even disintegration¹². The fact remains that Polish-Czechoslovak relationships were bad and there was no indication that they would improve significantly in late 1937 and in 1938. However, in the initial stage of the Czechoslovak crisis in the first half of 1938, Poland's position on the conflict between the government in Prague and the leadership of the Sudeten German Party (Sudetendeutsche Partei) was restrained. Back then opinions were expressed in talks with French diplomats that the Polish minority should have enjoyed the same rights which the German minority was demanding and which would be gained¹³. In January 1938, exchanging opinions with German politicians about the CSR, Józef Beck was critical about the "Czech police state" but did not indicate that Poland aspired to any part of the CSR territory should Czechoslovakia be trimmed¹⁴. It was only a month later when Józef Beck visited Berlin and talked to Göring about a "certain region" of the CSR in which Poland was interested, namely a part of the Czech Teschen (Cieszyn) Silesia¹⁵. The Polish government did not decide to start direct cooperation with the Third Reich against the CSR but attempts were made to entice Hungary to use Budapest's policy against its northern neighbour. During a visit of Regent Horthy in Warsaw on 7 to 8 II 1938, the Polish diplomats made a number of offers for joint efforts against Czechoslovakia. The talks focused on

¹² In 1937, reports were sent to Warsaw that France would "not lift a finger" to defend the CSR whose internal situation was critical. There was also accurate information about Halifax' talks in Berlin where head of the Foreign Office made provisions for territorial changes in Central Europe (the Anschluss, Sudeten, the Polish Corridor!) if they were introduced by peaceful means. *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, Vol. III, ed. T. Komarnicki, London 1969, doc. 6, pp. 134–135, 186–187, 244, 200, 278. See also: J. Łukasiewicz, *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939. Wspomnienia i dokumenty Juliusza Łukasiewicza ambasadora Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, wyd. rozszerzone, oprac. W. Jędrzejewicz i H. Bulhak, Londyn 1989, pp. 98–99, 112, 117.

¹³ A lot of information on it in reports by Łukasiewicz, see: *ibidem*, pp. 105–106, 111, 119–125, 133, 141–143; also: *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne 1938*, doc. No. 73, 105, 133–134, 136; this tactic was adopted during a conference in the president's residence in mid-May, attended by President Mościcki, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, Józef Beck and heads of Polish institutions in Berlin, Paris and Prague, see: P.M. Majewski, M.P. Deszczyński, *Polska wobec ČSR: marzec–wrzesień 1938 roku*, [in:] *Mnichovská dohoda cesta k destrukci demokracie v Evropě*, uspořádal J. Němeček, Praha 2004, p. 111. May 12 as the date of the deliberations provided by the authors is not accurate. On that day, Papée signed a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which he reported on the work of the CSR government on the nationality statute and concessions for Slovaks, AAN, MSZ, No. 5454.

¹⁴ See: *Monachium 1938*, doc. No. 3, 5–6.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, doc. No. 10.

cooperation in the Slovak issue and separating the CSR from Subcarpathia Rus¹⁶. In the opinion of Leon Orlovski, a Polish envoy to Budapest, Minister Kanya was as much as frightened by Kobylański's and Łubieński's suggestions regarding the solution of the Czechoslovak issue. He made a reservation that Hungary was not prepared for an armed conflict; this might imply that the proposals were far-fetched. Orlovski believed that Kanya wanted to analyze in Warsaw a possibility of creating an anti-German barrier involving Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Since the concepts were not entertained in Poland, he considered the visit a failure¹⁷.

Simultaneously with the Budapest commitment, the Polish government made a determined effort with respect to the Slovak issue which arose as early as in the early 1930s.

In the first months of 1938, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs analyzed a possibility of creating a Hungarian-Slovak union with considerable autonomy enjoyed in the Slovak territory. The underlying assumption was that Czechoslovakia would disintegrate before that. However, on 4 III 1938 Józef Beck stated that he had never discussed incorporating Slovakia into Hungary. The Czech-Slovak relationships were under close observation; at the same time contacts were established with Slovak politicians opposing Prague and accompanying priest Andrej Hlinka¹⁸. In the light of the fact that no cooperation was established with Germany against Czechoslovakia in January and that Budapest was offered cooperation in this matter one can conclude that it was an attempt implementing the concept of a Third Europe i.e. establishing a border with Hungary in Subcarpathia Rus, tackling the "Slovak issue" and, further on, attempting to bring Hungary and Romania together. These actions were intended to strengthen Poland's position on Berlin and forming a bloc of non-aligned states while pursuing the "26 January policy". By assuming that the fate of Austria was sealed, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expected that, following

¹⁶ M. Koźmiński, *Polska i Węgry przed drugą wojną światową, październik 1938–wrzesień 1939*, Wrocław 1970, pp. 56–57.

¹⁷ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, t. IV, oprac. J. Zarański, London 1972, pp. 31–32, Conversation with Orlovski on 16 II 1938; G. Juhász, *Hungarian Foreign Policy 1919–1945*, Budapest 1979, p. 133.

¹⁸ *DTJS IV*, pp. 54–57, Talks with Kobylański and Beck on 4 III 1938; E. Orlof, *Dyplomacja*, pp. 39–53. While in Budapest, the government probed into Hungary's intentions towards Slovakia; see: *Slovensko a slovenská otázka v polských a maďarských diplomatických dokumentoch v rokoch 1938–1939*, eds. D. Segeš, M. Hertel, V. Bystrický, Bratislava 2012, doc. No. 18 and 22, Hora's telegraph to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 31 March and the Ministry's reply from 5 IV 1938.

the Anschluss, the estranged CSR would not withstand Berlin's pressure. The pro-Polish, independent Slovakia and a shared border with Hungary were to balance off Germany's rise to power in Central Europe. From May 1938, Poland's policy was undoubtedly aimed against Czechoslovakia but it did not rely on cooperation with Germans but on close relations with Hungary and highlighting the case of Slovakia. It was a dangerous turn of events for Prague. Cooperation with Hungary and the Slovak issue were active elements in Poland's policy towards the CSR in 1938. Germany's activities were under observation and Berlin's anti-Czechoslovak drive was used, while the deteriorating situation of the CSR was taken in; however, until mid-September the attitude was passive.

However, no final decision was made about actions against the CSR. During a meeting with President Mościcki, held on in mid-May and attended by Marshal Śmigły-Rydz and Prime Minister Sławoj-Składkowski, Józef Beck expressed his conviction that the CSR would not resist and ruled out a general conflict as he did not believe that the Western powers would support the CSR. He stipulated, however, that if these predictions turn out to be incorrect and the war with Germany breaks out, Poland "could not support Germany even indirectly"¹⁹. The anti-government opposition as well as historians suggesting that Poland should have supported Czechoslovakia in 1938 did not take into account the fact that there was no certainty as to whether the CSR would resist Germany. In the summer of 1938, the decisive phase of the Czechoslovak crisis, the position of the Polish government did not change much. The official attitude towards the CSR was reluctant but neutral.

In contacts with Berlin, there were no talks on "the areas of common interest"²⁰. Rather, the attitude of the Western powers towards the "Sudeten issue" was followed; emphasis was placed repeatedly on the fact that the Polish minority needed to enjoy the same rights. When Georges Bonnet, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs inquired if Poland would attack Czechoslovakia, no answer was provided. In general, Beck and Łukasiewicz weakened France's (not steely at all) determination to defend Czechoslovakia²¹. However, in September 1938 Poland's position

¹⁹ *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, pp. 218–219; P.M. Majewski, M.P. Deszczyński, *Polska wobec ČSR*, pp. 110–111.

²⁰ This is evidenced by the documentation kept by Landau and Tomaszewski (*Monachium 1938*) where there are no documents on the reconciliation of the activities of the Republic of Poland and the Third Reich against the CSR between February and August 1938.

²¹ The dampening of France's readiness to help Czechoslovakia consisted in emphasizing that Poland had no obligations towards the CSR outside the League of Nations Pact and would not

did not determine Czechoslovakia's fate. Notably, on 12 IX 1938, when Hitler was delivering a speech at an NSDAP congress, did not demand cession of the territory inhabited by Germans. He "only" issued a warning that he would assist the German minority by attacking Czechoslovakia if the "Czech regime" continued to oppress the Sudeten Germans. On 15 September in Bertchesgaden, in his conversation with Neville Chamberlain, Hitler presented an open demand to annex the Sudetes which the British Prime Minister accepted. During a conference held in London on 18 and 19 September, the Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Great Britain and France adopted Chamberlain's position. On the following days, London and Paris made an attempt to enforce cession of the Sudetenland on the CSR, and accepted (as a rule) Poland's demands of equal treatment of areas inhabited by Poles²².

However, let me go a few days back to mention a fact known for 50 years but reluctantly analyzed in literature on the subject in the Czech Republic. I mean Jaromír Nečas' mission; following Beneš's order, he was to make contact with Prime Minister Daladier and the left-wing circles in France and Great Britain to suggest cession of a part of the CSR territory: 4–6 thousand km² (inhabited by about 500,000 Germans) and resettling 1 to 1,5 million Germans to the Reich. The land under cession did not include areas with Czech fortifications. Nečas went to France in late August, then returned to his mother country and went again to deliver Beneš's proposal around 15 September. According to his report, he revealed the president's "secret plan" to the Western politicians in which cession of the CSR territory to Germany was contemplated. Wasn't the later decision made in Munich by the leaders of the Western countries much easier?²³ In the light of these facts, are the opinions that Poland's lack of support for the CSR in the autumn of 1938 facilitated the territorial mutilation of the Republic by the Third Reich and weakened the West's determination to defend the status quo, present in literature on the subject, objective?

accept any new obligations. In addition, the Polish government refused to give consent to the Soviet troops passing through the Polish territory, and in this spirit, Romania was pressed. J. Łukasiewicz, *Dyplomata w Paryżu*, passim.

²² H. Batowski, *Rok 1938*, pp. 352–354.

²³ Text: *Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky, A/20/2, Československá zahraniční politika v roce 1938, sv. II (1 červenec – 5 říjen 1938)*, Prague 2001, doc. No. 599; J. Kozeński, *Czechosłowacja jesień 1938*, Poznań 1989, pp. 48–49; M.K. Kamiński, *Klęska państwa czechosłowackiego*, [in:] idem, *Szkice z dziejów Polski i Czechosłowacji w latach trzydziestych XX wieku*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 216–218; J.W. Brügel, *Tschechen und Deutsche 1918–1938*, München 1967, pp. 379–381; J. Dejmek, *Edvard Beneš. Politická biografie českého demokrata. Část druhá. Prezident republiky a vůdce národní odboje*, Prague 2008, pp. 147–148.

In the face of the vague positions of Great Britain and France regarding the CSR territory inhabited by Poles, Józef Beck decided to launch an independent campaign when he addressed the Czechoslovak government with a cession note of Zaolzie if the Sudetes were renounced to Germany. At the same time, cooperation with Hungary developed and Budapest was encouraged to act decisively; Poland ensured that it would stop Romania from intervening in favour of Czechoslovakia. Attempts were also made to stifle Hungarian aspirations concerning Slovakia²⁴. In late September, Józef Beck pursued a policy similar to Germany's policy though of secondary nature in the sense that it was the German government and the German minority in the CSR that caused the crisis that other states also used to achieve their goals. The brutal pressure exerted on Prague i.e. the note of 21 September resulted from concern that the powers negotiating with Hitler could "forget" the Polish postulates or delay them in time rather than from Beck's anti-Czech phobias of which he was sometimes accused in historiography²⁵. In fact, the powers gathered in Munich did not manage to resolve the issue of Zaolzie's affiliation together with the Sudeten issue, and that was the reason for the Polish ultimatum of 30 September²⁶. In addition, in Beck's eyes the arrangements reached in Munich by the four powers were too reminiscent of the Four-Power Pact of 1933. This was the way in which the Polish government tried to explain the vigorous actions targeted at the CSR and the ultimatum of 30 September. "According to Beck, the conference in Munich creates an extremely dangerous precedent in the European policy; the results of the conference forced the Polish government to take up a tough stance on the Czech issue", Deputy Minister

²⁴ Beck was displeased with the Hungarians' excessive caution during the Sudeten crisis. L. Orłowski, *Sprawa wspólnej granicy z Węgrami, Niepodległość XIII* (1980), pp. 123–126.

²⁵ *Dokumenty československé, A/20/2*, Annex III, and doc. 631, Letter from an CSR envoy to Paris to Beneš from 16 September 1938. Beneš also mentioned a possibility of small territorial concessions to the French deputy, Victor de Lacroix, who forwarded this information to Bonnet. There is also information about Prime Minister Hodža's declaration regarding territorial concessions. H. Batowski, *Rok 1938*, pp. 369–371; *Dokumenty československé, A/20/2*, attachment III and doc. No. 631.

²⁶ While the agreement of 30 IX 1938 determined the separation of the Sudeten from the CSR the matter of territories inhabited by the Polish and Hungarian minorities was to be resolved by the four powers if, within three months, the states concerned did not reach agreement (Annex to the agreement). Beck's repeated insistence that the problem of the Polish minority must be settled in parallel with the German issue involved decisive actions. Acceptance of the Munich arrangements would compromise Poland's policy and the minister himself, hence the decision to issue an ultimatum also saved Beck's prestige. A good opinion on the matter by Edward Raszynski is quoted by M. Kornat in *Polityka zagraniczna Polski*, pp. 157–158.

Szembek told a Belgian envoy in Warsaw on 30 September 1938²⁷. It is hard to say to what extent it was an act of justification of Poland's actions against the CSR, and to what extent it was an actual assessment. The fact that the powers decided about the fate of a European state, like a colony, must have caused dissatisfaction and even with concern.

The decisions made in Munich about the Sudeten and the regaining of Zaolzie marked a stage in the Polish policy when the country acted for the benefit of the idea of a Third Europe. The meeting in Munich was immediately followed by the Polish diplomacy's intensified activity in the Slovak issue, the Hungarian-Romanian alliance and the establishment of the Polish-Hungarian border. These activities can be considered the climax of the efforts aimed at implementing Józef Beck's Central European projects. However, right at the beginning, a failure marked the Slovak case. The hope in Poland was that Slovakia would separate after the Munich conference. Meanwhile, on 6 October, a declaration was made in Žilina by Slovak politicians who demanded autonomy for Slovakia. The consent of the Czech government and the establishment of a dualist state i.e. Czechoslovakia resulted in a new situation. Maintaining the Czechoslovak state in a modified form indicated that Slovakia would attract Germany's "special interest" as formally declared by Ernst Weizsäcker in a conversation with Lipski on 7 X 1938. This utterance was proof that the Slovak issue, previously in the background of German policy, gained significance in Berlin. In early October in *Auswärtiges Amt*, the Slovak issue was analyzed and a conclusion was reached that an independent Slovak state would be the best solution²⁸. The annexation of Slovakia by Hungary was considered disadvantageous to the Reich but support was granted to Hungary's territorial claims to the south of the country²⁹. Thus, the Hungarian (and therefore partly Polish) plans for Slovakia were put on hold. It turned out that immediately after the Munich meeting, Berlin would impose

²⁷ DTJS IV, p. 284, Szembek's conversation with Paternotte de la Vaillée on 30 IX 1938.

²⁸ Weizsäcker was especially interested in the newly created Slovak government. PDD 1938, doc. No. 279, Report of the Polish Ambassador to Berlin for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 8 X 1938; L. Deák, *O problemach stosunków słowacko-polskich od Monachium do rozbitcia republiki*, [in:] *Stosunki polsko-czesko-słowackie w latach 1918–1945*, ed. E. Orlof, Rzeszów 1992, p. 66.

²⁹ E. Orlof, *Dyplomacja*, pp. 101–102. Berlin's suggestion that Bratislava and the south of Slovakia were to be incorporated by Hungary probably pushed Slovak politicians to support autonomy within the CSR. *Monachium 1938*, doc. No. 410, A telegram from the Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Bratislava to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 28 September 1938. E. Orlof, *Dyplomacja*, pp. 101–102.

the conditions in Central Europe while closer cooperation with Poland would not be an alternative to the smaller countries in the Danube Basin. There is no certainty if it was Germany's involvement in Slovakia or other reasons that prompted Poland to demand changes to the border in the Carpathians. They led to disruption of Poland's influence in Slovakia in favour of Germany. The demand for changes to the Slovak section of the border with Poland was a serious mistake. According to Paweł Starzeński, Józef Beck's secretary, the minister had to give in under the pressure of the military circles³⁰.

Beck's attempt made in the second half of October to establish the Polish-Hungarian border, a prerequisite for the implementation of more ambitious plans, also failed. The Polish minister's trip to Romania with an intention of winning King Charles II's approval for incorporating Subcarpathia Rus into Hungary ended in fiasco. The Romanian authorities were very cautious because of Berlin's response and downright dislike to a project which made Hungary stronger. King Charles also failed to discuss Beck's far-fetched plans of cooperation of five countries: Poland, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Italy. The Romanian government realised that the "bloc of five" would trigger off Berlin's opposition; besides, Rome abandoning the Axis seemed unrealistic³¹. In total, several weeks after the Munich meeting the Polish diplomacy suffered defeat both with Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. The main goal of neighbouring Hungary, was not achieved. The withdrawal of the Western powers from the Danube basin, Germany's consolidation and the closer cooperation between Berlin and Rome in this area (Vienna's arbitration on 2 November) involved Poland's growing isolation³². An attempt at destabilizing the situation in Subcarpathia Rus in November 1938 through sabotage in cooperation with Hungary also failed. Perhaps it was an attempt to partially re-launch the initiative and keeping the affiliation of Rus at the centre of international events (as means to share a border with Hungary) but it was prevented by the result of Vienna's arbitration. Due to Hungary's unsatisfactory activity (mainly due to Germany's and Italy's opposition on November 21), the Hungarian project was abandoned and so was

³⁰ *Slovensko a slovenská otázka*, doc. No. 197, 199, , 203; E. Orlof, *Dyplomacja*, pp. 111–116; P. Kołakowski, *Między Warszawą a Pragą. Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki wojskowo-polityczne 1918–1939*, p. 533; P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, London 1972, p. 162.

³¹ PDD 1938, doc. No. 391, Note from talks between Minister Beck and the Romanian King on 19 X 1938; DTJS IV, pp. 309–310, Interview with Beck on 20 October 1938; H. Batowski, *Europa zmierza ku przepaści*, Poznań 1977, pp. 90–96.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 80 and next; M. Koźmiński, *Polska i Węgry*, pp. 147–150.

the Polish project, a bit later³³. Therefore, Poland's efforts to implement the Third Europe project ended in failure and by the end of 1938, Poland was left alone against Germany. As a result of the mutilation of Czechoslovakia and its subsequent liquidation in March 1939, Germany's position was strengthened more than the potential Polish-Romanian-Hungarian "triangle", even if it had been established.

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Summary

The article presents Poland's policy towards the Czechoslovak crisis in 1938. The dissertation takes into account not only references to Czechoslovakia, but also possible changes in the international situation in Central Europe, related to the strengthening of the Third Reich after cutting the CSR. Attempts to rebuild by the Polish diplomacy of the power system through the implementation of the concept of "Third Europe", i.e. create a group of smaller countries beyond the reach of Berlin and Moscow, were not successful. This resulted in the progressive isolation of Poland in Central Europe and weakening its position towards Germany. The intricate political concepts of Józef Beck turned out to be unreal, because Poland's potential to implement them was too little.

³³ Dokumentacja: P. Samuś, K. Badziak, G. Matwiejew, *Akcja „Łom”. Polskie działania dywersyjne na Rusi Zakarpackiej w świetle dokumentów Oddziału II Sztabu Głównego WP*, Warszawa 1998; M. Koźmiński, *Polska i Węgry*, s. 151–155, 158–171; recently: D. Dąbrowski, *Rzeczypospolita Polska wobec Rusi Zakarpackiej (Podkarpackiej) 1938–1939*, Toruń 2007, s. 149 and next; see also: M. Jarnecki, P. Kołakowski, *„Ukraiński Piemont”. Ruś Zakarpacka w okresie autonomii 1938–1939*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 275–305.