In the post-Versailles era, Polish leader Józef Piłsudski proposed to the authorities of Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus to forge an Intermarium union for the survival of their states. Piłsudski risked and pushed forward an intellectual speculation on how to strengthen subjectivity and sovereignty of the “young” states in games between major powers. From the perspective of time, this speculation can hardly be defined as a real-life success.

The Intermarium concept in Polish discourse has always been over-romanticised, imprecise and hyper-inflated. Initially, Piłsudski’s plan envisaged Poland’s gradual rise in becoming a new regional power on the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the late 1930’s the Polish foreign minister,
Józef Beck, changed the vision with the Intermarium embracing Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia and Romania; again, Polish leadership remained unquestioned. The current president of Poland, Andrzej Duda, also occasionally refers to the Intermarium concept as a broadly understood regional community of partners.

Jan Marek Chodakiewicz, one of the major researchers on the Intermarium concept, defines the latter as an area of co-existence, convergence and clash of many cultures, which has historically been a stronghold of western civilisation. It is Central and Eastern Europe’s easternmost part, the former “core” of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth along with the dependent areas. An important issue here is that even Chodakiewicz draws no “rigid” Intermarium geopolitical borders and recognises heterogeneity of its constituents. In a way, the aureole of multi-layered fuzziness has always surrounded Intermarium since its very beginning.

“Ukrainian” Intermarium

Exploring the Ukrainian historical visions of Intermarium also reveals some theorising and intellectual exercising. Professor Stepan Rudnytskyi, for example, had claimed that Ukraine should become a key player in the so-called Federation of Baltic and Pontus (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine). A professor of economic geography, Antin Syniavskyi, argued that Ukrainian-Turkish co-operation could be especially promising and contribute to the regional prosperity and security of Ukraine. Ukrainian military chief and Piłsudski’s partner Symon Petlura was the first to introduce the idea of a Black Sea union (Georgia, Kuban, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine). Being fully functional, the union would allow regional nations to withstand Russian pressure and preserve national independence. Finally, Ukrainian geo-politician Yuriy Lypa justified in the 1930s Ukrainian political dominance in the region. He believed that Ukraine should unite efforts of the Eastern European nations in order to secure their independence from colonisers. Ukraine had an “undeniable” right to become such a leader due to it being the largest and most densely populated state with considerable economic potential.

In a nutshell, Ukrainian historical conceptualisations of Intermarium can be characterised with the following features. Primarily, the Prometheanist (read “neo-imperialist”) Poland had not been regarded a priori positively as part of the union; moreover, in the majority of cases, it was not even considered to be a part. Secondly, the term Intermarium was not been frequently used to define the union of Baltic and Black Sea states; instead, it was used to define a geographical area between the two seas. Thirdly, at the core of the “Ukrainian” concept of Intermarium was co-operation between the Black Sea states, including up to the occasional engagement of the Middle East states (i.e. Ukrainian conceptualisations were much more south-oriented). Lastly, the North-South geopolitical axis connecting Scandinavia to the Mediterranean ran through the territory of Belarus and Ukraine, not Poland.

The great geopolitical confusion

The Intermarium concept, because of its historical nonexistence, geopolitical diversity and theoretical ambiguity, has often been confused with other similar concepts. One may speak here of the
The current Three Seas Initiative has been planned as a “soft” regional formation initiated by Croatia and Poland. Its geopolitical aim resides in constructing an economic corridor on a North-to-South axis connecting Scandinavian states with the Balkans through Poland. This said, the term Intermarium is frequently used to refer to the Three Seas Initiative which, actually, is very similar to the Beck’s vision of Intermarium in the 1930’s.

Ukrainian public figures often use the term Intermarium to define the Baltic and Black Sea union. For instance, Iurii Honcharenko (expert from the Intermarium Centre), Andrii Parubiy (Chairman of the Supreme Council of Ukraine), Borys Tarasyuk (former minister of foreign affairs, 1998-2000, 2005-07), and others have noted this. In fact, Honcharenko uses Intermarium and the Baltic and Black Sea union synonymously. This conceptual carelessness conceals an irresolvable dichotomy in its core as Ukrainians regard the “prototype” of Intermarium union in Kyivan Rus’ while Poles in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Geopolitically, these formations were competitors.

Finally, speaking of Mitteleuropa, one may also see a lot of confusion and imprecisions here. The term was coined to notify parts of Europe located between the eastern and western poles. According to historian Jörg Brechtefeld, Mitteleuropa is very imprecise and descriptive in its core. Political scientists and politicians use it to frame certain unique occurrences and connect them to certain territories, but it sometimes brings more confusion than clarity.

Hence, a variety of existing Intermarium interpretations make the concept very fuzzy. This fuzziness along with the crucial importance of the concept as it circulates in a variety of national discourses should not be underestimated. It leads to the emergence of geopolitical simulacrum: individuals start perceiving regional realities based on non-existing or non-coherent predispositions. The latter may trigger socially hazardous occurrences if overemphasised – or over-theorised – in environments of right-wing thinkers and numerous sympathisers of colliding “great national ideas”.

To introduce some clear points of reference, the Intermarium concept will be regarded in this text as the Polish-Ukrainian geopolitical linchpin of equal partners with eventual engagement of willing Baltic and Black Sea states.

The Polish-Ukrainian linchpin

Contemporary Polish-Ukrainian geopolitical linchpin is underdeveloped and partitioned. On the one hand, Poland is a member state of the EU, NATO, Visegrad Group, Weimar Triangle and now promotes the Three Seas Initiative. On the other hand, Ukraine struggles to gain prospects of EU and NATO membership, as well as to move away from the CIS and benefit more from its membership in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation or the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development of Georgia,
Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (ODED GUAM). The major feasible – institutional and formal – link Poland has established with Ukraine is through being a co-ordinator in the European Neighbourhood Policy. Therefore, the socially rampant Intermarium narratives do not reflect themselves explicitly in the geopolitical reality.

ODED-GUAM – with all its faults and limitations – is the closest embodiment of the Ukrainian vision of Intermarium union. ODED-GUAM’s main declared objectives reside in the strengthening of democracy and promoting economic development in the Black Sea region. Its hidden objective, as one may speculate, resides in jointly resolving regional conflicts and ensuring economic prosperity without Russian engagement.

In fact, the ODED-GUAM is a Ukrainian attempt to construct the Baltic and Black Sea union. However, this is a very “local” and dysfunctional attempt. Primarily, Turkey and Latvia remain observers, not participants. Secondly, Poland, as well as Belarus and other Baltic states are not even interested in becoming observers. Thirdly, Russia is diplomatically hostile and perceives the organisation as “Russophobic”. Finally, the ODED-GUAM efficiency directly depends on the political will of the leaders which govern the member states in given periods of time.

Conclusions

The Intermarium has two major connotations: as a union of states between the Baltic and Black Seas, as well as the land between those seas. The first connotation is often confused with Mitteleuropa and the Baltic and Black Sea union; it is often over-romanticised in the political and public discourses, what leads to emergence of geopolitical simulacrum.

The perceptions of an Intermarium Union are different in Poland and Ukraine (ie. in two states which should constitute its linchpin). While Polish political thought favours the reconstruction of dependencies of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Ukrainians are more prone to reconstruct Kyivan Rus’. Poland and Ukraine as the linchpin states are divided by the EU, NATO and other borders. This seriously constrains co-operation and prevents the Intermarium “engine” from working properly. Moreover, the political elite in both states do not invest enough time, resources and dedication into the development of the Intermarium concept. Unfortunately, it is high on rhetoric, especially in right-wing and conservative narratives, but low on practice.

At this particular period of time, neither “hard,” nor “soft” Intermarium unions are possible. What is more, both Poland and Ukraine are accelerating their integration into competitive international organisations (e.g. Three Seas Initiative, Visegrad Group, GUAM and others).

Regional co-operation which is independent from – or even competitive to – the EU and NATO frameworks is not attractive as it brings more harm than benefits to member states. The same has happened with Pilsudski’s, Beck’s, Lypa’s, and Rudnytskyi’s Intermariums: none of the contemporary conceptions of a security-oriented union of regional states appears to be sufficient and convincing enough.
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