

# POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá / Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies

URL časopisu / URL of the journal: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

Autor(i) / Author(s): Andrzej Piskozub - Artur Roland Kozłowski  
Článok / Article: A Distant Mirror: Poland between the Visegrad Group and the Eastern Alliance  
Vydavateľ / Publisher: Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica / Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – UMB Banská Bystrica

Odporúčaná forma citácie článku / Recommended form for quotation of the article:

PISKOZUB, A. - KOZŁOWSKI, A. R. 2016. A Distant Mirror: Poland between the Visegrad Group and the Eastern Alliance. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Roč. 19, č. 2, 2016. ISSN 1335 – 2741, s. 208-224. Dostupné na internete: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk/archiv-vydani/2016/2-2016/andrzej-piskozub-artur-roland-kozowski.html>.

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## A DISTANT MIRROR: POLAND BETWEEN THE VISEGRAD GROUP AND THE EASTERN ALLIANCE<sup>1</sup>

Andrzej Piskozub - Artur Roland Kozłowski \*

### ABSTRACT

The article offers an overview of the position of the Visegrad Group in the history of Central-Eastern Europe. The Group emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century as a coalition of three medieval kingdoms: Poland, Bohemia and Hungary. Towards the end of the century, Poland favoured an alliance with Lithuania, motivated by the conflict of both states with the Teutonic Order. The shift involved a personal union under the Jagiellonian dynasty, which in the course of time evolved into an actual union (the Union of Lublin, 1569) creating the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów). Nationalist ideology, which emerged after the partitions of the Commonwealth towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, resulted in the disintegration of entire Central-Eastern Europe into nation states formed on the basis of ethnic differences. The present study have aimed to verify the potential of the cultural contribution of the Visegrad Group and the Eastern Alliance for the development of European integration processes. The influence of these groups of countries in the external environment in the development of European civilization has been presented in terms of historiosophical. Today, the former medieval partners are members of the European Union, where they revive the Visegrad Group in order to pursue their narrow interests, thus affecting the progress of European integration. Unlike the Visegrad Group there is Eastern Alliance perceived as a bloc of countries with a potential for introducing progressive ideas for a constructive development of the European Union.

**Key words:** Visegrad Group, Eastern Partnership, Eastern alliance, Jagiellonian group, Central-Eastern Europe, nationalist disintegration

### Introduction

The blurb for the Polish edition of *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Polish by Piotr Styk.

*Century*<sup>2</sup> comments: 'presenting this most disastrous period in history, (...) **Barbara Tuchman** makes us ponder what is happening in our times, which are a distant mirror-image of the waning of the Middle Ages'. Indeed, her book inspires consideration of more analogies, including those discussed in the present essay, which is concerned with the past and present of the countries forming the so-called Visegrad group. It cannot remain unnoticed that in the author's approach the concept of Europe is limited practically only to the area of the ancient Western Roman Empire. The geographical focus is even more selective, considering that the book is woven around the biography of the French noble **Enguerrand de Coucy VII** (1340–1397), and concentrates on two major events: the calamitous Black Death (1348–1350), which wiped out a third of the population of the affected area, and the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), which divided Western Christianity between the two Popes and split the medieval unity of European civilisation. Spared by the plague and uninvolved in the Great Schism, the three central European states forming the fourteenth-century 'Visegrad group' (the Kingdom of Hungary, Kingdom of Bohemia and Kingdom of Poland) are hardly mentioned in *The Distant Mirror* (the index includes references to some events of secondary importance in Bohemia, p. 615; Poland, p. 624; and Hungary, p. 627). The present article focuses on issues that are not presented in **Tuchman's** volume, although they were an important part of European history and continue to feature in the current political debate.

## 1 Medieval Kingdom of Poland in the Visegrad Group

In the period, the three *dramatis personae* of this clearly heterogeneous triangle were Bohemia, Poland and Hungary. Slovakia remained under Hungarian rule until the end of the First World War, when it went on to form a part of Czechoslovakia, to become an independent state only in 1993. Unlike this relatively recent rivalry between the Czechs and Hungarians over Slovakia, the Polish–Bohemian dispute over Silesia continued for centuries and concluded only at the royal summit in – incidentally – Visegrad in 1335, when King **Casimir the Great (Kazimierz Wielki)**, the last ruler of the Piast dynasty, gave up Polish claims to the province. It was for this reason that in the 15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Original edition: B. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Polish edition: *Odległe zwierciadło czyli Rozlicznymi plagami nękanie XIV stulecie*, trans. M.J. Michejda and A. Michejda (Katowice: Książnica, 1993), cover.

Century the most eminent medieval Polish historian **Jan Długosz** (**Ioannes Longinus**) referred to Bohemians as the greatest enemies of the Kingdom of Poland. In an attempt to compensate for the loss of Silesia in the south-west, King **Casimir** sought gains in the south-east, where he incorporated Red Ruthenia (1340). This, however, gave rise to the Polish–Hungarian conflict over the province, as King **Andreas II** of Hungary had assumed the title of the *Rex Galiciae et Lodomeriae* over a century earlier (1215). Hungarians backed off having secured an agreement promising Polish succession to **Louis of Anjou** (known in Hungary as **Louis the Great**) in the event that King **Casimir** did not produce an heir. On his accession to the Polish throne, **Louis** (known in Poland as **Ludwik Węgierski**, **Louis the Hungarian**) installed Hungarian administration in the region. When his daughter, **Hedwig** (**Jadwiga**), became the Queen of Poland and married the Lithuanian Grand Duke **Jogaila** (known in Poland as **Władysław Jagiełło**), they mounted an expedition aiming to restore Red Ruthenia to Poland. Considering that in the new situation the balance of power shifted decisively in favour of Poland, Hungary did not resist the move.

The late Middle Ages in Western Europe saw the post-feudal renaissance of the tradition of autocratic rule going back to the ancient Roman Empire. On the other hand, a reverse trend dominated in the part of the continent, which had been outside the ancient *limes*. The evolution of political systems east of the *Sacrum Imperium Romanum* did not lead towards *absolutum dominium*. Rather, the tendency here was to preserve the liberties achieved under feudalism, expanding and consolidating them into the post-feudal order. In the period of her feudal fragmentation between the mid-twelfth and the late thirteenth century, Poland was the country where this process was the most advanced. Although the period is usually unfairly criticised and unreasonably depreciated in Polish historiography, the great Polish Romantic poet **Adam Mickiewicz** rightly called it 'Fragmented Poland – Free Poland' (*Polska w podziałach – Polska wolna*) in his lectures on Polish history at the Collège de France (Mickiewicz, 1952). This view of the era was also shared by **Feliks Koneczny**, who divided Polish medieval history into three periods: before, during, and after the fragmentation, which he referred to as follows: 'The imposed state' (*Państwo społeczeństwu narzucone*), 'Society struggling for political power' (*Walka społeczeństwa o udział w rządach*), 'The kingdom shaped by the society' (*Królestwo przez społeczeństwo ukształtowane*) (Koneczny, 1902).

Prior to the period of fragmentation, the political system in Poland was autocracy. **Bolesław the Wrymouth's** (**Krzywousty**) statute of succession

(1138) instituted the division of the realm, thus inadvertently initiating a process of empowerment of society and development of self-government as a means of protection from autocratic pressure. In 1295, the country was united as the Kingdom of Poland, which throughout the five centuries of its existence (until 1795) remained loyal to the socio-political heritage of the period of fragmentation.

Considering political liberties, the three kingdoms forming the fourteenth-century 'Visegrad group' followed different paths of development. Initially it would seem that Hungary, a source of inspiration for Polish nobility, would also embrace the idea of self-government. The site of the royal elections in the fields on the Rákos River, a left-bank tributary of the Danube, was also where the Hungarian nobility mounted assemblies ready to rise up against royal authority. Hence the Polish term *rokosz* ('rebellion') referring to the seventeenth-century uprisings of Polish nobility (Zebrzydowski's *Rokosz*, 1606; Lubomirski's *Rokosz*, 1661), replaced by its Polonised Latin equivalent *konfederacja* in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (e.g. the Confederation of Bar, 1768; the Confederation of Targowica, 1792). Bohemia, in turn, was devastated by the Hussite Wars (1419–1436), which broke out in the aftermath of the treacherous murder of the Bohemian religious reformer **Jan Hus** at the Council of Constance in 1415.

Both Bohemia and Hungary were too closely tied with the Holy Roman Empire to be allowed an evolution similar to the one observed in Poland in the period of feudal fragmentation. Indeed, even before the Habsburgs became Emperors in 1438, **Charles IV of Luxemburg** had been both King of Bohemia and Roman Emperor, while shortly afterwards, **Sigismund of Luxemburg** was King of Hungary and Roman Emperor. In 1438, the Habsburgs came to rule in Vienna and Prague, and, less than a century later, also in Budapest. Inaugurating their long rule, they made an important change to the name of their realm, adding *Nationis Teutonice* to *Sacrum Imperium Romanum*. The previous name, usually mistranslated as the Holy Roman Empire, has rightly been criticised as 'neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire'. From the theological perspective, to call it 'holy' (Lat. *sanctum*) amounts to sacrilege; in correct translation it should be referred to as 'sacred' (Lat. *sacrum*) in the sense of 'blessed', i.e. no longer 'pagan'. It was Teutonic or German rather than 'Roman', as is stressed by the addition made in 1438; finally, it was not an autocracy, but a *federation* of member states forming a Reich.

Introduced in 1438, the change of the anachronistic name of the empire marked the end of the Middle Ages. From then on, the Empire was effectively

*German Reich*. Out of the three kingdoms of the 'Visegrad group', it was the Czech Crown of St. Wenceslas, already part of the medieval empire, which had the closest ties with the Reich. The connections between the empire and the Hungarian Crown of St. Stephen were also strong. Indeed, even before the change of the name of the empire, the prestige both kingdoms enjoyed in Europe was enhanced by the fact that their most eminent kings were at the same time emperors of the *Sacrum Imperium Romanum*.

European prestige of fourteenth-century Bohemia and Hungary led the Polish Kingdom, established at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century to offer the throne to Czech and Hungarian kings. The century began with the rule of Bohemian dynasty of the Premyslids (1300-1306), and concluded with the sovereigns from the Hungarian line of the House of Anjou (1372-1399). The reign of two Piast kings, **Ladislav the Short (Władysław Łokietek, 1320-1333)** and **Casimir (1333-1370)**, occurred between these two periods of non-Piast rule, separated by two interregna. Writing on **Casimir**, the modern historian **Stanisław Mackiewicz-Cat** comments that 'it was a misunderstanding to call him "the Great"' (1962, p. 126ff). Or was it the fashion of the day? **Louis of Anjou**, his successor on the Polish throne, was also called 'the Great' in his home kingdom of Hungary. In his historical essay *Piast Poland (Polska Piastów)*,<sup>3</sup> **Paweł Jasienica** (1960) goes to great lengths to extend the continuity of the Piast era to 1370. As the Premyslids do not fit in this picture, he concludes that their rule was a period of nothing less than Bohemian occupation. The fact, however, is that while the Piast epoch was over at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the Jagiellonian period began only in the fifteenth. Thus the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, with its Bohemian-Polish-Hungarian kings competing for Silesia and Red Ruthenia, deserves its own name: the 'age of Visegrad', or the 'age of medieval Mitteleuropa'.

In the period, the three kingdoms formed the only landlocked outskirts of the Empire. Indeed, in the south, there was Italy and the entire Mediterranean coast and islands; the west, from Portugal as far as the Netherlands, had access to the Atlantic; in the north, Scandinavia had the Baltic and the North Sea. While seafaring expanded the European horizon in all other peripheries of the realm, the 'Visegrad group' formed the limits of the medieval European civilisation, which bordered on the *partes infidelium*, or the lands of the infidels.

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<sup>3</sup> English translation: P. Jasienica, *Piast Poland*, trans. A. Jordan (Miami: American Institute of Polish Culture, New York: Hippocrene Books, 1985).

This location might seem to suggest that the region was destined to function as the peripheries of fourteenth-century Europe. However, geography saved 'medieval Mitteleuropa' from the progress of the Black Death, which made its way from the Crimea (where it started), along the Mediterranean, the Atlantic coast and Scandinavia to reach the neighbouring regions of the Empire. While other parts of the continent were ravaged by the plague, Prague was a thriving capital of the Holy Roman Empire under **Charles IV**, Hungary was a stable regional power, and Poland benefited immensely from the Eurasian trade route known as the Silk Road, which ran across the country once it had been blocked by the Turks in the Mediterranean. The memory of the prosperous period was preserved in the saying that King **Casimir** inherited Poland built of wood and left her to posterity a country built of stone. In fact, it is not true, as it was the thirteenth rather than fourteenth century, i.e. the period of feudal fragmentation that saw the development of stone architecture and the most intensive construction activity in the country until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century). Fourteenth-century Poland, however, had no chance of competing with Bohemia and Hungary. The country accepted their kings as its own rather than vice versa; in addition, it lost the region of Silesia to Bohemia, and, temporarily, Red Ruthenia (incorporated by **Louis of Anjou**) to Hungary.

The situation changed radically in favour of Poland when towards the end of the century the kingdom abandoned the medieval 'Visegrad group' and turned eastwards to form an 'Eastern alliance' in the form of a personal union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1385). Formed nine decades after the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland, the 'Jagiellonian group' brought a revolutionary geopolitical change, as Poland's focus of interest shifted from Mitteleuropa to the Intermarium stretching between the Baltic and the Black Sea for over four centuries (until the final partition of Poland-Lithuania in 1795).

## **2 A great change in Poland's history: Lithuania as a creator of the Jagiellonian group**

The move was motivated by the need to join forces in the conflict of both states with the Teutonic Order: Poland aimed to regain the province of Gdańsk Pomerania (in which she could not count on any assistance from Bohemia or Hungary), while Lithuania intended to recapture Samogitia and put an end to Teutonic threat to its territory. Although these objectives were met in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, this did not terminate the union. On the contrary, the personal

connection evolved into an actual union between the two states (the Union of Lublin, 1569), which established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów) three years before the death of the last of the Jagiellonian kings.

Historiographers of the two nations disagreed whether the Union of Krevo (1385) actually meant the incorporation of Lithuania into Poland or vice versa. On the Polish side, the dispute was symbolically resolved when the prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile, the historian **Stanisław Mackiewicz-Cat**, opened one of the meetings of his cabinet declaring that '[t]his state was created by the House of Gedymin' (Mackiewicz, 1962, p. 112). Lithuania was the only state in the entire 'pagan belt' stretching from Mecklenburg to Livonia to have survived the crusades of the late Middle Ages. The country owed its success to expansion in Kievan Rus' and liberation of these lands from the Tatar Golden Horde. Having completed the conquest of today's Belarus, **Gedymin** (1315–1341) continued expansion in Ukraine, accomplished by his son **Algirdas**. In 1377, when **Jogaila (Jagiello)** succeeded his father as the Grand Duke, Lithuania ruled the entire Dnieper basin, which made it the largest European state at the time. Considered the last enclave of paganism on the continent, the country in fact had predominantly Orthodox population (80%), whose language was adopted by the Grand Duke's chancery in Vilnius. Five sons of **Algirdas** from his first marriage were brought up as Orthodox, and assigned administrative duties in Rus' territories incorporated into Lithuania. Five sons from the second marriage were baptised as Catholics in Cracow in 1386, which meant Christianisation of ethnic Lithuanians. **Jogaila (Władysław Jagiello)** married Queen **Hedwig (Jadwiga) of Anjou** and became *iure uxoris* King of Poland. Following her death in 1399, his rule opened the Jagiellonian period in the history of Poland.

In this perspective, the personal union of 1385 appears as Lithuanian–Polish, the final act of 'gathering the lands of the Jagiellons', which in 1569 eventually formed one state, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While relations between the two countries did not involve a military conquest, the union brought cultural results similar to those summarised in the famous quote from **Horace**: 'Greece, conquered Greece, her conqueror subdued, / And Rome grew polished, who till then was rude' (2013, Book 2, Epistle 1). The process of shifting Poland's interests from Mitteleuropa to the Intermarium stretching between the Baltic and the Black Sea advanced in the course of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This involved a transfer of the Polish post-feudal system of self-

governance and democratic rule of the nobility to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and thus introduced what was at the time the largest country of the continent to European civilisation, extending the limits of Europe to the steppe beyond the Dnieper. On the other hand, the same period saw the decline of prestige, which Bohemia and Hungary had enjoyed in the previous century: the former bled in the Hussite wars, the latter increasingly suffered from Turkish pressure. Although both countries came to be ruled by the Jagiellonian kings, this no longer had anything to do with the idea of the 'Visegrad group'. In the following centuries, it was the Habsburg Empire which, to an extent, gathered the 'Visegrad lands'. The realm included the Crown of St. Stephen (Hungary and Slovakia), the Crown of St. Wenceslas (Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia), and in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – although it lost Silesia to Prussia – incorporated new territories in the regions of Galicia and Lesser Poland by engaging in the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In spite of considerable territorial losses under King **John Casimir (Jan Kazimierz)**, 1648–1667, the worst ruler of the Kingdom of Poland in the entire five hundred years of its history), on the eve of the partitions the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth covered 733,000 square kilometres, which still made it the largest European country at the time (Russia and Turkey, although larger, were in fact Eurasian states). Russia, the main partitioning power, on three occasions seized the total of 463,000 square kilometres, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the Commonwealth territory. By pursuing the policy of partitions, Empress **Catherine II** aimed to obliterate any trace of the Commonwealth between the Baltic and the Black Sea. Moreover, it was a deliberate choice to leave the territories, which had never been part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the other two partitioning powers in order to push out Poland from the Intermarium back to Mitteleuropa, whatever might happen in the Polish cause in the future. Indeed, the western Russian border established in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century came to be known as the Curzon Line in 1920.

Although the *finis Poloniae* of 1795 might have seemed a long-term settlement at the time, the Napoleonic wars soon brought considerable territorial changes in the region. The French dominium under the name of the Duchy of Warsaw left Prussia (in 1807) and Austria (in 1809) with only a part of their gains from the First Partition of 1772. When the Duchy fell in the aftermath of the retreat of **Napoleon** from Moscow, Tsar **Alexander I** claimed the territory of the statelet at the Congress of Vienna (1815). Considering that his policy of *Drang nach Westen* had already rewarded Russia with Białystok Region

(negotiated from **Napoleon** in 1807), and Finland (of which he became the Grand Duke a year later), he also planned to become King of Poland. His success was partial, as the new Kingdom of Poland (also known as the Congress Kingdom) he came to rule included 127,000 of the Duchy's 154,000 square kilometres, which, nevertheless, enlarged the Russian share of the pre-partition Commonwealth territory to 80%.

### **3 Nationalism and disintegration of Central-Eastern Europe into 'nation states'**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century brought European *révanche* on Russia for crossing the Rubicon of the western border of the Russian empire as set out in the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: in 1915 the Central Powers seized the Congress Kingdom. The same year saw the publication of **Fritz Naumann's** *Mitteleuropa*, the first modern programme of European integration. As presented, the concept envisaged the economic union between Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Congress Kingdom, recently taken over from the Russians, as the core of Europe. Both Central Powers proclaimed Poland's independence in the Congress Kingdom on 5 November 1916. In the period, it was this date, rather than 11 November 1918, which was considered *Le Grand Jour* marking the end of captivity brought by the eighteenth-century partitions. The act came before the end of the Great War, as did the Finnish declaration of independence (1917). In this way, Russia was forced back to square one of the geopolitical game.

The final twelve months of the Great War shattered all the calculations and created a radically changed political map of Europe, with Germany acting as the *spiritus movens* of the new developments. The vital period began on 7 November 1917 with the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and concluded with signing the capitulation of Germany on 11 November 1918. German assistance in bringing about the Bolshevik Revolution and the financial assistance, which the Bolsheviks received from the same source during the Russian Civil War, was greatly reproached by the noble democrats from the Entente. However, German help came at a price, and Bolshevik Russia had to pay the bill during the peace treaty negotiations with the Central Powers, practically with Germany, as the Habsburg Empire no longer had a considerable military or political potential. Invoking the right of nations to self-determination, Germany demanded that the Bolsheviks should give up vast territories which Russia had

conquered from Sweden, Turkey and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. None of them would go to Germany or Austria-Hungary. Instead, they were to belong entirely to the people freed from the tsarist 'prison of nations' (Carrère d'Encausse, 1992).

Presented at the peace treaty negotiations in Brest Litovsk, the demand was rejected by **Lenin**. However, having disbanded the Russian army, he had no forces to oppose it. The Germans marched ahead until they reached the line they had demanded, encountering no resistance to their advance. Faced with a *fait accompli*, Bolshevik Russia recognised the border in the peace treaty signed on 3 March 1918. A fact worth stressing, it was almost the same as the western border of the Russian Federation today. The historical significance of the Brest Litovsk border was corroborated by the declarations of independence proclaimed by the following countries in the territories liberated from Russia in the first months of 1918: Ukraine (22 January), Lithuania (16 February), Estonia (24 February), Latvia (23 March), and Belarus (25 March). The rebirth of the 'Jagiellonian group' seemed to be a fact.

**Paweł Jasienica**, ten-year-old at the time, witnessed the new order in the region being formed under German protection. In his memoirs, he described it as follows: 'In the east, there was no power which would have been able to contest, let alone overthrow the border arrangement. (...) The photographs they had taken were reproduced in all kinds of books. (...) If these photographs were to be put together, they would produce a historical archive sending an irrefutable message. One would be able to see Kaiser **Wilhelm's** soldiers against the background of the Gulf of Finland, Lake Peipus, and other parts of the east-European landscape as far as the Crimea and the Caucasus. In all these places, German soldiers stood victorious, still bearing their arms but no longer engaged in combat. Their achievement in the east seemed accomplished' (Jasienica, 1989, p. 28).

The blame for the Bolshevik captivity suffered by the peoples of this part of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century rests not on the Central Powers but on the hypocritical decision-makers of the Entente, who paid lip service to democracy, freedom and the right of nations to self-determination, while in fact protecting mainly their own dirty imperialist interests. **Lloyd George** was very concerned that in the first year of the Great War the Italian engagement on the side of the Entente had been secured with the promise of concessions in South Tyrol despite its 'purely Germanic population' (Lloyd George, 1938, vol. 2, p. 810). He also added that he was not responsible for the decision as he had not been in

the government (!) at the time. Writing his memoirs in the late 1930s, the same **Lloyd George** refers to the Brest Litovsk settlement, which took away the territorial gains of the Russian Empire from its Soviet successors, as 'a shameful pact' (Lloyd George 1938, vol. 1, p. 381). The Russian partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were accepted in 1920 by the British foreign minister Lord **Curzon**, whose name came to be associated with the very same line, which was approved as the eastern Polish border in the 1943 Teheran agreement between **Churchill** and **Stalin**.

Following the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution, **Lenin** published a number of secret documents of the tsarist administration, including those concerning the Russian–French agreement on mutual support in the future peace treaty negotiations, i.e. the Russian territorial claims against Turkey and the French ones against Germany. While Russia demanded, first and foremost, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, including Istanbul, France wanted to push its border eastwards as far as the Rhine, all along its course between Switzerland and the Netherlands. After the deposition of the Habsburgs and the fall of their multi-ethnic empire, the overwhelming majority of the population of German-speaking provinces voting in local referenda expressed their wish to become part of Germany. However, they were denied this right by France, which was concerned that such changes would have made Germany equal in size and larger in terms of demographic potential.

The entire situation made a mockery of the right of nations to self-determination. While a similar national policy pursued by the Bolsheviks in the territories under their control in 1917–1930 was analysed in a study by **Hélène Carrère d'Encausse**,<sup>4</sup> there is no such volume discussing the Entente and the national question in 1914–1945. The Entente ignored the treaty of Brest Litovsk; it was recalled only in the United States, where **J.W. Wheeler-Bennett** published his *Brest Litovsk: The Forgotten Peace, March 1918* on the twentieth anniversary of the event. In Poland, the settlement was analysed by **Artur Kozłowski** (2000) in his PhD. thesis, published as *Rosja wyparta z Europy: Geopolityka granicy pokoju brzeskiego 1918 r.* (Russia pushed out of Europe: the geopolitical issues of the Brest Treaty borderline, 1918'), whose title

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<sup>4</sup> Original edition: H. Carrère d'Encausse, *Le grand défi: Bolcheviks et nations: 1917–1930* ([Paris]: Flammarion, 1987); English translation: *The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State, 1917–1930*, trans. N. Festinger (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1992); Polish translation: *Bolszewicy i narody czyli Wielkie Urągowisko 1917–1930* (Warszawa: Most, 1992).

pinpoints the significance of the change. Indeed, the Brest Treaty border was not an ordinary line of an armistice between opposing armies. Rather, it was a consciously chosen 'civilisational border' dividing the Western and Eastern world. The Tsardom of Muscovy, which consolidated between the sixteenth and seventeenth century beyond this line, crossed it and broke into Europe in the eighteenth. Europe made a brief return to its former border in 1918, when non-Russian peoples liberated from the Russian prison of nations established their states in the eastern peripheries. However, taking advantage of the capitulation of Germany, Bolshevik Russia soon crossed the Brest Treaty border again.

In 1941–1944, the German armies reached the Brest Treaty border for the second time in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, occupying the Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Germans crossed the line only slightly: having moved ahead from Livonia, they unsuccessfully besieged Leningrad; their progress from Belarus was stopped a hundred kilometres west of Moscow; having crossed the borders of Ukraine, they fought on the streets of Stalingrad but never managed to capture the city. The reality of war and occupation beyond the Brest line proved quite different than west of it. From the Russian perspective, the German invasion lost its impetus on the western peripheries of the country, just as the Crimean War, which in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century had never progressed beyond the Black Sea borderland of the Empire. The significance of the Brest Treaty border became apparent again following the unexpected dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the states west of the line regained independence which they had originally declared in 1918.

While 1918 saw a revival of the idea of the 'Eastern alliance' in the intermarium between the Baltic and the Black Sea, it was also the year, which marked the disappearance of the 'Visegrad group' from the agenda for the rest of the century. Indeed, the Little Entente of the interwar period was supported by France as its substitute ally in the east in the aftermath of the fall of the Russian empire and had nothing to do with the Visegrad idea. Poland, which had no issues with Hungary and remained in conflict with Czechoslovakia over Cieszyn Silesia, declined the offer of membership in the alliance. The project was even more out of the question when Poland discovered that the Soviet Union was also consulted on joining in and requested two military bases on Polish soil – in Lviv (Lwów) and Vilnius (Wilno) (*sic!*) – in return. In its final form, the Little Entente included Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, Hungary's neighbours, which acquired over two-thirds of its pre-war territory in the Treaty of Trianon (1920). **Marian Zdziechowski** rightly observed that 'Contrary to

French intentions, the Little Entente was not formed against Germany, but only against Hungary. Indeed, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania are bound together by the very same bond, which had brought together the Partitioning Powers against Poland. They are a pack of wolves, or, to put it mildly, a mutual assurance group' (Zdziechowski, 1933, p. 77). It should be added that this alliance had nothing in common with the tradition of the 'Visegrad group'.

Under the Yalta agreement, after the Second World War the area of Europe east of the Lübeck–Trieste line became a Soviet protectorate. Following the secession of communist Yugoslavia, the Kremlin made every effort to prevent the 'people's republics' from forming any interest groups which could potentially undermine Soviet domination. This became apparent in the case of the Bulgarian communist leader **Georgi Dimitrov** (a leading figure in the Komintern in the interwar period), who attempted to form the Balkan Federation including Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. After Yugoslavia's secession, he fell into disgrace with **Stalin** and died in Moscow 'while undergoing medical treatment'. The isolation of individual communist countries made it easier to suppress their attempts at liberating themselves from the Soviets, as became evident when the revolts in East Berlin (1953), Budapest (1956) and Prague (1968) were suppressed by Soviet tanks (Wandycz, 1994).<sup>5</sup> The nations remaining under Soviet domination were forbidden to maintain any of their traditional historical links within the 'Visegrad group', Mitteleuropa, and even more so, the Baltic–Black Sea Intermarium (Moczulski, 2007). On the other hand, the same period saw the development of the process of integration of the western part of the continent, eventually leading to the establishment of the European Union.

#### **4 Current decomposition of the Visegrad Group as a bloc of eastern EU member states**

After the Second World War, Maisons-Lafitte near Paris became the centre of the group gathered around Prince **Jerzy Giedroyc**, the founder and editor of the *Kultura* (The Culture) monthly, often referred to as the Second Great Emigration (Druga Wielka Emigracja). Like its predecessor – the Great Emigration of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century under Prince **Adam Czartoryski** (residing at the Hotel Lambert in Paris) – the circle cultivated the memory of the Polish-

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<sup>5</sup> The study was originally published in English: P.S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1992), second edition: (London: Routledge, 2001).

Lithuanian Commonwealth. The political thought of **Giedroyc's** circle revolved around the so-called 'UBL' (i.e. Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania) programme of developing an alliance with the historical partners in the east, and identified nationalism and clericalism as the main threats to the Polish cause (Giedroyc, 1996).<sup>6</sup>

The death of **Giedroyc** in 2000 marked a symbolic closure of the Second Great Emigration. Its intellectual achievement was adopted in Poland, which – liberated from Soviet domination in 1989 – was making its progress towards membership in the European Union, eventually achieved in 2004. The same year saw the accession of an entire alliance of Central-Eastern European countries (including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), known under the revived medieval name of the Visegrad Group (also referred to as the V4, formed in February 1991). Within the European Union, the bloc acquired a reputation for its reluctance to pursue the principal EU objective of curbing ambitions of sovereign nation states in order to create a European federation.

Polish literature on the subject includes mostly positive assessment of the achievement of the Visegrad Group. Presenting the most far-reaching conclusion, **Wojciech Gizicki** (2013, p. 178) uncritically observes that Central Europe has become a geopolitical fact. **Karolina Gawron-Tabor** (2014, p. 91) notes that at the European level the Visegrad countries do not really function as a group but rather tend to form a coalition aiming to deal with particular issues with a view to minimising their losses. **Anna Czyż** and **Sebastian Kubas** view the current role of the Visegrad Group as 'an important form of dialogue, exchange of experiences, and a forum for consultation on important European questions.' The authors also observe that the four countries 'constitute an area of common interests, are characterised by similarities resulting from their history, and face similar demands of the current democratic European and international politics' (Czyż, Kubas, 2014, p. 236). However, assessments of the Visegrad Group are not always objective and tend to be dominated by wishful thinking when it comes to its perspectives for the future. In this context, it is important to observe **Tomasz Dubowski's** opinion, according to which the V4 is a group with a limited ability to exert influence over particular European institutions or processes, even though it provides an adequate basis for developing future alliances (Dubowski, 2015, p. 23).

Both the challenges faced by the V4 after the accession to the European

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<sup>6</sup> See also [www.kulturaparyska.com](http://www.kulturaparyska.com).

Union and the attitudes to these challenges indicate the potential role of the group on the European scene. **Tomáš Strážay**<sup>7</sup> identifies the main priorities as follows: further development of cooperation with Eastern neighbours in the framework of the Eastern Partnership; support for countries of the Western Balkans in their integration into the EU; continuous cooperation in the area of energy security; further exploitation of the V4+ mechanism; transfer of know-how and the best practices; establishment of joint consulates and other forms of representation; and development of the civil dimension of Visegrad Cooperation (Strážay, 2011, p. 30–32). In fact, however, these objectives are pursued with no particular determination or spectacular successes (it would be difficult to give the V4 exclusive credit for the accession of Croatia to the EU). The Visegrad Group is not very active in proposing strategic projects which its members would be determined to implement in cooperation with the European Union. The situation is probably not going to improve considering such factors as the alienation of Hungary under President **Viktor Orbán**, a controversial rapprochement between the Czech President **Miloš Zeman** and **Vladimir Putin** (at the time when the international community condemned the Russian annexation of the Crimea and support for separatist activity in the Donbas), and the victory of Eurosceptics in the presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland, leading to the formation of a single-party government. As a result, the Visegrad Group is evolving towards *ad hoc* alliances mounted in defence of narrow national egoisms. Such a path of development leads to the loss of a sense of direction and strategic attractiveness. As long as the countries of the Visegrad Group do not develop progressive ideas for a constructive development of the European Union, they will be pushed out on the margins of the decision-making processes shaping the future of Europe.

## Conclusion

A pro-European alternative would involve drawing on the six-centuries-long tradition of the 'Jagiellonian group', currently reviving as the 'Eastern alliance' of three Slavic states. On the other hand, Lithuania, where nationalism broke with the Jagiellonian tradition (Narcissistic differences, 2010; Bad blood, 2011), in geopolitical terms is returning to its distant, pre-Gedymin past, when it formed the pagan outskirts of Viking Scandinavia. Today, then, the 'Eastern alliance'

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<sup>7</sup> Head of the Central and Southeastern Europe Programme at the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association.

includes Belarus, Poland and Ukraine, which share the heritage of the medieval Duchy of Vladimir, whose territory came to be divided between them (Piskozub, 2010). Indeed, from the late Middle Ages the region along the Bug River between Lviv (Lwów) in the south and Brest in the north was the area where the three nations developed their bonds. To mark a symbolic return to their historical multi-denominational community, the 2016 Gniezno Convention proposed an idea of erecting a church symbolising their Christian unity. Unlike the Visegrad Group, such an alliance would form the eastern outpost of the fully integrated Old Continent, and one loyal to the European Union.

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