

Polish Diplomacy on the Balkans (1918 – 1926)*

The present paper is related to the activities of Polish diplomacy in the Balkan region during the period of 1918–1926, crucial for the history of Poland. That was not only the time of the development of political ideas considering the role of the Baltic states in Polish foreign policy, but also of the establishment of new organizational structures, later on adopted by the diplomatic network of the re-born state. The main theme of reflections relates to the scope and forms of activities towards the Balkan states of the Polish diplomacy that was carrying out the objectives of the foreign policy of the state in close cooperation with military factors. Requirements of the defensive system in Poland during military actions of the years 1918–1920, as well as of the development of the system of alliances and cooperation with many neighboring states to strengthen the position 'between Germany and Russia' directly influenced the Balkan policy. Cooperation with the Balkan states, as well as neutral position, favorable to Poland, of some of them, facilitated the survival during fights with Ukrainians, and during the war with Soviet Russia. Poland, adjoining Romania, with a limited and insecure access to the Baltic Sea, aimed at winning the opportunity to use South-European routes and access to Aegean, Black Sea, or Adriatic harbors. That was the main reason of interest in cooperation with the states of this region and of aiming at being able to influence the pattern of their relations in order to contribute, thanks to taming down conflicts, to the increase of the significance and importance of small and medium states on an international scale with interstate relations dominated by great powers. Entering into alliance with Romania to strengthen security of eastern borders determined the main direction of diplomatic activities in this region. Conclusion of alliance with Romania, followed by its growth and development, resulted in Polish foreign policy undertaking actions to strengthen international position of this state. Its numerous conflicts and troublesome relations with neighbors had to become the subject of permanent analysis and concern of Polish politicians and diplomats, who aimed at taking into consideration the allied party's interests in all the undertaken actions. According to this policy, however, the alliance between Poland and

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France, regarded as the most important guaranty of Poland's international safety, was considered to be a priority. As the time went by, after the conclusion of alliance with France and Romania, tendencies to synchronize the form and the scope of cooperation with both allied parties started to grow.

The strategic goal of Polish foreign policy, determined by the requirements of defense against Germany and Soviet Russia, was serious enough to reveal significant activity in relations with the countries of South-Eastern Europe. Apart from Romania, this was particularly evident with regard to the Polish policy of advances towards Turkey, as well as interest in the development of a solid basis for international relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (hereinafter referred to as the Kingdom of SCS). Polish policy towards the state of Southern Slavs had to consider the actual state of its relations with Greece, since Thessaloniki Harbor ensured supplies for the Polish army. Therefore, Greece, despite doubts, or even the lack of consequence, was considered as an important partner in the South of Europe. This was particularly apparent during the Polish-Soviet war of 1920. The conflict between Greece and Turkey, however, jeopardized the development of Polish-Greek relations. The cooperation with Greece was perceived in Warsaw from the perspective of its relations with Turkey and the Kingdom of SCS that limited mutual contacts to economic cooperation. Polish policy towards Bulgaria and the scope of diplomatic work in this country was also subject to the state of this country's relations with neighbors, Romania and the Kingdom of SCS in particular. Accommodation of conflicts in that region was considered in Poland as conducive to strengthening of the international position of main partners, *i.e.* of Romania and the Kingdom of SCS. During the period covered in the title of the present paper any contacts between Poland and Albania were not established.

Therefore, the implementation of strategic political goals in the Balkan region required entering into multilateral international relations since they facilitated contacts on a military plane, simultaneously affecting economic and cultural cooperation. There are numerous threads of this kind in the monograph, although they appear in the background in order to present problems that Polish diplomats had to deal with.

The present work constitutes an attempt to explain why Poland was interested in cooperating with the Balkan states in the years 1918–1926. The considerations allow concluding that the activity of Polish diplomatic service in the countries of South-Eastern Europe in the years 1918–1926 was of a significant importance for the implementation of the goals of the Polish Republic's foreign policy. Polish diplomacy, from the very first moments of its presence there, had to face tasks related to the most critical problems, *i.e.* the territorial shape and safety of the reborn Polish State. At the same time, the diplomacy had to take care of numerous Poles who were migrating, and often coming back to their motherland across the Balkans. The beginnings of this activity that happened on the turn of 1918 were not easy. The lack of professional staff accompanied by the shortage of material resources was a minor problem as compared to critical issues

of a political nature regarding the situation of Poland on an international arena, as well as the state of internal relations. It was particularly apparent during the first period, crucial for reborn Poland, *i.e.* from regaining independence on November 11, 1918 till the signing of the Versailles Treaty on June 28, 1919.

The establishment of the network of Polish diplomatic representative offices in the Balkan region, out of which only the office in Athens did not take up its activities, terminates this period. Simultaneously, the competition of the National Polish Committee with the government in Warsaw for the right to represent the state on an international arena lost its significance. Another important stage of the Balkan policy of Poland was initiated by the deputy Aleksander Skrzynski's arrival in Bucharest in June 1919. It was the stage of the implementation of the assumption in the Polish foreign policy, which declared that Poland, 'squeezed' between Germany, and Russia needed a complex system of alliances protecting it against powerful neighbors, and allowing to conduct independent foreign policy. The South-European direction of this policy required active performance since Polish contacts with the West depended on establishing relations and cooperation with the Balkan states. Routes via Germany and Baltic harbors did not secure Poland's safe communication with allies, primarily with France, which came out in September 1939.

The policy of rapprochement towards the Balkan states, also in the League of Nations, reserved special attention towards Romania. The necessity to enter into alliance with Romania as considered an axiom of the Polish foreign policy, determined first of all by the state of Polish-Soviet and Polish-Ukrainian relations. They were characterized by Polish efforts securing a convenient eastern border, efforts perceived by Polish politicians as fully justified actions due to historical reasons, as well as necessary ones to protect the Poles who lived there, and to protect the Polish cultural heritage and the heritage of civilization. A well-justified anxiety about bringing the Bolshevik revolution to Poland and the loss of a newly regained independence multiplied this belief. Poland conducted its fights in the East in a significant isolation, though some understanding for its goals was observed in Romania, and some support from Greece and the Kingdom of SCS. This attitude of the Balkan states was particularly important during the war with Soviet Russia in 1920. This was, however, a period when the concept of Polish foreign policy towards this part of Europe was not yet determined.

In Warsaw in 1920, a prevailing opinion was the one of establishing a Polish-Romanian-Hungarian covenant as the goal of the Polish policy. The unreality of this concept, however, soon became evident due to adverse relations between Hungary and Romania, as well as a just commenced process of establishing the Little Entente. Edward Beneš' activity related to this was not convenient for Poland. All this endeavors were observed with a lot of suspicion, for fear that they served Soviet Russia and could divert Romania from cooperation with Poland. Poland won this first encounter with the Little Entente since Romania considered the alliance with Poland as its priority, and it had become true before joining the Little Entente. The deputy Aleksander Skrzynski

played an important role in bringing about the Polish-Romanian alliance; he supported the activity of ministers of foreign affairs of Poland and Romania: Eustachy Sapieha and Take Ionesco, a great friend of Poland who understood Polish problems exceptionally well, and who did not hesitate to intercede for its protection at the time of defeats incurred during the war with the Bolsheviks. The Polish-Romanian alliance was the consequence of the necessity of mutual guaranties regarding eastern borders of these two countries against Soviet Russia. Successful termination of fights for eastern borders, when the conclusion of the alliance agreement became possible did not signify, however, that both Poland and Romania would find states ready to uphold them in case of the threat from Moscow. Under these circumstances the situation of Romania, entangled in numerous arguments and conflicts with its neighbors, with Hungary and Bulgaria in particular, was carefully observed from Warsaw. Everything that could strengthen Romania's international position was considered in Poland as beneficial from the point of view of its own reasons of State. Therefore, Polish foreign policy and diplomacy in the Balkan region tried to assess all issues from the perspective of Romania's interests and needs.

Obviously, the above did not exclude possibilities to develop bilateral relations with the Balkan states in the attempt to treat them on even terms. Efforts were made to conduct active policy towards the Kingdom of SCS. That was not easy to realize due to significant Russian influence in this state, as well as endeavors of the White Guardist émigrés aiming at discrediting Poland in the Yugoslavs' eyes. Erazm Piltz, a Polish deputy in Belgrade rendered great merits in opposing these Russian plans. The appointment of this outstanding person of Polish political life to this post proves that the Kingdom of SCS was treated as an important partner. Polish diplomacy, acting there under difficult conditions, undertaking efforts to ensure supplies of goods, in particular during the war with the Bolsheviks, did very well indeed. The contacts and cooperation established, also on a military plane, were of a critical value for the organization of Poland's defensive efforts. Thus, the Kingdom of SCS could have almost acted as the ally of Poland if not for the Prime Minister N. Pašić's opposition towards recognition of Poland's rights to Eastern Galicia. When the eastern borders had been recognized, Yugoslavia refrained from assuming the attitude towards the Riga Treaty. This did not, however, hinder Yugoslavia from assuming a joint position with Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania in the course of the conference in Genoa in April–May 1922. This event demonstrated significant possibilities of Poland's cooperation with the states of the Little Entente, without the necessity to join this group of states. Moreover, it allowed the Yugoslavs to safeguard Poland its transit of military materials, in the form of a treaty, as a special clause of a commercial agreement of November 1922. It was a turning point in the history of Polish-Yugoslav relations during the inter-war period. Yugoslavia was included into the Polish system of defense. Therefore, under these circumstances, it was the task of diplomacy to influence the development of bilateral relations on all the planes possible.

Romania and the Kingdom of SCS belonged to the group of states of a victorious coalition, the group that in the Balkan region included also Greece. This was, however, a country involved in exhausting war struggles with Turkey, considered in Poland as a potential ally in opposing the Russian expansionism. Any involvement on the side of Greece was therefore avoided, and diplomatic relations were established as the latest among other Balkan states, *i.e.* in May 1920. This happened under the direct influence of the war with Soviet Russia, the main motive of the Polish side being to ensure the possibility to use harbors of the Aegean Sea for providing supplies for the Polish army. August Zaleski was put in charge of the mission in Athens, and at the same time sentenced to seclusion. He was deprived of almost any contacts with Warsaw, while his actions proved significant diplomatic abilities. During the most critical period of the war with the Bosheviks, Greece could have been considered as Poland's potential ally. Greece revealed serious interest in joining the Little Entente, detecting important benefits for itself in Poland's participation in this group. Greece also assumed that Poland, opposing Soviet Russia (the only state supporting Turkey in its war in the Near East) by force of arms could contribute to strengthen its position. This state of affairs, however, was not convenient for Poland, and consequently Greece was given the secondary position in the Balkan region. It was caused due to the policy towards Turkey conducted by Warsaw.

After the end of the World War I, Poland's attitude towards the Balkan members of the Four-Party Agreement often resulted in confusion and misunderstandings on an international arena. The attitude assumed towards Bulgaria was very favorable, diplomatic relations were established soon after the regaining of independence, the manifestation of pro-Polish attitude of politicians and the society of this country was a real satisfaction. Poland, however, could not undertake any political obligations towards this state, which found itself in a tragic situation after the lost war. Poland was doing nothing that could aggravate this situation; at the same time, however, Poland was not able to help Bulgaria, which strove for this help. It was understood in Warsaw that taming down conflicts between Bulgaria and its neighbors, with Romania in particular lied in Poland's interest. Poland was interested in such a system of relations in the Balkan region that could strengthen the position of the states of this region, eliminating or limiting the possibilities of the interference of great powers in their affairs. The anxiety about them falling into dependence from Russia or Germany was a live issue, although the threat from Moscow was considered to be much more factual.

The Russian factor influenced Poland's policy towards Turkey to a much greater extend than in the case of Bulgaria. At first, a significant mistake was not avoided; it was the engagement of Poland on the side of great powers in imposing the conditions of the peace treaty signed in Sèvres on Turkey. Insisting on rights to capitulation by the country liberating itself from over a century of slavery treated by Turkey, even when Ottoman, as inconsistent with its independence, was a misunderstanding. Still, at the same time, the fact that Turkey had not recognized the partitions of Poland and its attitude was friendly was

emphasized. With the growth of resistance in Turkey against plundering provisions of the peace treaty, and consequent subordination of this country to Soviet Russia, Warsaw began to understand this mistake. Jozef Pilsudski, the Commander-in-chief of the State was personally involved in this policy. Attempts were made to establish contacts and cooperation with Angora, with much confusion arising around these activities of the Polish diplomacy. Warsaw was relieved to learn about the change of the policy of France towards Turkey, announcing withdrawal from the peace treaty, humiliating for this country, signed by the Ottoman government. The British attempt to use military forces of Romania (also of the Kingdom of SCS) to prevent Kemal Pasha's forces from taking Istanbul in autumn 1922, situated Poland in a very dangerous position. The Romanian-Soviet war could have been an evident consequence since these countries would have found themselves on both sides of the Near East front. That was a factor motivating the activity of the Polish diplomacy with regard to the situation in this region and forcing to 'call' for own rights at the peace conference held in Lausanne. The fact that Poland was not invited to this conference, being a cosignatory of the Sèvres treaty, was understood as a significant defeat. As a consequence of this situation, more active diplomatic endeavors were undertaken in the region of the Balkans, accompanied by, apart from the feeling of threat from the side of Soviet Russia, a growing feeling of threat from the side of Germany.

The development of relations between Poland and the Balkan states in the years 1923–1926 was shaped under the influence of fear of the Germans. The problem that prevailed in the Polish policy and diplomatic activities regarding Romania was the one of synchronizing Poland's obligations towards its allies: France, and Romania. Later on, it was also the extension of the activity of Polish-Romanian alliance to cover Germany, under the influence of the international activity of this western neighbor and the Locarno policy of great powers, Great Britain in particular, that implied guaranties for Romanian borders with Hungary and Bulgaria. Consequently, the scale of interest in the Balkan affairs was much increased; the highest state authorities proved that on the turn of 1924. The decisions of the Political Committee of the Council of Ministers of January 5, 1925, related to the Polish-Romanian alliance and receiving permanent guaranties from Yugoslavia for the right of transit of military accessories in case of war, signified the recognition of the Balkan direction in the foreign policy as a critical one in the general international activity of Poland. Polish diplomacy was forced to undertake initiatives difficult to implement, often in close cooperation with military authorities. The conclusion of a secret Polish-Romanian-Yugoslav Transit Convention in November 1925 constituted a turning point at this stage of the Poland's Balkan policy. Romania took advantage of Polish interest in this issue to further tighten the relations by making the validity of the Triple Transit Convention expire together with the alliance between these countries. Thus, Romania could oppose for a long time the adoption of a Polish proposal of amendments to the alliance agreement by adjusting it to the Locarno system. There was some anxiety in Romania that this adjustment could weaken the alliance with Poland.

Opposition of this kind was, however, broken and the Romanian Covenant of Guaranty introducing new values to the Polish Balkan policy was adopted on March 26, 1926, to a significant degree thanks to Jozef Wielowiejski's, Polish Deputy in Bucharest, diplomatic skills. Poland, having received Romanian guaranties of its border with Germany, safeguarded at the same time Romanian borders with Hungary and Bulgaria. Poland's obligations in fact resolved themselves into potential technical assistance in case of the Bulgarian-Romanian war; analogous were Romania's obligations in case of the Polish-German war, still the connection of Poland with the system of international relations in the Balkan region became the fact.

Polish attempts of getting the Kingdom of SCS involved into the system of covenants of guaranties did not succeed. They can not, however, be considered as a complete failure. The conclusion of the Polish-Yugoslav treaty on friendly relations in September 1926 was only seemingly a gesture of no political significance. In fact, it was a form of a political superstructure with regard to the secret Transit Convention. Yugoslavia, declaring its readiness to help Poland in the field of military affairs, did not consider it necessary to become involved in the system of Central European relations. This would exceed the scope of its possibilities. Under these circumstances, the Yugoslavs were fully justified to assume that getting involved on the side of Poland in wartime conditions by safeguarding the transit of military accessories, they conduct the policy of one-sided services towards Warsaw. Their interest in Polish communication routes was of no comparison with Polish expectations related to the Yugoslav free trade area in Thessaloniki and its railway routes leading to Romania and Czechoslovakia. Due to this situation Poland had to become more interested in the state of Yugoslav-Greek relations that were characterized by some tension in Thessaloniki region. Therefore, Greece as a partner for political cooperation could not have been neglected. The best way towards mutual rapprochement was to develop economic relations, and it found its reflection in signing of a commercial treaty. Obviously, other planes of cooperation could not have been forgotten. All the above facts resulted in the necessity of constant demonstration of initiatives by the Polish diplomacy in Athens, as well as in Belgrade, relying on activities creating friendly atmosphere around Poland and stimulating interests in its culture, achievements of civilization and foreign policy affairs.

These were the forms of activity characteristic for the performance of Polish diplomacy in other states of this region, in particular in Bulgaria. This country was made up for the support of the position of Romania and of the Kingdom of SCS, conflicting with Bulgaria, in the international arena. Taming down of these conflicts was, under these circumstances, one of the most critical tasks. The results of undertaken actions, obviously, could not influence the system of international relations in the Balkan region to any significant degree; however, they increased Poland's international prestige, forcing great powers to observe these activities. In the case of Bulgaria, these observations were often related to surprising issues, such as for example artistic activity of Polish

diplomats or Tadeusz Stanisław Grabowski's, who was the head of the mission, active participation in scientific and cultural life of this country.

Polish policy of advances towards Turkey should be perceived in other categories. The independence and sovereignty of this country were considered as factors strengthening Poland's international position since they contributed to limit the possibilities of the Soviet expansion in the Balkans and Near East. Although Turkey was ready to cooperate with Poland only to a limited extent, and it used to attach much more significance to gestures than to real political moves, its importance for Poland was vital. It was understood in Warsaw that close Soviet-Turkish cooperation, forced by the British policy hostile to this country, was of a temporary character. The activity of the Polish diplomacy in Turkey was closely observed by the Soviets. The meaning of such facts as the conclusion of the Polish-Turkish agreement on friendship before the peace treaty was signed in July 1923, and accompanying rumors about a secret military agreement, important economic undertakings in this country, as well as the control from this territory over Promethean actions, aroused opposition from the Soviet side. Under these circumstances, the state of Polish-Soviet relations influenced the possibilities of Poland's cooperation with Turkey, which interested in this cooperation awaited favorable changes in Polish-Soviet relations. Kemal Pasha considered the option of entering into closer agreement with Poland. Poland's activities in the Balkan region, in particular its agreement on cooperation with the Kingdom of SCS, highly inspired Atatürk. He did not conceal his recognition of the goals of Polish policy in this territory and his readiness to join a wider group of states resisting the threat of domination from the side of Soviet Russia. The Turkish leader, however, lacked consequence in the implementation of his political initiatives. Polish diplomacy in the Balkan region had well justified reasons to be satisfied. Consequently carried on line of the defense of the interests of state endangered by its powerful neighbors brought about significant results. Poland was not afraid of isolation from the Balkan states nor of being cut off from communication routes, ensuring Polish-French cooperation in compliance with the provisions of the alliance between these two countries. The Polish-Romanian alliance was developed and became of a critical importance after the Treaty of Locarno as the guaranty in the case of conflicts with Soviet Russia or Germany. Poland also succeeded in building up of a positive image of its statehood and international prestige, as well as in developing political, cultural, and in a way also economic influence in the Balkan region. Having in mind the opportunities in Poland, in particular the actual economic potential, the above achievements were really significant. One may even state that the policy far exceeded the state of these opportunities. It can not be denied, however, that it was required and necessary. Therefore, the achievements of Polish diplomacy in the Balkan region in the years 1918–1926 deserve favorable evaluation. It managed to define and properly protect the interests of the Polish State in this region.