



## The Intermarium as the Polish-Ukrainian linchpin of Baltic-Black sea cooperation

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Intermarium as the Polish-Ukrainian linchpin of Baltic-Black sea cooperation**, edited by Ostop Kushnir, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, pp. 222, £61.99 (hardback), ISBN-13:978-1-5275-2712-6

As the title suggests, this collected volume explores the geopolitical legacy and implications of the “Intermarium” – a project of regional cooperation proposed throughout different historical ebbs and flows of struggle for self-determination and independence of different nation-states in Central Eastern Europe. The multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional contributions focus particularly on the Polish-Ukrainian linchpin by scholarly navigating between developments and failures of an idealised flawless cooperation across the region and nevertheless overlook other actors along the Baltic-Black seas axis.

All authors attempt generally to shed light on the rationale behind the Intermarium from different angles of investigation. Throughout different epochs, of particular interest is how the Intermarium was historically thought into a regional space historically understood as periphery of Europe.

The first two contributions – written respectively by Daria Nałęcz and Volodymyr Poltorak – investigate the “Intermarium” as a political doctrine, which constantly failed to be concretely realised. Theorised with the regional aspiration to establish a flawless cooperation and withstand the onrushing ambitions of Ottomans and the Tsarists in the XIX century, the Soviet Union in the XX century, and Western Europe and the Russian Federation nowadays, the “Intermarium” is the epitome of the Anti-Empire (23). In this particular case, both authors notice how a single nation’s disinterestedness to fulfil any precondition was a conscious action to empowering a potential leading-nation among the others and designing a scenario opposite to the one the Intermarium was made for. In the very end, all potential developments revealed how the architects of the Intermarium turned to be the gravediggers at its funeral, graved by a constant fear of whether a flawless cooperation would turn to be only a façade cooperation and trigger regional turbulences instead.

While Nałęcz sheds a new light on the Poland-centred project for digesting the periphery through a novel regional cooperation, Poltorak broadens his investigation to more complex connotations of Intermarium along historical and geographical lines. The latter is described as a project in motion due to its constant evolvement to include a wealth of entities from the region (e.g. such as masonic and para-masonic organisations, intellectuals in exile or nationalist organisations during the Soviet period) and their territorial ambitions to wishfully unite a region composed of Finland and Estonia, the Black Sea, the Adriatic Sea and the Balkans.

In Ostop Kushnir’s contribution, the author narrows down Nałęcz’s and Poltorak’s historical investigation by focussing on peculiar connotations of the Intermarium on the geopolitical ground. In doing so, he investigates the cultural inflations that such slippery term meant for the history of the region (49) and digs into the multifaceted intellectual aspirations. Against the pitfall of depicting the Intermarium as a geopolitical simulacrum, Kushnir defines it as a commonly used term in the public and political discourse with the attempt to name any interstate formation with hypothetical chances to emerge in the space between the Baltic and the Black seas (49). He thus looks closer at the Polish-Ukrainian linchpin in the attempt to venture the parapet of the both national and regional rhetoric. While Poland recollects the spirit of the Jagellonian dynasty with a projection until the Balkan Peninsula, the Ukrainian image of the Kievan Rus pictures the idea of Intermarium along the Baltic-Black sea axis until the Caucasus.

Although the Intermarium does not explicitly reflect the actual geopolitical reality, one of the most relevant aspects that Kushnir sheds a new light on, is the opportunity to interrogate the socio-political and historical trajectory of Intermarium on the interregional dynamics of the contemporary Central East Europe. Despite having been historically only a geopolitical speculation, Kushnir's analysis of the term opposes the scholarly mainstream "Intermarium issue" as a project for Central Eastern Europe. On the one hand, it gives credits to the hypothesis that the regional cooperation did never happen to come into existence due to the controversially overlapping ambitions of the different regional forces, such as Poland and Ukraine among others. On the other hand, it is also useful to give yet another perspective besides the mainstream one that sees the region in between the two regional poles of influence -Western Europe and the Russian ambitions. With no dismissal of the latter, of course, he somehow recalls Poltorak's contribution by laying out the Intermarium not as a mainly East-to-West dichotomy, but also as a North-to-South axis, from the Northern Baltic Sea coasts to the Southern Baltic seas one of the Caucasian region.

In her contribution, Katerina Pryshchepa investigates the "Intermarium" through the prism of high-politics. In particular, she analyses the foreign policy strategy that the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs began to adopt toward Ukraine in the post-Soviet era.

With the attempt to best frame the Intermarium, this chapter is chronologically threefold. First, it investigates the regional role that Poland played as main advocate of Ukraine through the recognition of Kiev's independence (1989–1992) in order to secondly contrast the "Russian factor" from within the country (1993–1999) and thereby guarantee to Ukraine a certain degree of independency and international respectability in the eyes of the European Union (1999–2004). However, perhaps too patronising, Poland's attitude could not successfully free the terrain of regional cooperation with Ukraine from contradictions.

Defined as the "enfant terrible" due to the post-Tymoshenko domestic events, and the "place des arms" for those escalated in the post-Euromaidan, Ukraine has barely benefitted from Poland's willingness to promote Ukraine as a regional actor whose short-lived hopes could transform the country. For instance, since 2014 Pryshchepa notes how Poland's regional advocacy was largely bounded in contradiction due to the rise of Euro-scepticism and alt-right movements and discourse that brought both countries to face contested historical legacy and disputes. Here instructive, the cross-border migratory movements and the Polish policy of assimilation for Ukrainian minority meant nothing else than another page of the failure of any flawless bilateral cooperation.

It hence follows that a certain degree of regional confrontation between Ukraine and Poland has played a more positive role in strengthening future partnership. From a security viewpoint, for instance, Maksym Bugriy's contribution once again reminds how while the failure of the Intermarium resulted historically from the risk to have a suzerain nation, at the same time the "Russian factor" has been identified as a common issue to deal with. This neighbourly shared anti-Russian sentiment has in fact maintained vivid a certain discourse in the wider Polish public, but has also left room in Ukraine to a so-called *banderivtsi narrative* in the post-Euromaidan. Although different, both have brought the two countries into a de facto alignment to speak in praise of. In the fifth chapter, Tomasz M. Napirókowski analyses deeper such "security alignment" between the two neighbourly "threatened states" (114), taking into account a variety of macroeconomic indicators from an "Intermarium perspective".

Both contributions – despite organised on two different levels of research – mirror a quite similar outcome. While Poland continues to play a perhaps modest, albeit important, role of non-institutionalised military partner with Ukraine in light of the outburst of the crisis in the Southeast region and Crimea, Ukraine itself seems to have recently benefitted from such relationship by increasing its good exportation to Poland. In this regard, however, Napiórkowski

clearly indicates that while Ukraine would eventually benefit from a strong Intermarium cooperation due to lack of international investors scared of warfare situation within the country, security and military cooperation do not provide similar results. Poland NATO membership obstacles a smoother cooperation with Ukraine, a country not considered fully trustworthy in the eyes of the Atlantic alliance. However, the Intermarium might benefit from regional proximity, where Ukraine would eventually reform its internal institutions of defence and alike by learning from transnational experiences of other countries in the region.

To conclude, beyond doubt this collected volume offers a different perspective through which looking beneath geopolitical dynamics of the history and contemporary affairs of the Central Eastern Europe. Since the return of the "Intermarium" as a subject of discussion in the national public and academic circles has been proposed along the original features in the region, this paradigmatic term may be used to shed a new light on those intra-regional dynamics-to-come of a region historically at crossroad between the gigantic Russia and Western Europe.

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