

KINGA CZECHOWSKA  
Bydgoszcz  
ORCID: 0000-0002-2620-6096

KRZYSZTOF KANIA  
Toruń  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5145-3726

## **THE POLISH MINORITY TREATY AND THE POLISH IDEA OF GENERALISATION OF MINORITY PROTECTION COMMITMENTS WITHIN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS**

### INTRODUCTION

The so-called minority question was intensely discussed during the Paris Peace Conference, mainly due to recent anti-Jewish pogroms in the Eastern Europe. Eventually it was decided that the rights of minority groups in the newly established states should be protected by minority treaties designed for that purpose. In the result, Polish delegation to the conference signed the Polish Minority Treaty on 28 June 1919. Then, during turbulent deliberations, the Legislative Sejm adopted the Versailles Treaty together with the Polish minority treaty (*Dziennik Ustaw 1929: 728*).

Many voices of criticism were raised on that occasion in Warsaw. Politicians pointed out the unfairness of imposing such a commitment on Poland given her centuries-old tradition of tolerance and liberty. Already during the Paris Peace Conference Ignacy Paderewski made it known that irrespective of the minority treaty, Poland was planning on including minority rights into the constitution. That argument was reminded during the parliamentary debates to underline that even without the international treaty, minority groups in the Second Republic of Poland would have been ensured equal rights. Moreover, the obligation to respond to the League of Nations regarding a situation of minorities was commonly perceived as a threat to Polish sovereignty (*Czechowska 2021: 122-123*).

Nevertheless, Poland agreed to sign the minority treaty because it was necessary for the conclusion of the Versailles Treaty. Weaker states had to give in to the pressure of the stronger ones. In this way, the minorities living among others in Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) and Greece were guaranteed the possibility of submitting complaints directly to the League of Nations, bypassing national judiciary. The treaty concluded with Poland was the basis

for those concluded with other states.<sup>1</sup> Yet, most countries of League of Nations (with Germany among them) did not make such a commitment. In the years that followed Poland continued to look for a way out of that unfavourable situation. Soon the solution was found in the idea of generalisation of minority protection commitments.

The aim of this article is to present, in chronological order, how this idea was developed and what actions were undertaken by Polish diplomacy because of it. Both the starting point: the minority question discussed during Paris Peace Conference, and the ending point: Polish foreign minister Józef Beck's speech of 13th September 1934, are relatively well-known in historiography. Our goal is to highlight what is frequently omitted or misunderstood, i.e. perspective of Polish diplomacy on those issues. As we will argue, the idea of generalisation of minority protection commitments was crucial for the Polish approach to the minority question within the League of Nations.

#### FIRST CRITICS OF THE TREATY, FIRST IDEAS FOR GENERALISATION

In the interwar period the situation created in Poland by the minority treaty was called 'the depletion of sovereignty' by for instance Władysław Józef Zaleski, a lawyer in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, writing under the pseudonym Józef Lemański (Lemański 1934: 527). During the conference on international protection of minorities convened by the Institute for Nationality Research [Instytut Badań Spraw Narodowościowych] – a "think tank" for Polish minority politics (Stach 2016: 149-178) – in Warsaw in April 1932, it was discussed whether the treaty violated Polish sovereignty or only the exercise of sovereignty within the country. Once again it was pointed out that minority rights were to be included in the constitutions of all new states even without minority treaties enforcing this.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, it was noted that minority obligations divided countries into two groups of unequal status in the League of Nations. This view appears, for example, in the 1932 book by Władysław Józef Zaleski, *Międzynarodowa ochrona mniejszości* [International Protection of Minorities]. In particular, the author offered the following view:

"This situation divides the League of Nations members into two groups, one of which has far-reaching international commitments and a voluntarily adopted procedure regarding the League of Nations, while the other is free from minority obligations. Therefore, on the one hand there are only

<sup>1</sup> Article 12, which will be described in detail further, was common for the other seven countries that signed similar commitments: Fink 2006: 261, 267–268. This work is a valuable reference point for the issues discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London (PISM), Delegat RP przy Lidze Narodów w Genewie (DLN), A.41/1: 23–24. Here, the phrase 'minority treaties' is worth noting; this plural, referring to different versions of commitments signed by individual countries, was also used in the context of the actions aimed at their generalisation discussed here. In the context of Poland's obligations in the interwar period, the same term 'minority treaties' may refer to the so-called of the Little Versailles Treaty and the Upper Silesian Convention. More on this subject can be found in: Raczyński 1993: 55.

obligations, while on the other – only rights. This situation is contrary to the fundamental principle of coexistence of nations which states that all independent states, small and large, have equal rights and equal obligations (ibidem: 528, Zaleski 1932: 109-115)”.

Both historical writings and diplomatic documents indicates that since 1922 we may speak of the Polish idea of generalisation of minority obligations, with the aim to obtain ‘the commitment of all countries to treat their minority groups equally in the implementation of equal provisions for all’ (Lemański 1934: 527). It was Szymon Askenazy, plenipotentiary minister on behalf of Poland in Geneva, who on 12 September 1922, during the Third Assembly of the LoN, said that ‘it would be in accordance with the principles of humanity and equity, which are the main guidelines of the League of Nations, for this problem (i.e., protection of minorities) to apply to all members of the League of Nations’ (ibidem: 529). It was the first call for the generalisation made by the Polish diplomat in the international arena.<sup>3</sup>

Another speech in a similar vein was offered at the Sixth League of Nations Assembly in 1925, when a representative of Lithuania proposed to establish a ‘special commission’ which would be responsible for developing ‘common rights and obligations towards minorities’. In response to this appeal, Polish delegate Stanisław Kozicki stated that he fully agreed with the principles of the resolution proposed by the Lithuanian delegate (ibidem).

Further, it is commonly known that Józef Piłsudski also had his views on the activities of the League of Nations and the Little Treaty of Versailles concluded in consequence of the Versailles Treaty. He expressed them openly on 8 November 1926, just a few months after the Coup d’état of May 1926, during a conversation with the new Foreign Minister August Zaleski concerning the main directions of Polish foreign policy. For Piłsudski, minority protection was one of many problems that resulted from the general politics of LoN. As Zaleski recalls,

‘he [Piłsudski] considered the League of Nations only as an instrument created by the victorious powers to implement their own policy. Small countries have nothing to say in Geneva. Their voice is not considered. On the contrary, several measures have been created to subordinate smaller countries to great ones. Such measures include the possibility that the treaties may be revised; protection of minorities; loans from the League of Nations Finance Committee, et cetera’ (Zaleski 2017: 140-141).

It seems that immediately after the 1926 May Coup it was not possible to take any definite action regarding the Polish Minority Treaty, but the matter was carefully considered. Zaleski shared an unfavourable opinion of Piłsudski and in the cabinet meeting in August of that year he was to say that ‘[f]rom a foreign policy point of view, Poland is highly interested in the abolition of the minority treaty’. Evidently,

---

<sup>3</sup> One should also take notice of more general, global ideas of dealing with minorities question in the League of Nations, which were first suggested by president Woodrow Wilson or later proposed by Japanese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference – and were met with reactions from scepticism to strong opposition. Fink 2006: 154-157.

abolition was another solution to the problem, more rapid than generalisation, that was discussed by the Polish policy makers. However, Zaleski rightfully understood that it could not happen anytime soon, primarily due to the complicated internal situation in the country under the watchful eye of other countries, and thus postponed a decision in that matter to calmer times (Wandycz 1999: 57).

#### CASES OF ABUSE OF THE MINORITY PROCEDURE. THE CALL FOR SOLUTION

Four years later, on 20 September 1930, during a debate at the 11th Assembly of the League, Zaleski recalled the idea of generalisation of minority protection commitments. He stated:

“The Polish government would be ready to re-examine a situation in which a minority protection system would be established, equal for all member states of the League of Nations – in line with the first thought of President Wilson whose noble concern wanted to extend the benefit of protection to all minorities without distinction, by introducing a generally applicable rule in the League Covenant” (Lemański 1934: 529).

In September 1931, during a Zaleski’s meeting with the foreign ministers of Czechoslovakia (Edvard Beneš), Romania (Dimitrie Ghica), Yugoslavia (Vojinslav Marinković) and Greece (Andreas Michalakopoulos), the issue of the LoN minority procedure was discussed again. The ‘five countries’ action was a response to the actions of German diplomacy which at every opportunity tried to use the issue of minorities for its own ‘political and propaganda purposes’ (PDD 1931: 572–574).

As historian Mariusz Wołos noted, ‘[u]ntil 1934, representatives of the German minority lodged about three hundred complaints against Warsaw with international institutions’ (“Nowa Europa Wschodnia” 2016).<sup>4</sup> Polish diplomats were well-aware of this abuse of the minority procedure and of the goal it served. They observed that Germany ‘meant to treat minority affairs in such a way that they never cease to occupy the League and the world’s public opinion – and that they would increasingly serve to undermine Poland’s sovereignty over the territory which is the object of German desires’ (PISM, DLN, A.41/1: 140). In this way, the Weimar Republic’s minority policy became an important element of its revisionist policy. Years later diplomat Edward Raczyński wrote: ‘[t]he whole procedure had little to do with the interests of persons who complained, and sometimes even turned against them. This was about something else; defamation of the name of Poland as an unlawful and frivolous state, in a word, a ‘seasonal’ state’ (Raczyński 1993: 55).

Petitions to the League of Nations against Poland were sent also by the Ukrainian minority, but those were of different nature as they resulted from the so-called pacification of Eastern Lesser Poland. Raczyński explained it to Massimo Pilotti, a member

---

<sup>4</sup> For more on the problem of protecting the German minority in Poland, see Raitz 2000.

of the Italian delegation to the League. The authorities in Poland, taking advantage of the fact that sabotage operations were carried out by the Ukrainian Military Organisation, decided to act against the Ukrainian minority living in south-eastern Poland. The action lasted from mid-September to the end of November 1930 and, contrary to Warsaw's intentions, led to negative publicity in the international arena, an anti-Polish campaign, a complaint by the Ukrainian minority, and later a petition to the League regarding the policy of the Polish authorities (More on this topic also: Grünberg, Sprengel 2005; Kulińska 2009; Potocki 2003). Polish representatives in Geneva were disappointed by the attitude of the Three Committee which at a meeting on 18 September 1931 did not issue a decision favourable to Poland and did not reject Ukrainian petitions, instead referring the matter to the Council of the League (Kania 2014: 57; PDD 1931: 648–649).

Raczyński, the then head of the Department of International Organisations in Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1931–1932), in his letter to the Polish Ambassador in London Konstanty Skirmunt commented that: '[a]s far as I know, we will take the most firm and tenacious position in Geneva. We are determined at all costs to prevent the Geneva areopagus from interfering with our internal policy' (PDD 1932: 8). Zaleski spoke in a similar tone, ready to 'come into the most serious conflict' in this matter (*ibidem*). The whole matter was concluded at the beginning of 1932, in line with Warsaw's expectations. The League saw no inadequacy in the policy of the Polish authorities towards the Ukrainian minority and recognised it as a higher necessity resulting from Ukrainian 'subversive policy'.

Interestingly, only few complaints were submitted by Jewish minority, the one that was believed to be in the greatest need of protection during the Paris Peace Conference. In the 1930s, only two complaints were lodged by Polish Jews (Bacon 2002: 150). In Raczyński's opinion the small number of Jewish petitions resulted from a sense of loyalty: 'they considered it desirable to use these treaties as little as possible against the countries of which they were citizens' (PISM, DLN, A.41/2: 17–18).

On 26 February 1932, Raczyński, richer in experience obtained in the two-year-long activity of the Conference on Disarmament, stated in a memorandum that Poland should strive to suspend the treaty or fundamentally change it in the near future. His explanation for that was as follows: '[t]here is no doubt that the tactics adopted by the countries defeated in World War I, and above all Germany, in relation to reparation payments and the issue of arms, pave the way for a review of the minority protection system'. Raczyński remembered the reluctant reaction of the superpowers to the idea of generalisation offered in 1930. In addition, he believed that in the changing situation such a concept was already insufficient (PDD 1932: 115). The most important changes were to be introduced to Article 12 of the minority treaty which referred to guarantees for persons belonging to racial, religious or linguistic minorities and the consideration of possible complaints by the Permanent Court of International Justice. The consent of most permanent member states of the League Council was needed for such changes. According to Raczyński, the project ought to be carried out only after the elections to the League Council, as its earlier

reveal could have had an adverse effect on the re-election of Poland as a semi-permanent member of this institution (*ibidem*: 115–119). Nevertheless, this was the spirit in which a meeting was held with the countries of the Little Entente. On 27 June 1932, Raczyński realised that while Poland could count on the strong support of Yugoslavia and Romania in the discussed matter, the attitude of Czechoslovakia was difficult to guess (*ibidem*: 388–390).

The Department of International Organisations managed by Raczyński also worked on the minority issues. On 17 September 1932, an interesting note was created there that discussed three options for the possible removal or travesty of ordinances arising from the Little Treaty of Versailles. It was assumed that the Article 93 of the Versailles Treaty should be left intact because it was directly related to Germany. Instead, there was a postulate to change the minority treaty itself. The solution could be an agreement concluded on the one hand by Poland, and on the other hand by Italy, Japan, France and England. If it was included in the Polish constitution, it would state that the provisions contained in the minority treaty would be strictly observed and would not change. As a result, the minority treaty could be annulled. Another idea was to replace the minority treaty with another arrangement, similar to the Universal Arbitration Act, which could be called the Universal Act on the Protection of Minorities. The latter of the options was limited to revoking the minority procedure alone while maintaining the treaty itself. Both of those ideas were at least partially inspired by the idea of generalisation of minority obligations (PISM, DLN, A.41/1: 62–63).

#### FROM *GLEICHBERECHTIGUNG* TO GENERALISATION

During the meeting held by Zaleski on 27 October 1932, it was agreed that Polish *démarche* to the governments of Western powers will be delivered orally, probably in the first half of November. The statement clearly indicated that Germany's equality of rights in armaments could only occur after the abolition of the Little Treaty of Versailles (PDD 1932: 626–627).

Already as the Permanent Delegate of the Republic of Poland to the League of Nations in Geneva, at the end of 1932 during the disarmament conference Raczyński reported that the talks on the matter of Germany's *Gleichberechtigung* with respect to armaments came to the fore, together with the country's potential return to the proceedings. Polish diplomacy intended to take advantage of this fact by publicising and highlighting the matter of the minority treaty accordingly: '[t]he moment has come to propagate the idea of equal rights in the field of minority obligations with the help of all available means' (*ibidem*: 690).

In a report sent to Beck on 3 December 1932, the Polish delegate postulated prudent tactics in this matter, without pushing Western powers to the proverbial wall. Recalling the note of 17 September 1932, created in the Department of International Organisations, Raczyński stated that:

“A tangible result can be achieved through negotiations with the powers that, together with us, signed the minority treaty and ratified it (France, England, Italy, Japan). In this group, of course, one would not speak practically about imposing the minority system adopted by us on the powers, but about modifying or even abolishing this system in the name of equality and at the price of our consent to equality for Germany” (ibidem: 692).

In addition, in a report of 31 January 1933, he warned against the complete annulment of minority treaties as it would give Germany a reason to abolish the territorial clauses contained in the Versailles Treaty. The Polish diplomat stated that the best way to settle the matter would be through generalisation, combining ideas related to ‘equality of rights’ in armaments and protection of minorities (PISM, DLN, A.41/1: 141).

The Foreign Office had a negative attitude towards the idea of merging these two issues. According to British diplomats, the matters were not *in pari materia* and therefore lacked formal prerequisites for such a combination. Above all, despite ongoing and intensifying efforts, the British did not take Polish opposition to unequal minority obligations seriously. One of British officials expressed his doubt as to whether a Polish position on this matter was indeed so strongly marked as it was stated in a memorandum sent by Vladimir Poliakov, a British journalist dealing with Polish affairs: ‘[a]s far as I know, there have been no more than hints of this in speeches by col. Beck, etc.’ (TNA, FO 371/17230, N236/236/55).

According to Raczyński, Hitler’s rise to power and the beginning of the persecution of Jews in Germany marked a ‘new stage’ in the pursuit for generalisation of minority protection commitments. Namely, these events gave the lie to the existing counterarguments that ‘Western states (...) have long grown out of intolerance’ and they do not need to be a part of minority protection system. From the spring of 1933 onwards, ‘it became a political necessity for minority states to demand generalisation of the protection of minorities’ (PDD 1933: 640).

Jewish organisations also proposed to extend minority obligations to other countries. Neville Laski, chairman of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, in correspondence with the Foreign Office reminded about the proposal to create a World Convention which would apply not only to League countries, but to all countries in the world. However, this proposal was not received warmly. According to British diplomats, there was no chance that the League Assembly would agree to such an offer. In addition, ‘its acceptance by HM Government would not be justifiable or practical having regard to the nature and composition of the British Empire’ (TNA, FO 371/16756, C6966/6839/18). This final argument, undoubtedly of great importance for the British position, was obviously not presented outside; this does not mean that the outside did not realise that it existed (Kulski 1977: 158).

Ultimately, the resolution of 21 September 1922 was adopted again at the 14th Assembly of the League. It obliged the states not bound by minority treaties to apply ‘to their minorities a measure of justice and tolerance at least equal to that required by the treaties and practice of the League’ (PDD 1933: 638); however, it was already obvious that this would not satisfy minority countries. In the report written at the end of



1933, Raczyński, the then Polish delegate to the League (1932–1934), wrote that ‘this year’s Assembly allowed for the first breach in the fortress which until now resisted all such attempts’ (ibidem: 642).

#### THE FORTHCOMING CHANGES IN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

At a meeting held by Józef Beck on 23 March 1934, minister pointed out that ‘as soon as Germany left the League, the issue of extending minority obligations to all League members changed its character. Generalisation that does not include Germany could not satisfy us’ (PISM, DLN, A.41/2: 6). Still, acting on his instructions, on 10 April 1934, Raczyński sent a letter to the Secretary General of the League in which he asked for a draft resolution to be submitted to the following League Assembly. The draft stated that ‘the current conditions of international protection of minorities do not comply with the basic principles of international morality’ and that Poland ‘is of the opinion that this should be prevented by adopting a general convention on the protection of minorities’. Further, he wrote that ‘[t]his convention should impose the same obligations on all League of Nations members and ensure international protection for all racial, linguistic and religious minorities’ (“Sprawy Narodowościowe” 1934a: 121). To this end, the Polish delegate called for a conference to be convened in which all League members would participate. Its effect was to be the development a general Convention on the international protection of minorities (ibidem).

At the same time, in his report to Beck of March 1934, Raczyński drew attention to the ‘choice of the moment’. Other countries’ violation of treaty provisions regarding armaments could be used by Poland ‘as a justification for our opposition to continue to submit to the provisions on the protection of minorities’. He also noted that evasion of the treaty in procedural terms could give almost the same effects as its formal abolition, although it would be deeply criticised. Hence an integral part of this tactic was to call for the generalisation of minority obligations (PISM, DLN, A.41/2: 7–8).

According to Raczyński, if Poland was to agree to any rearmament of Germany, it should issue its own military or political (minority-related) demands:

“The Polish Government could issue identical notes to the four signatory governments of the new Minority Treaty, namely England, France, Italy and Japan. These notes could develop the above summarised propositions and announce the consequences that we would be determined to draw (in the event of cancellation of former provisions regarding armaments in the Disarmament Convention). In conclusion, the notes could state the readiness of the Polish Government to accept the most far-reaching commitments in the field of protection of minority rights, should they be extended to all League members” (ibidem: 21–23).

Raczyński predicted a sharp reaction from Western powers to such a note. Hence France’s attitude was extremely important in this respect as it was to be won over in order to form a common front against England, Italy and Germany.



In Raczyński's conversation with René Massigli of June 1934, the subject of Poland's attitude towards Soviet Union's potential accession to the League of Nations was touched upon. The Polish diplomat, noting that he is expressing only his personal views, put this issue in the context of minority obligations:

“This regards whether Poland can agree that the Soviet Union, sitting on the Council of the League of Nations, itself free from any obligations regarding minorities, could at any time provoke conflicts with Ukrainian or Belarusian minority in Poland; or that any repression against the communist agitation in the eastern borderlands of Poland could be presented by the Soviet Union as a minority issue”.

He emphasised that the fact that one country misuses this international procedure of minority protection for its own political goals by no means allows another one to do the same now (*ibidem*: 89–90).

The famous meeting of Edward Raczyński and Józef Beck on Lake Geneva marked another important development (Raczyński, Żencykowski 1989: 12). The new plan provided for the suspension of existing minority treaty which Raczyński at the time considered ‘a real splinter in our body’ (Raczyński 1993: 55). By using the case of Germany, which assumed that the state would limit armaments if other countries did the same (through generalisation of obligations), the Polish delegate in Geneva began his painstaking work on linking this strategy with the minority treaty. Raczyński thought that ‘we can respect and execute it [the treaty – author(s)], provided those other European countries are in the same position’ (Raczyński 1990: 53).

The diplomat decided to involve in his action the delegation counsellor in Geneva Władysław Kulski. Kulski, Beck and Beck's cabinet secretary Michał Łubieński conferred again on Lake Geneva. They did not want to revoke the minority treaty, because they were afraid of ‘creating a precedent’ for Germany which could then denounce the Versailles Treaty regarding e.g. the Polish-German border. Instead, it was decided to refuse further cooperation with the League of Nations in matters concerning minorities. In practical terms, this made it impossible to implement the provisions of the minority treaty and to apply the procedure ensuring international protection of minorities (Kulski 1977: 158).

#### JÓZEF BECK'S DECLARATION OF 13TH SEPTEMBER 1934

The decision announced by Beck on 13 September 1934 was certainly influenced by the USSR's accession to the League of Nations planned for 18 September (*ibidem*). The Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs made his attitude to the Union's presence in the League dependent on how the minority issue was solved (Brzeziński 2017: 90; Michowicz 1985: 370–371). Polish diplomacy, as expressed by previously cited Raczyński, was afraid of the Soviets' interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Poland by means of the Polish Minority Treaty after their accession to the League and its Council. After all, the experience with the German minority was very

informative. There was a fear that the Soviets would use Slavic minorities in a similar way (Wołos 2009: 253).

On 13 September 1934, at a plenary meeting of the League of Nations Assembly, Beck announced a declaration in which Poland suspended the application of the international procedure provided for in Article 12 of the Polish Minority Treaty. The Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs stated that:

“The existence of such a system of minority protection as exists today has proved to be a complete failure. The minorities themselves gain nothing from it whilst the system, only too often misused in a manner which is quite incompatible with the spirit of the treaty, has in a great measure become the tool of slanderous propaganda directed against the states bound by it; it has also become a means of applying political pressure by the countries which freed of all minority protection obligations benefit by the right and prerogative of participation in control (...). Awaiting the entrance into force of a universal and uniform system of minority protection, my government finds itself obliged to refrain as from today from all cooperation with the international organs controlling the application of the minority system protection in Poland.

Quite obviously this decision of Polish Government is in no event directed against the interests of minorities. These interests have been and will continue to be defended by the constitution of the Polish Republic which assures the lingual, racial and confessional minorities freedom of development and equality rights.”<sup>5</sup>

In a circular sent by the minister to his subordinates later, he emphasised that ‘the actual standing of the situation of the minorities will not be changed in any way, this statement cannot be treated as a unilateral denunciation of the treaty whose principles are covered by the Polish Constitution’ (PDD 1934: 568). In the report of 4 October Raczyński explained that this declaration ‘however intentionally, in order to hinder the contract, was presented in an intricate legal form’ had an unambiguous overtone as to the functioning of the minority treaty and as such caused numerous reactions (ibidem: 599).

A week after Beck’s speech, during discussions of the 6th Committee of the Assembly, the Western powers ‘sought various pretexts to justify their negative position’ (Lemański 1934: 535). Raczyński noted that their statements were ‘moderate and courteous’ (PDD 1934: 600). For instance, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs John Simon said that ‘since the system is wrong, there is no reason to generalise it’. He further considered that Article 12 was related to Article 93 of the Treaty of Versailles concerning the borders of the Polish state. In his view, these and other reasons prevented Poland from unilaterally terminating its obligations. Louis Barthou, who said that ‘France was against any changes to the rules,’ felt the same way (ibidem). In addition Minister without Portfolio for League of Nations Affairs, Anthony Eden criticised the Polish proposal to convene a special conference on the problem of protecting minorities, arguing that ‘when the divergence of view is known to be wide and deep,’ such deliberations would be doomed to failure, and this would further undermine the League’s prestige (TNA, FO 371/18542, W8532/289/98). From the

<sup>5</sup> For the full Polish version of this speech see: Beck 1939: 128–131; PDD 1934: 567–568.

perspective of Great Britain and France, the fact that Beck made his speech before the application for generalisation could be considered (even if no success was predicted) was also viewed negatively (*ibidem*, W8380/289/98; *ibidem*, W8646/289/98).

Pompeo Aloisi, the Italian delegate to the League of Nations, was more favourable toward Beck's declaration. Speaking about his country's perspective he said that the Polish minister's note 'is only read as a statement aimed at offering a new system, perhaps better adapted to the current situation, instead of the former one which was used fifteen years ago and now is considered inadequate to the requirements of our time' ("Sprawy Narodowościowe" 1934b: 679). Representatives of Belgium, Spain, Switzerland and the Netherlands were critical of Beck's declarations. Meanwhile, Poland was supported by delegations from Yugoslavia (Constantin Fotitch spoke on behalf of the Little Entente states), Turkey, Sweden, Ireland, Albania, Iraq and Haiti. A statement by Mirosław Arciszewski, Polish envoy to Bucharest, is worth quoting here: '[t]he move of the Polish Government is categorical and no one will be able to change anything about it, because it is supported by the broadly understood interest in rightness, equality, justice and international solidarity which are the basis for the moral strength and existence of the League of Nations'.<sup>6</sup>

Raczyński agreed to the proposal of the chairman of the 6th Committee of the League Assembly and withdrew the Polish proposal from voting. He was aware that the voices of opposition to the idea of generalisation 'rendered a vote in the Committee completely superfluous', because unanimity of the assembly was necessary to make the decision. He decided not to insist on taking a vote that 'would have had no political value' (TNA, FO 371/18542, W8758/289/98). Already at the time of submitting the request to be included in the agenda in April, it was realised that the postulated generalisation could not be achieved. However, the motion was of strategic significance. Raczyński wrote that 'our tactical goal was achieved because we led the superpowers to express their opposition towards generalisation, which weakens their moral foundations in defending existing treaties; we have prompted a declaration of revisionist tendencies on their part' (PDD 1934: 603).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The call to generalise minority obligations was indeed an important and evolving element of Polish diplomatic tactics over the years, closely related to the controversial (from a Polish perspective) provisions of the minority treaty. It constituted the foundation for the steps taken by Minister Beck on 13 September 1934, and became the subject of discussion a week later, during the proceedings of the Sixth Committee of

---

<sup>6</sup> PISM, DLN, A.41/2: 303. However, the subsequent part of Arciszewski's statement aroused considerable controversy on the international arena and, above all, in Romania. The reason therefore was the fact that Arciszewski accused Romanians of the lack of patriotic attitude since they did not support the Polish position despite being in a similar situation, TNA, FO 371/18542, W8519/289/98.

the Assembly. However, the essence of Beck's speech was the declaration of refraining from cooperation with the League's bodies regarding minority obligations.

In Poland, the declaration was clearly enthusiastically received (TNA, FO 371/18542, W8646/289/98). Interestingly, foreign observers noted the lack of major agitation on the part of national minorities who did not believe that this would affect their situation (TNA, FO 417/59: 34). However, the declaration met with mixed reception abroad. The French press initially suggested that the decision on 'the rudest blow the League has yet received' was probably taken in consultation with Germany (TNA, FO 371/18542, W8277/289/98). Reactions of German newspapers were mostly positive, which must have supported this impression (*ibidem*, W8278/289/98). Meanwhile, *Reich* authorities criticised the declaration, trying to raise the issue of their claims regarding the 'Polish Corridor', arguing that if Poland had not accepted minority obligations, the area would not have been granted to it in the Versailles Treaty (*ibidem*, W8394/289/98).

Although Beck's speech was widely criticised as drastic, numerous circles cherished hopes that this 'declaration of non-co-operation' would not be put into practice (TNA, FO 417/59: 33). Hopes that could not be fulfilled as Poland did act accordingly to Beck's declaration. Since for the Polish diplomacy the declaration of 13 September 1934 solved the problem of unequal minority obligations, the postulates for generalisation disappeared from its main agenda, although they remained unrealised. It shows that generalisation was never a goal itself, but rather a way to fulfil another, bigger political purpose. Moreover, it served as an ideological justification for plans and actions of Polish diplomacy. Finally, one should observe that the call for generalisation of certain commitments was derived from one of the most fundamental rules in diplomacy: a principle of reciprocity. The Polish Minority Treaty did not follow this principle and as such was met with Polish criticism, which was finally expressed by Beck on 13 September 1934.

## Bibliography

### Archives

The National Archives in London (TNA):

Foreign Office (FO), 371/16756; 371/17230; 371/18542; 417/59

Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London (PISM)

Delegat RP przy Lidze Narodów w Genewie (DLN), A.41/1; A.41/2

### Printed sources

Beck J. (1939), *Przemówienia, deklaracje, wywiady 1931–1939*, Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff.  
Dziennik Ustaw RP (1929), No. 110, item 728.

- Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1931*, Wołos M. (ed.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Polskiego Instytutu Spraw Międzynarodowych 2008.
- Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1932*, Kania K. (ed.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Polskiego Instytutu Spraw Międzynarodowych 2011.
- Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1933*, Skóra W. (ed.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Polskiego Instytutu Spraw Międzynarodowych 2015.
- Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1934*, Żerko S. (ed.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Polskiego Instytutu Spraw Międzynarodowych 2014.
- Zaleski W.J. (1932), *Międzynarodowa ochrona mniejszości*, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Spraw Narodowościowych.

### Literature

- Bacon G. (2002), *Polish Jews and the Minorities Treaties Obligations, 1925: the View from Geneva (Documents from the League of Nations Archives)*, "Gal-Ed", No. 18.
- Brzeziński A.M. (2017), *Liga Narodów w koncepcjach i dyplomacji Józefa Becka (1932–1938)*, in: S.M. Nowinowski (ed.), *Plk Józef Beck (1894–1944). Żołnierz, dyplomata, polityk*, Łódź-Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.
- Czechowska K. (2021), *As Everyone Expected It to Be? Reborn Poland and Her Jewish Minority*, in: R. Barta, R. Kerepeszki, K. Kania (eds.), *Trianon 1920–2020. Some Aspects of the Hungarian Peace Treaty of 1920*, Debrecen: University of Debrecen.
- Fink C. (2006), *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kania K. (2014), *Edward Bernard Raczyński 1891–1993 dyplomata i polityk*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton.
- Kulski W. (1977), *Z pamiętnika b. dyplomaty (I)* „Zeszyty Historyczne”, No. 42.
- Lemański J. (1934), *Generalizacja zobowiązań mniejszościowych a Polska*, „Sprawy Narodowościowe”, Vol. 8, No. 5–6.
- L.K. (1934a), *Wniosek Polski w sprawie generalizacji zobowiązań mniejszościowych*, „Sprawy Narodowościowe”, Vol. 8, No. 1.
- L.K. (1934b), *Sprawy mniejszościowe na XV Zgromadzeniu Ligi I 82-jej Sesji Rady Ligi (wrzesień 1934)*, „Sprawy Narodowościowe”, Vol. 8, No. 5–6.
- Michowicz W. (1985), *Genewska Konferencja Rozbrojeniowa (1932–1937) a dyplomacja polska*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie.
- “Nowa Europa Wschodnia” 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200717214129/http://www.new.org.pl/2796-nikt-sie-nie-wstawi> (dostęp 19.04.2022).
- Raczyński E. (1990), *Czas wielkich zmian. Rozmowy przeprowadzone przez Krzysztofa Muszkowskiego*, Paris: Éditions du Dialogue: Société d'Éditions Internationales.
- Raczyński E. (1993), *Od Narcyza Kulikowskiego do Winstona Churchilla*, Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna.
- Raczyński E., Żenczykowski T. (1989), *Od Genewy do Jałty. Rozmowy radiowe*, Kielce: Wydawnictwo Nurt.
- Raitz von Frenzt C. (2000), *A Lesson Forgotten. Minority Protection under the League of Nations. The Case of German Minority in Poland, 1920–1934*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Stach S. (2016), *The Institute for Nationality Research (1921–1939) – A Think Tank in Minority Politics in Poland?*, in: *Religion in the Mirror of Law Eastern European Perspectives from the Early Modern Period to 1939*, (ed.) Y. Kleinmann, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

- Wandycz P. (1999), *Z Piłsudskim i Sikorskim. August Zaleski, minister spraw zagranicznych w latach 1926–1932 i 1939–1941*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe.
- Wołos M. (2009), *Szkic o polskiej polityce zagranicznej w międzywojennym dwudziestoleciu*, in: K. Persak, P. Machcewicz (eds.), *Polski wiek XX. Dwudziestolecie*, Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Polski i Wydawnictwo Bellona.
- Zaleski A. (2017), *Wspomnienia*, K. Kania, K. Kloc, P.M. Żukowski (eds.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Polskiego Instytutu Spraw Międzynarodowych.

**dr Kinga Czechowska**, Delegatura Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Bydgoszczy (kinga.czechowska@yahoo.com)

**dr hab. Krzysztof Kania, prof. UMK**, Wydział Nauk Historycznych, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu (frantic@umk.pl)

**Słowa kluczowe:** Liga Narodów, polska dyplomacja, traktaty mniejszościowe, międzynarodowy system ochrony mniejszości, prawo międzynarodowe

**Keywords:** League of Nations, Polish diplomacy, minority treaties, international protection of minorities, international law

#### ABSTRACT

*In 1919 Poland officially accepted its minority protection commitments. Nevertheless, the treaty and the international system of minority protection was still perceived as an unjustified burden and a threat to state sovereignty. The debates in the Legislative Sejm showed both fears and obligations felt by the members of parliament. Already in the 1920s and even more actively in 1930s Polish diplomacy was introducing the idea of generalisation of minority protection commitments to the League of Nations. Poland wanted all members of the LoN to have equal obligations regarding their minorities. The fight for generalisation ended on 13th September 1934 when the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Józef Beck, declared that Poland would refrain from further cooperation with LoN regarding minority protection until a new 'universal and uniform' system of such protection was established.*

*The aim of the article is to present, in chronological order, how this idea was developed and what actions were undertaken by Polish diplomacy on this account. Both the starting point: the minority question discussed during Paris Peace Conference, and the ending point: Polish foreign minister Józef Beck's speech of 13th September 1934, are relatively well-known in historiography. Our goal is to highlight what is frequently omitted or misunderstood, i.e. the perspective of Polish diplomacy on those issues.*

*As we will argue, the idea of generalisation of minority protection commitments was crucial for the Polish approach to the minority question within the League of Nations.*

*The article used the archival resources of: The National Archives in London, Foreign Office, and the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London.*