

## Great Theorists of Central European Integration in France

Attila PÓKECZ KOVÁCS

### ABSTRACT

France played a key role in the negotiations on the peace treaties that ended the First World War, thus emerging as a major European power and key political player in the Central European region. In the period between the two world wars, French governments in Central Europe sought to preserve the status quo that they had established, and in the course of this process, developed several ideas to integrate the region into Europe.

Among the French ideas for the integration of Central Europe, I will first analyse the Briand project. In a 1929 speech, French Prime Minister Aristide Briand proposed a new form of European cooperation. His idea was to create a European Union of 27 European countries, in which the Member States would retain their autonomy, and cooperation would be established primarily in the economic sphere. After a favourable reception, he put his plans into writing, publishing them in 1930. The Briand Plan placed political issues before economic ones, leading to Hungary's and many other countries' disappointment.

A second idea was the Constructive Plan (*'Plan constructif'*), which was the antonym of the German-Austrian customs union of 1931, drawn up under the leadership of André François-Poncet, Deputy State Secretary, and published in a memorandum on 4 May 1931. In the document, the French government drew attention to four problems: the crisis in the cereals trade in Central and Eastern Europe; situation of the industrialised countries; question of capital and credit; and special situation of Austria.

The plan with the most significance was submitted by the French Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, André Tardieu, to the British and Italian governments in the form of a memorandum on 2 March 1932. The Tardieu plan was to provide urgent aid to the five Danube states – Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia – whose economic situation was close to collapse, mainly as a result of the difficulties caused by the agricultural crisis. However, the fate of the most detailed Central European plan was clearly sealed by the lack of agreement between the great powers, particularly German and Italian opposition, and the position of reluctance adopted by most of the Danube region countries. The Tardieu plan was conceived in February 1932, published in March, and in April it had practically failed.

Therefore, none of the three plans developed between 1930 and 1932 was eventually implemented. Following this, no other comprehensive ideas for the integration of the Central European area in 20<sup>th</sup> Century France have been put forward.

### KEYWORDS

Tardieu-Plan, Briand-Plan, Central Europe, French Constructif-Plan, Central Europe between the two World Wars

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## Introduction

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of French thinkers shifted towards the idea of the European ideal.<sup>1</sup> The French interest in the Central European region only intensified in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. France played a key role in the negotiations on the peace treaties that ended the First World War, thus emerging as a major European power and key political player in the Central European region. In the period between the two world wars, French governments in Central Europe sought to preserve their established status quo, and in the course of this process, developed several ideas to integrate the region into Europe. Among these ideas for the integration of Central Europe, the Briand Plan of 1930 ought to be mentioned first. We can also include the Reconstruction Plan (*Plan constructif*), which was an antonym to the German–Austrian customs union of 1931. However, the one with the greatest significance was the Tardieu Plan of 1932. Many studies have been conducted on the relations between Central Europe and France in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but unfortunately the French vision of settling the situation in the region did not develop in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

### The Briand Plan (1930) and the ‘*Plan constructif*’ (1931)

The peace treaties following the First World War fundamentally redefined the borders of Central European countries. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was dissolved, new states (Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) were created, and France gained a leading influence in the region. However, the economic crisis that began in the 1930s made the maintenance of the existing status quo increasingly difficult. To solve the difficulties in Central Europe, two comprehensive French ideas for a settlement – the Briand Plan of 1930 and the Plan Constructif of 1931 – were put forward.

#### ***1.1. The circumstances of the development of the Briand Plan, its points relating to Eastern Europe and its reception***

In 1927, the French Prime Minister Aristide Briand (1862–1932)<sup>3</sup> accepted the honorary presidency of the Pan-European Movement. At the 10<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations on 5 September 1929, he proposed a new form of European cooperation.<sup>4</sup> The essence of his proposal was to create a European Union of 27 European countries. According to his vision, the Member States would retain their

1 Pókecz Kovács, 2015, pp. 122–127.

2 Gazdag, 2019, pp. 7–13.

3 Aristide Briand. French statesman, unknown author, public domain, source of the picture: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristide\\_Briand#/media/File:Aristide\\_Briand.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristide_Briand#/media/File:Aristide_Briand.png).

4 Ormos, 1997, pp. 59–60.



autonomy within the Union, and mainly establish economic cooperation. Briand's speech lacked specific detail and was deliberately vague, as he planned to clarify the details of his plan through bilateral negotiations. Less than a month after Briand's speech at the League of Nations, the New York stock market crisis took place. After a positive reception, Aristide Briand was asked to present his plan in a written form, which was done on 1 May 1930, and the memorandum was sent to the European governments on 17 May that year. The memorandum was entitled '*Memorandum of the French Government on the organisation of the European federal system*'.

However, the written version of the Briand Plan contained significant changes compared to the previous version, due to shifts in the world economic situation and the diplomatic discussions took place since the speech was delivered. In the written material, placed politics before economic interests. The main reason for this was that the customs union would have proved advantageous to the rival Germany, whose industrial products were predominantly sold on European markets. This would have offered Germany the markets of Central Europe. According to Briand, it would also have been inappropriate to prioritise economic issues as it would have made weaker states vulnerable to those with more advanced industries.<sup>5</sup> The memorandum therefore already rejected a customs union, and underlined the participating countries' sovereignty and political independence. The future confederation would have been organised around three main bodies. As a supreme decision-making body, it would have set up a European Conference of representatives of the governments of the Member States, which would have defined the nature of the integration. To avoid the predominance of any particular state, the presidency would have been rotated among the member states on an annual basis. As a second body, a Permanent Political Bureau would have been established, consisting of a selected number of members from the European Conference, with executive and decision-making functions. The third body would have been the Geneva-based Secretariat, responsible for carrying out the administrative tasks of integration.<sup>6</sup> This published draft of the Briand Plan prioritised the political status quo – including in Central Europe – over the resolution of economic difficulties, and therefore met disappointment in Hungary and many other countries. Of the 26 countries, Bulgaria was the only one to support the draft unconditionally, while Belgium, Poland and the Axis countries (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania) basically supported it, while Hungary, Germany and Italy were reluctant to do so.

5 Diószegi, 2014, pp. 51–55.

6 Knapp, 2020, p. 3.

After the rejection of the French proposal by the major European powers, including the British, Italian and German governments, the Briand plan became an unrealistic utopia.<sup>7</sup>

### ***1.2. The Concept of the French ‘Plan Constructif’ (1931)***

Although the Briand plan only remained at the centre of the political debates for a few months, it still triggered changes in European countries’ foreign policy. For Germany, it became apparent that the creation of the federal system of the Briand Plan would hinder the revision of the country’s eastern borders, and thus Berlin’s foreign policy from 1930 onwards focused on economic cooperation. In its response to the Briand Plan, Hungary had already expressed its wish to set up a kind of agricultural cartel to facilitate the sale of surplus agricultural goods in Central Europe. This initiative was put on the League of Nations’ agenda and a Romanian-Austrian-Hungarian consensus was established on the issue. Subsequently, Romania took the initiative to set up a Central European agricultural bloc. The proposal was joined by Poland, and a successful conference was held with the participation of the Baltic States, the Danube countries, Balkan countries and Finland. The conference was followed by a series of meetings between the countries of the agricultural bloc; however, the initiative was ultimately unsuccessful, mainly due to Czechoslovak and French rejection.<sup>8</sup>

The initiatives to create an agricultural bloc raised concerns in Germany, which sought to remedy the worrying economic situation through bilateral agreements. One of the most significant steps towards this was the German-Austrian Customs Union, signed on 19 March 1931, which provided for the dismantling of customs barriers between the two states. The announcement of the German-Austrian customs union caused a ruckus in France. The French government, sensing a threat to its Central European influence, began to draw up a counterplan with a preferential tariff plan at its core. This was carried out under the leadership of André François-Poncet, Deputy State Secretary, in March 1931 as a response to the German-Austrian customs union. The swiftly developed draft was presented to the British government and published in a memorandum on 4 May 1931 under the title ‘*Plan Constructif*’. The memorandum stressed that the German-Austrian customs union was a prelude to the Anschluss, which was prohibited by international treaties. In the constructive plan, the French government drew attention to four problems: the crisis in the cereals trade in Central and Eastern Europe; situation of the industrialised countries; issues of capital and credit; and the special situation of Austria. The memorandum sought to reconcile the difficulties of the agricultural countries with the interests of the industrial ones. To resolve the cereals crisis in Central Europe, it proposed the introduction of a preferential system, supplemented by the creation of a consortium between the countries involved in the sale

7 Ormos, 1997, pp. 60–61.

8 Ormos, 2007, pp. 118–119; Diószegi, 2014, pp. 55–57.

of cereals. This consortium would negotiate with the countries that would buy the cereals. An essential element of the memorandum was the establishment of an agricultural credit union to finance the harvest, by providing the applicants with public loans. The French plan would have placed the supervision of a proposed new bank in the hands of the League of Nations. For other financial operations, such as the granting of loans and financing of production, a banking group supervised by the Bank of France was to be set up. The realisation of these financial plans would have been vital for the countries of Eastern Europe that were struggling with agricultural marketing problems. Regarding the Austrian problem, the Memorandum stressed the unalterable nature of the Treaty of Saint-Germain. On the economic front, it put forward proposals that would have, on the one hand, served the interests of the European cereal-producing countries, and on the other, that of Austria. The French proposal neither took German interests into account, nor provided a satisfactory solution to the problems of overproduction of cereals and lending, and was therefore dropped from the agenda.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Emergence and Objectives of the Tardieu-Plan (1932)



On 2 March 1932, the French Prime Minister and Foreign Minister André Tardieu (1876–1945)<sup>10</sup> sent a memorandum to the British and Italian governments to hasten the relief of the five Danube states – Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia – whose economic situation was close to collapse, mainly due to the difficulties caused by the agricultural crisis. The brief, which featured nearly three pages of text, was called the Tardieu Plan. It was vague on several points, in line with the French diplomatic language of the time, and was also littered with verbose phrases. The memorandum began with a reference to the financial report of

the Committee of Finance of the League of Nations on Hungary and Austria, concluding that both states were close to financial collapse. In its very introduction, the sombre text emphasised the need for the development of the closest possible economic relations between Austria, Hungary and their neighbouring countries in order to regain the confidence of the financial markets. The Tardieu Plan argued

<sup>9</sup> Diószegi, 2014, pp. 58–69.

<sup>10</sup> André Tardieu, French statesman, Agence de presse Meurisse, in: Gallica Digital Library, ID btv1b90554137/f1, public domain, source of the picture: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9\\_Tardieu#/media/File:Andr%C3%A9\\_Tardieu\\_en\\_1928.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_Tardieu#/media/File:Andr%C3%A9_Tardieu_en_1928.jpg).

that the main cause of the situation was the global economic recession, but that the behaviour of the countries of the Danube region had also contributed to the crisis. In the memorandum, the French prime minister clarified that partial improvements would not lead to results and called for a comprehensive plan. The French government, in agreement with the British, proposed the creation of a customs union covering the Danube countries, which would, in their view, also solve a number of economic and political problems. The agreement was to be developed in agreement between the five concerned countries, taking into account the legitimate interests of third countries as far as possible. The French government considered that the prerequisite for economic restructuring was the sorting out of financial issues, followed by the establishment of the five countries' willingness to cooperate and, finally, the definition of economic preferences, conditions and limits. The Memorandum concluded by stating that the French government's intention was to serve European interests and that besides the five Danube States concerned, it was also counting on the Italian and British governments as well.<sup>11</sup>

The development of the French Tardieu Plan was also influenced by Elemér Hantos, an attorney-at-law with an interest in monetary affairs, who was also Secretary of State for Trade in 1926.<sup>12</sup> Hantos drew up a detailed plan for economic cooperation in Central Europe, which he wanted to establish between the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with Poland and Bulgaria as possible candidates.<sup>13</sup> Hantos also presented his plan in the form of a memorandum at the League of Nations meeting in Geneva in 1931. Several sources indicate that the material published by Hantos was included in the Tardieu draft. A German newspaper described Hantos as the 'real father' of the plan, and Czech historian Bohdan Chudoba referred to the plan as the Hantos-Tardieu plan.<sup>14</sup>

After the publication of the memorandum, Tardieu came up with a specific proposal for a customs union. He proposed that Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania should grant each other a 10% tariff reduction and remove existing trade restrictions.<sup>15</sup>

Tardieu was aware that his plan could only be implemented with the help of the British, and so did everything possible to ensure that the London government was on his side. A conference was held in London from 6 to 8 April 1932 to discuss the French proposal.<sup>16</sup> This conference was marked by Franco-German antagonism, but Italy<sup>17</sup>, along with Germany, also rejected the French proposal, whereas Britain

11 Diószegi, 2014, pp. 163–165.

12 Horel, 2011, p. 294.

13 Ormos, 2007, pp. 90–91.

14 Diószegi, 2014, p. 185.

15 Stambrook, 1963, pp. 79.

16 OL K 63. 448/50. Minutes of the London Conference. 6–8 April, 1932.

17 Bagnato, 1997, p. 120. Italian efforts were aimed at preventing Austria and Hungary from becoming dependent on Germany or France.

adopted a policy of benevolent neutrality.<sup>18</sup> The conference thus concluded without any results, and the Tardieu plan practically failed.<sup>19</sup>

### ***2.1. The Impact of the Tardieu-Plan on the Countries of Central Europe***

The Tardieu Plan failed mainly because of the failure of the four great powers (France, Britain, Italy and Germany) to reach a consensus. However, the plan's failure was also because the idea was put forward during the negotiations that the great powers should first reach an agreement over Eastern Europe without the countries concerned, and only then could negotiations with the countries of the Danube region be held. Although the individual countries of the Danube Basin had different views on the Tardieu Plan, they shared the opinion that the Great Powers could not decide their fate without them.

### ***2.2. Czechoslovakia and the Tardieu Plan***

One of the main beneficiaries of the Versailles peace treaties that concluded World War I was the then-nascent Czechoslovak state. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it became the dominant state in the region, mainly owing to its acquisition of a large part of the industry of the defunct Monarchy. As a member of the Little Entente, it was also one of the most important countries in Central Europe from a political point of view, and Prague became France's key ally to counteract the threat of its German neighbourhood. The German aspirations for influence in the Danube basin also alerted Czechoslovak leaders because, as a result of the peace treaties following the First World War, the new republic had nearly 3 million German-speaking citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Following the publication of the Tardieu plan, politicians in Prague expressed their delight at the considerable overlap between the idea of the French Prime Minister's – who maintained good personal relations with the Czech Foreign Minister Beneš – and the Czechoslovak plans. This is evidenced by the opinion of Kamil Krofta, Political Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague, who said: *'The Tardieu plan is really our plan, that is, Beneš's. Its essence is cooperation between the five Central European countries without any interference from the great powers.'*<sup>21</sup>

Although the plan would have primarily served Czechoslovak interests, it was criticised by the leaders in Prague. The Czechoslovak government considered it to be in its interest to strengthen economic cooperation between the Central European states, but rejected the political objectives of the plan. Beneš nevertheless stated that cooperation could lead to servitude or, if it were to lead to some kind of confederation, the Prague government would prefer to reject any such cooperation. Czechoslovakia also was not in favour of the portion of the plan that gave Austria

18 Hamilton, 1997, p. 103.

19 Diószegi, 2014, pp. 198–211.

20 Ibid. pp. 171–172.

21 Ferenčuhová, 1997, p. 15.

and Hungary a prominent role in the settlement plan.<sup>22</sup> Even after the failure of the London Conference and of the Tardieu plan, the Prague government stuck to the principles announced by the French government. This was reaffirmed at the Annual Conference of the Small Entente countries in Belgrade on 12–15 May 1932. They emphasised that cooperation between the five Danube countries would be the basis of their Central European policy, followed by economic cooperation with Italy and Germany. According to Beneš, until this was achieved, the Little Entente was to be considered the core of Central Europe.<sup>23</sup>

### ***2.3. Austria and the Tardieu-Plan***

The greatest impact of the economic crisis was in Austria, where public finances came close to total collapse. France, along with Germany, now sought to extend its influence over Austria, while the Austrians attempted to avoid this, with the Austrian Chancellor Buresch requesting for help from the great powers, through a memorandum published on 16 February 1932. The Tardieu plan was regarded with interest by the Austrian public, as the economic situation was critical; however, Austria could not accept any solution in which Germany was not involved. The Austrian demands were presented to the British Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sir John Simon, on 5 April 1932, calling for preferential treatment for Austrian goods, the rejection of the principle of the maximum preferential tariff and financial restructuring. The preferential treatment of Austria applied mainly to the trade of industrial goods.<sup>24</sup>

### ***2.4. Hungary and the Tardieu-Plan***

After the plan's publication, for a brief period, Hungary became the focus of French political attention.<sup>25</sup> Hungary welcomed the publication of the Tardieu Plan with great anticipation. After the First World War, the central element of Hungary's foreign policy was territorial revision.<sup>26</sup> The improvement of relations with France, a dominant force in European politics and in the Central European region at the time, was also a central issue, given the need to promote Hungarian interests more effectively. István Bethlen, the prime minister who dominated Hungarian political life in the 1920s, had already sought to move closer to Paris from the 1920s onwards. His ambitions were motivated both by the need to counterbalance the German and Italian foreign policy orientation of the time, and the desire to obtain the French financial support necessary for Hungarian economic development.<sup>27</sup> However, Bethlen's efforts to improve Hungarian-French relations were unsuccessful.<sup>28</sup> On 24

22 Diószegi, 2014, pp. 176–178.

23 Ferenčuhová, 1997, p. 29.

24 Kronsteiner, 1997, pp. 65–72; Diószegi, 2014, pp. 181–183.

25 Horel, 2011, p. 84.

26 Stambrook, 1963, p. 69.

27 Erényi, 1933, p. 183.

28 Romsics, 2019, pp. 240–245.



August 1931, Gyula Károlyi, who had been foreign minister since December 1930, succeeded Bethlen, who was forced to resign because of the world economic crisis. Károlyi was reputed to be a Francophile politician. Both French official circles and public opinion welcomed the fact that he did not mention the idea of revision in his first political statements, and he repeatedly confirmed his intention to work towards deepening Hungarian–French relations. However, Károlyi’s friendliness towards France did not change the perception of Hungary in Paris, as Tardieu noted in a letter to the former French Prime Minister Laval on 11 February 1932. In this letter, Tardieu criticised the Hungarian political aspirations to revise the Trianon Treaty, as well as the refusal to reach an agreement with the Czechoslovak government.<sup>29</sup> British policy was more sympathetic to Hungarian policy, since British Foreign Office experts considered Hungary’s excessive weakening of the Trianon Treaty to be a serious mistake. London believed that Hungary should be given economic aid and that Czechoslovakia should be persuaded to prioritise Hungarian grain sales, either by means of a special tariff or by setting a specific quota. The Budapest government also held intensive negotiations with Rome to improve economic relations. On 23 March 1932, Lajos Walkó, Minister of Foreign Affairs, informed the parliamentary finance committee about the Tardieu plan. In his presentation, he emphasised that the industrialised countries of the West were not able to absorb the entire Hungarian agricultural surplus, and therefore economic cooperation between the countries of the Danube basin was essential. At the end of his speech, he noted that ‘...the Hungarian government welcomes the French Prime Minister’s plan and has been in favour of it from the very beginning.’ The Hungarian Foreign Minister summarised the country’s interests in three points. He acknowledged the need for cooperation in the Danube Basin, but emphasised that agricultural products should also be made available on other markets (Swiss, northern Italian, German, French, Polish). Hungary, given its central location, should seek to exploit the advantage of transit transports, and finally, the priority of financial restructuring was highlighted.<sup>30</sup>

However, the Tardieu plan was, rejected by the Hungarian political elite, and the majority of the Parliament adopted the position of former Prime Minister István Bethlen.<sup>31</sup> In his parliamentary speech of 4 May 1932, Bethlen called for Italian–Austrian–Hungarian cooperation instead of the Danube countries’ cooperation, inspired by Paris and Prague. Relations between Bethlen and the Francophile prime minister Gyula Károlyi became strained, leading Károlyi to ask Horthy for his dismissal in July 1932.<sup>32</sup> At the time, the governor did not accept Károlyi’s resignation, but his government was finally forced to resign on 1 October 1932.

29 Horel, 1997, p. 78.

30 Diószegi, 2014, pp. 183–187.

31 Bethlen, 1932, pp. 352–362.

32 Romsics, 2019, pp. 416–418.

### 2.5. Standpoint of Yugoslavia and Romania regarding the Tardieu-Plan

Yugoslavia was an ally of France; however, its economic interests were linked to Germany. France provided the Belgrade government with many loans, but its exports to Germany were four times its volume of the trade with France.<sup>33</sup> This double dependence limited the scope for Yugoslav politicians. The Belgrade government welcomed the news of the Tardieu plan with cautious optimism and, after hearing its ideas, declared its political content undesirable. The plan was officially supported by the Yugoslav government, although it was not considered satisfactory from an economic point of view. The government's basic position was that the industrialised countries should open their markets to agricultural products from the Danube region and provide new loans to assist the Central European countries that had been placed in a difficult financial situation by the crisis.<sup>34</sup>

Romania's situation and position was similar to that of Yugoslavia. The Bucharest leadership maintained strong trade relations with Germany and was therefore concerned about participation in the French plan.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, they were resented because, in addition to the Lesser Entente countries, France also offered a solution to Austria and Hungary. They were concerned that the Tardieu plan would favour Austria and Hungary, thus undermining Romania's prominent role in the Central European system established after the First World War. The Romanian government also urged that the negotiations should be limited to the countries of the Danube basin without the Great Powers. After pressure from London made it obvious that helping Austria and Hungary was an important aspect of the settlement, Romania, similarly to Czechoslovakia, engaged in delaying tactics.<sup>36</sup>

We can therefore conclude that during the years of economic crisis, several French plans were put forward for the integration of Central Europe. The Briand Plan, published in 1930, presented a general vision for a European political settlement, but contained neither economic solutions nor proposals focusing on the specific characteristics of the Eastern European states. The 1931 '*Plan constructif*', the antithesis of the German-Austrian customs union, focused on solving the agricultural crisis and financial crises in Central Europe, but did not take into account German interests, and was soon dropped from the agenda. The most detailed plan for Central Europe was published by French Prime Minister Tardieu in 1932. However, its fate was clearly sealed by the lack of agreement between the major powers, particularly German and Italian opposition, as well as the lack of support from several countries along the Danube, including Austria, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. The Tardieu Plan was drawn up in February 1932, published in March, and by April, it had practically failed. Along with it, the French idea of *Europe Centrale* was consigned to the repository of ideas that had no rational basis for implementation.<sup>37</sup>

33 Bled, 1997, p. 190.

34 Pavlovic, 1997, pp. 33–38; Diószegi, 2014, pp. 178–180.

35 Bariety, 1997, p. 10.

36 Berindei, 1997, pp. 55–56; Diószegi, 2014, pp. 180–181.

37 Ormos, 2007, p. 131.

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