



# The Three Seas Initiative:

an original concept  
of regional cooperation  
in different approaches

ed. Agnieszka  
Orzelska-Stączek

**3SI**  


**ISP**  
**PAN**

Institute of Political Studies  
of the Polish Academy  
of Sciences

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## Foreword

As the Three Seas Initiative is approaching its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is heartening to witness a steady increase in academic discourse surrounding the initiative. While the subject of the 3SI remains a relatively niche topic in the regional scientific ecosystem, the growing number of related scientific literature serves as a promising development. This collective monograph, aimed at addressing existing gaps in academic literature and providing valuable insights into the 3SI for a broader audience, represents a concerted effort to enhance understanding and awareness of the initiative among diverse stakeholders.

The monograph illuminates several key trends, including varied political engagements observed across different countries involved in the 3SI, spanning from enthusiastic endorsement to cautious skepticism. Moreover, it points out to a notable emphasis on infrastructure development and economic cooperation as the driving rationale among the participating states of this framework, also underscoring its multifaceted nature, diverse perspectives and common interests that shape its trajectory. The significance of collaborative efforts and diplomatic engagement in advancing the goals of the 3SI and promoting regional stability and prosperity is highlighted as a prerequisite for the success of the 3SI. Through a nuanced exploration of these



trends, the monograph seeks to contribute meaningfully to the scholarly discourse surrounding regional cooperation initiatives in Europe and beyond.

In this context it is worth noting a very opportune coincidence of the publication of this monograph with the conclusion of the Lithuanian chairmanship of the 3SI, culminating in the 3SI Summit and Business Forum, that took place on April 11, 2024, in Vilnius. Lithuania has taken great pride in coordinating various activities within the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) in the runup to the Vilnius Summit, with a steadfast commitment to both consolidating and expanding the initiative's reach while forging stronger ties with strategic partners. Rooted in a vision of fostering regional cooperation and resilience, the main political priorities of the Lithuanian Chairmanship of the 3SI were aimed at fostering regional infrastructure connectivity, aligning the 3SI with EU policies, nurturing transatlantic relations and expanding relations to strategic partners as well as advocating for Ukraine's integration into the European Union.

Core to the 3SI's mission is the well-known objective of enhancing infrastructure connectivity along the North-South axis of Central Europe, focusing on key, traditional sectors of transport, energy, and digitalization. By fostering closer ties and promoting collaboration in these critical areas, the initiative seeks to strengthen regional bonds and contribute to the resilience of Europe, thereby underscoring its fundamental geopolitical significance in an increasingly interconnected, yet also increasingly volatile and unpredictable world.

The recently convened 3SI Vilnius Summit and Business Forum heralded positive outcomes, epitomized by the adoption of a declaration reaffirming unwavering commitment to the fundamental goals of the 3SI. Noteworthy was an impressive participation of the regional business community in the proceedings

of the Business Forum and a significant number of side events, that broke new grounds and served as a testimony of the commercially driven nature of the initiative, also involving civil society elements, outlying the potential of the Initiative to spur economic growth and prosperity across the region.

Furthermore, discussions at the Vilnius Business Forum shed light on the pivotal role of Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction in shaping a comprehensive and sustainable regional landscape. Inclusion of priority infrastructure projects from Ukraine and Moldova into the priority projects list of the 3SI further underscores initiative's dedication to supporting associated participating states and fostering inclusive development across the region.

Accession of Japan as the 4th Strategic Partner to the 3SI at the Vilnius summit signified a momentous development, with heightened expectations for increased global cooperation among like-minded partners on joint connectivity projects. Moreover, the intent to establish a successor infrastructure investment fund, announced in Vilnius underscored the continued commitment of the initiative to address pressing regional infrastructure funding gaps and promote sustainable development.

Throughout Lithuania's tenure as the chair of the 3SI, concerted efforts were directed towards shoring the support to the consolidation of the North-South connectivity axis, fostering closer alignment with EU policies, and deepening partnerships.

As the 3SI ecosystem continues to expand and evolve, with numerous sidetracks, bottom-up initiatives, and outreach efforts, contributing to its increased visibility, momentum is ripe for bringing the Initiative to a new level, with a view to the upcoming anniversary Summit in Poland. Harnessing the potential of the Initiative to contribute to regional resilience, increased military mobility, innovation, acquiring technological edge and most notably, to support Ukraine's

integration into the EU and into regional networks should remain a cornerstone of the initiative's agenda. It would manifest the achievement of a steadfast commitment of the 3SI to advance democratic values, foster regional stability and prosperity, fill European infrastructure gaps, and meet regional connectivity goals.

*Gediminas Varvuolis*

Ambassador for connectivity and the 3SI, MFA of Lithuania

# Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is an original cooperation project involving, at present, thirteen EU member states. The project focuses on improving connectivity between the north and south of the eastern part of the EU through the development of infrastructure for transportation, energy, and digitalization. The main motive for establishing the 3SI was a pragmatic desire to strengthen the economy of Central Europe.

This monograph aims to enrich the current body of knowledge about regional cooperation and to discuss the current state of research on the 3SI in various academic disciplines and from various national perspectives. The main research questions that the contributors have sought to answer concern knowledge of the 3SI. What is the current state of knowledge in regard to the 3SI? What are the main sources of this knowledge? What are the methods of acquiring data about the 3SI? How do the states of the region differ in this regard? Another major research question concerns narratives about the 3SI, its image, and how it is perceived in particular states. There are significant variations in approach to the 3SI between the 3SI states and even within the states themselves. This monograph helps to explain these differences.

The review of academic literature on the 3SI presented here reflects different approaches to the topic and varying levels of interest within the region's academic societies. The authors turned to official documents and media-based research as their main data-collection

technique. Interviews also constituted an important category of the collected data. Qualitative research was used, as this method was the best for finding credible answers to the research questions. In regard to levels of analysis, most of the authors based their research on state-level analysis, with reference to the international level as well.

The important added value of this monograph is a review of the most important official documents and literature concerning the 3SI from the majority of the participating states, in the languages of those countries, by researchers who know the local political, social, and cultural context. This approach has ensured the authenticity and originality of the work. It is important to note that each of the thirteen 3SI states has its own language, and the 3SI documents are also generated in English. The primary sources on the 3SI have a different form in each state, as there are different state institutions responsible for 3SI cooperation. So far, no systematic collection of primary sources on the 3SI is accessible. The present work's main contribution lies in filling a research gap by identifying the most relevant sources on the 3SI in most 3SI states.

\* \* \*

It should be noted that finding authors in different 3SI states to co-write this monograph was a task in itself. The list of authors comes from searching for the best specialists and inviting them to academic debates at conferences, seminars, study visits, and other scholarly events occurring within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative Research Center project. The events gave us access to a wider network of researchers. We wish to thank all the panel, seminar, and conference participants, who provided us with valuable insights during discussions.

The following academic events are worthy of particular mention: the panel titled "The Three Seas Initiative as a Research Subject: Exploring Regional Cooperation from Different Academic

Perspectives,”<sup>1</sup> which was part of the 3SI Local Congress in Lublin in 2023; a scholarly conference titled “Conclusions from the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Bucharest: The Use of Scientific Research for Regional Cooperation,”<sup>2</sup> organized as a side event of the 3SI Summit in Bucharest in September 2023; and a seminar at the ISP PAN in Warsaw titled “Status of the Three Seas Initiative from the International Law, International Relations, and Political Science Perspective”<sup>3</sup> in January 2024. In Vilnius, the team of the 3SI Research Center had the privilege of organizing, in cooperation with the Lithuanian Academy of Science and the University of Łódź, the international conference “The Three Seas Initiative: One Concept, Different Approaches?” which served as a platform for diverse scholars to deepen their knowledge of regional cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Such events provided an excellent opportunity to conduct academic discussions and to verify our research results.

In summary, preparation of the monograph involved three main stages. In the first, we worked on the concept and searched for scholars from various states and academic disciplines whose research interests included regional cooperation. We invited political scientists, economists, historians, sociologists, lawyers, a professor of art, and other academics, from all the 3SI states, to participate in the project. The second stage included data collection, data analysis, and a series of study visits, seminars, and conferences organized in the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Romania, Lithuania, Greece, and Poland. We invited participants from all 3SI states and also from

1 For more information about the event: <https://3si.politic.edu.pl/>.

2 *Ibidem*.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 For more information about the event: <https://www.lma.lt/news/2225/645/International-Scientific-Conference-The-Three-Seas-Initiative-One-Concept-Different-Approaches>. A complete list of scholarly events organized by the 3SI Research Center is on our website: <https://3si.politic.edu.pl/>.

some other states to join our project. Finally, the third stage involved collecting the articles, a review procedure, and the editorial process. We collected articles from scholars from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania. These are eight states from different parts of the 3SI region, with various approaches to regional cooperation in Central Europe. The articles reflect different points of view regarding the 3SI concept itself, its foundation, origins, aims, and the role particular states play in it. Together, the texts provide a comprehensive answer to the main research questions. The monograph gives a comparative perspective on the topic.

We hope the monograph will be interesting and inspiring for those scholars and researchers of regional cooperation in Central Europe who are its main addressees. However, we are convinced that it may also be of interest to diplomats, political decision-makers, businessmen, students, and those who wish to enrich their knowledge of the topic. The book could be an excellent starting point for further discussion and academic debate.

The opinions presented are those of the authors themselves; they do not represent the official position of any affiliated institution or the position of the 3SI Research Center at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

\* \* \*

The monograph consists of a foreword, an introduction, eight articles arranged alphabetically according to name of country (in English), conclusions, literature, notes about the authors and index of names. I am very grateful to H. E. Gediminas Varvuolis, Ambassador-at-Large for Connectivity & the 3SI from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, for sharing his insights on the 3SI in the foreword. In April 2024, Lithuania successfully organized the 3SI Summit in Vilnius and the 3SI Business Forum, with more than twenty side

events, which aimed to enhance regional cooperation in various dimensions. Lithuania then passed the 3SI presidency to Poland, where the next 3SI summit is planned.

In the first chapter, “Croatia and the Three Seas Initiative: Harvesting the Geographical Position?” Ivan Koprić and Iva Lopizić explore the role of Croatia in the 3SI. They set out the views of Croatia’s political leadership, explain various narratives on the Initiative, and examine the institutional framework. Their paper also includes a review of Croatian literature on the 3SI. This is a comprehensive, synthetic, and valuable contribution to the body of knowledge about Croatia’s role in the 3SI.

According to Vít Dostál, author of the chapter “The Czech Republic and the Three Seas Initiative,” the Czech Republic’s approach to the 3SI is often considered cautious or passive. He explains this approach by showing how domestic and external factors shape Czech regional policy. The article is based on official documents, speeches, and interviews with actors involved in the 3SI. Dostál argues that external conditions and the desire to adapt the Czech position to the views of other vital partners are crucial in determining the Czech approach to the 3SI.

The third chapter, by Matthew Crandall, is titled “The Three Seas Initiative and Estonia after the Outbreak of the War in Ukraine.” Crandall argues that the 3SI has not been given much attention, even though the main priorities of the 3SI align with Estonia’s vital national interest (including in regard to energy and digital security). The consequences of the war in Ukraine may change the place of the 3SI in Estonian policy. The author looks at whether the 3SI aligns with Estonia’s interests and evaluates Estonia’s attempts to influence the 3SI to improve the fit.

Miklós Mitrovits, in the chapter “The Hungarian Reception of the Three Seas Initiative in Academic Publications,” argues that the 3SI has not generated much public response, political debate, or reflection in Hungary. This assessment is based on Mitrovits’s



comprehensive examination of all publications and academic articles on the 3SI published in Hungarian or written in English by Hungarian authors since 2015. He describes the level of general knowledge about the 3SI in Hungary, existing reservations about its format, and the reasons for these. As a historian, he puts emphasis on the historical context of regional cooperation.

Andrzej Pukszto and Robertas Eismontas argue, in the chapter “Lithuania and the Three Seas Initiative: from Scepticism to Leadership,” that Lithuania was initially quite sceptical about the 3SI but later became one of its most active participants. They emphasize that from the Lithuanian point of view, the 3SI is a format for economic cooperation but not for political or security cooperation. The EU context is of primary significance for cooperation.

In most states, the 3SI is not a popular research subject. Nevertheless, the number of articles and monographs on the 3SI in Poland has been growing dynamically. Łukasz Lewkowicz and Marlena Gołębiowska examine the academic and expert discourse on the 3SI in Poland and conclude that the 3SI has “not only catalysed a new discourse in Poland regarding international relations in the region but has also emerged as a reference point for understanding and interpreting the evolving landscape of Central Europe by encapsulating both its challenges and opportunities.”

Romania’s position is examined in “The Three Seas Initiative: A Romanian Perspective” by Mihai Sebe, who studies official statements, source documents, and literature on the 3SI to elucidate Romania’s approach to the Initiative. He emphasizes that Romania was the first country to host a second 3SI summit. The results of the first, held in 2018, dynamized 3SI cooperation. The second, in 2023, renewed interest in the Initiative among Romanian scholars.

The next chapter focuses on Slovakia. In “Agenda Setter or Agenda Follower? Slovakia’s Perception of the 3SI and Other Regional Formats,” Tomáš Strážay concludes that the 3SI is a subject almost unknown to the public and absent from academic discourse.

In Strážay's opinion, Slovakia is a "hesitating" 3SI participating state rather than an active agenda setter, and he explores the reasons for Slovakia's passive stance.

The final part of the book includes conclusions, literature, notes about the authors and index of names.

The monograph is part of a project titled "The Three Seas Initiative Research Center," which was inaugurated in 2022 at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and is conducted there by a team of researchers. The project aims to produce scholarly research and promote knowledge about cooperation among the thirteen 3SI participating states, which are all members of the EU.

\* \* \*

I would like to express my gratitude to all the authors, from many different states, who contributed to this work. The foreword by H. E. Gediminas Varvuolis, Ambassador-at-Large for Connectivity & the 3SI from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, is a unique added value for which we are grateful and feel honored. The monograph certainly could not have been completed without the support of the editorial committee, which included Prof. Piotr Bajda, Dr. Jan Muś, Julia Dobrowolska, and Jędrzej Błaszczak. I would also like to thank the whole great 3SI Research Center team, all the project participants with whom we had the pleasure of cooperating, and Wydawnictwo ISP PAN, with Elżbieta Krzewska and Agata Sawicka-Korgol, who provided valuable guidance along the way. The editors and reviewers have done much to improve the monograph. Finally, I would like to thank the staff of the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences for their support.

I hope the work will inspire further research on regional cooperation within the European Union, particularly concerning the 3SI.

*Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, editor*



**Ivan Koprić**

Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Croatia

ORCID: 0000-0002-9086-6937

e-mail: ivan.kopric@pravo.hr

**Iva Lopižić**

Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Croatia

ORCID: 0000-0002-1157-0602

e-mail: iva.lopizic@pravo.unizg.hr

## **Croatia and the Three Seas Initiative: Harvesting the Geographical Position?**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the role Croatia has played in the creation and development of the Three Seas Initiative. It maps the political leadership's views and narratives in regard to the Initiative and analyzes the institutional framework for the Initiative's projects, while emphasizing the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development. After a brief review of the projects Croatia has undertaken within the Initiative, the paper comments on the role of Croatian counties and their engagement in the Initiative. The paper includes a review of literature on the topic from the Croatian perspective and in regard to Croatia's general position within the Initiative.

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative–Croatia, institutional framework, political narratives, transborder regional cooperation, research mapping, Adriatic, European Union

## Introduction—Croatian Participation in the Three Seas Initiative

Croatia played the central role in founding the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The idea for Baltic-Adriatic cooperation was promoted by the then president of the Republic of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, during the UN General Assembly session in the autumn of 2015, and was strongly supported by the Polish president, Andrzej Duda. Later, when Bulgaria and Romania joined the Initiative, it was renamed the Baltic-Adriatic-Black Sea Initiative or the Three Seas Initiative.

In Croatia, the Initiative was publicly promoted at the first summit of young political leaders from the 3SI countries. The summit, which was organized by a non-governmental organization, iDEMO, and its president, Simona Gotovac, was called “New Europe: Europe of Ideas” and was held in Zagreb in October 2015 under the auspices of the then president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, and the mayor of the City of Zagreb, Milan Bandić.<sup>1</sup>

The first annual 3SI summit, “Strengthening Europe: Connecting North and South,” was held on August 25–26, 2016, in Dubrovnik, Croatia and resulted in the signing of a joint declaration by the representatives of 12 transitioning, post-socialist EU member states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria), plus the Austrian representative. Seven summits were held after the first one: in Warsaw, Bucharest, Ljubljana, Tallinn, Sofia, Riga, and (again) Bucharest.

The 3SI’s partners and supporters are the United States, Germany, and the European Union. A number of other countries and institutions have shown interest in observing, communicating with, or cooperating with this political platform, including China, Japan, Turkey, South Korea, India, and Taiwan. In September 2023, Greece joined

1 <https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/grabar-kitarovic-otvorila-summit-mladih-politickih-lidera-novih-clanica-eu-a/>.

the Initiative, and Ukraine and Moldova were granted the status of associated states at the 3SI summit in Bucharest. There has been a weak voice favoring Finnish accession to the 3SI, but there has not been any official Finnish expression of interest in the prospect (Pizzolo, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental ideas behind the Initiative include the establishment of better transport connections, infrastructural connectivity, and digital communications; the improvement of energy supply arrangements; the promotion of economic growth and cooperation opportunities among the 3SI countries and their industries; and support for innovative climate-protection instruments. The 3SI countries primarily intend to close the infrastructure gap that exists in comparison to Western European countries. However, there are other potential fields of cooperation, such as educational reforms, research and development, the rule of law, and so forth (Baeva Motusic, 2017).

The core of these ideas actually followed those in the Atlantic Council's report "Completing Europe, from the North-South Corridor to Energy, Transportation, and Telecommunication Union" issued in November 2014 (Zbińkowski, 2019), which seemed to be an inspirational document for the establishment of the 3SI. However, profound changes in the general situation of the countries of the 3SI generated new challenges over time.<sup>3</sup> The most recent issues to have been debated within the 3SI framework are illegal migrations, cyberattacks, food transport and supply safety, the use of the energy supply for political purposes, and so forth. Some of these problems were the focus of a ministerial meeting involving Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania in New York in the early autumn of 2023.<sup>4</sup>

2 Cf. also <https://ine.org.pl/en/outcomes-of-the-2023-bucharest-three-seas-initiative-summit/>.

3 Cf. <https://www.cea-policy.hr/inicijativa-tri-mora/#>.

4 <https://mvep.gov.hr/press/nikad-vaznija-inicijativa-triju-mora-glavna-tema-ministarskog-sastanka-kvadrilaterale/259874>.

Although security reasoning had been behind the Initiative since the very beginning (Żurawski vel Grajewski, 2017; Zbińkowski, 2019; Lewkowicz, 2020), security concerns and promotion of the 3SI countries' common safety were high on the 3SI agenda, particularly after the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 (Kutsenko, 2021; Schwartz, 2023). For some authors, Croatia's participation in the 3SI might be seen as a component of the country's search for a more close-knit security arrangement (cf. Szerencsés, 2021).

For realization of the 3SI infrastructure and economic goals, the 3SI Investment Fund was established and officially registered in May 2019. It has been fully operational since February 27, 2020. So far, contributions to the Fund have been made by Poland, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Croatia, and Slovenia. In 2022, the United States International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) expressed a wish to contribute to the 3SI Investment Fund, but it has not yet done so. Thus far, the Fund has invested or promised to invest in seven 3SI infrastructure projects. For strengthening its role, the 3SI would need to attract additional financial resources from participating countries, partners, and the private sector. Because this is not an easy task, the establishment of a second investment fund, the Innovation Fund, with a focus on green infrastructure, was encouraged at the 2023 Bucharest Summit.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from investment funds, several organizational forms developed during the last eight years have become components of the 3SI institutional bedrock. The first two are the Business Forum, which Romania initially organized during the 2018 Bucharest Summit, and the Network of Chambers of Commerce, which the Joint Statement established during the Bucharest Summit. Estonia launched the Parliamentary Forum in 2021 and the Civil Society Forum was

5 <https://ine.org.pl/en/outcomes-of-the-2023-bucharest-three-seas-initiative-summit/>.

launched during the 2022 Riga Summit.<sup>6</sup> At the 2023 Bucharest Summit, the 3SI Business and Development Association, as a civil sector organization with headquarters in Brussels, was inaugurated, and the Joint Chamber of Commerce was announced.<sup>7</sup> Local governments and regions have also been cooperating and debating the 3SI prospects within their forums.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its serious rationale, the Initiative has provoked criticism and controversies, too. While some have praised it as a valuable project to accelerate the development of infrastructure and the economic growth of Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, others have seen it as a purely geopolitical recurrence of Polish statesman Józef Piłsudski's idea of the *Międzymorze* (Intermarium) (Mierzejewski, 2017; Dijanović, 2019, 2022), or as a US Trojan horse that is to divide and weaken Western and Eastern Europe (Zubović, 2019). Russia has been observing and analyzing the development of the 3SI as well (cf. Samoylovskaya, 2017; etc.).

Despite many statements claiming that the Initiative focuses on the energy, transport, and digital connectiveness of the participating countries, wider economic (Čavrak, 2018), geostrategic, and geopolitical considerations are inevitable. The desire to reduce the energy dependence of the 3SI countries, and the whole EU, on Russia, through the domination of east-west pipelines and the development of the north-south energy supply infrastructure, is among the most frequently mentioned arguments favoring 3SI cooperation. Some commentators see the 3SI "as a potential counterbalance to China's interest in participating in regional infrastructure projects as part of its global Belt and Road Initiative" (Garding & Mix, 2021).

6 Economic cooperation was supported through various other innovations, such as the common CEEplus or Three Seas Index, which was launched in September 2019 during the Economic Forum in Krynica (Lewkowicz, 2020).

7 <https://3seaseurope.com/bucharest/>.

8 <https://www.gov.pl/web/hrvatska/ii-three-seas-initiative-forum-of-regions>.



Other geopolitical arguments are also discussed in the relevant literature. Not only have the United States and the European Union kept their eyes on the Initiative, China is also among the most interested observers of the results, having especially in mind the “potential synergies between China and CEE countries” (cf. Kotarski & Kostanišić, 2016). Germany had had a reserved attitude towards the Initiative, probably because of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline,<sup>9</sup> but then it requested partnership status with the 3SI before the 2018 Bucharest Summit (Zbińkowski, 2019). The United Arab Emirates are among those that have tried to make as strong ties with the 3SI countries as they could (cf. Krzymowski, 2021).

The number and structure of the participating countries, their significant common interests and interesting geographical positions, the size of the new alliance in terms of its territory and population, economic and developmental potentials, energy supply dynamics, and historical and other factors linked to the 3SI, demonstrate the strategic potentials and risks of such a politically induced arrangement. The rising interest in the 3SI of China, Japan, and other countries, as well as of international organizations, indicates that not only its potential but also its spirited nature and unpredictable development may cause it to become globally relevant (cf. Ping & Zuokui, 2017; Bajda, 2020; Grochmalski et al., 2020; Wójtowicz, 2020; Xin, 2021; Sprūds & Vargulis, 2022; Anghelescu & Oneaşcă, 2023; etc.).

Critics emphasize certain 3SI weak points and obstacles, such as the low attractiveness of 3SI investment funds for private sector companies, corruption (Zawadzki, 2020), slow 3SI institutional development, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the modest or weak support of some participating countries, the insufficient participation of national parliaments, the low level of academic and research interest, the weak support of the civil sector, citizens’ low

9 Because of Grabar-Kitarović’s active role in the 3SI, it seemed that German officials were angry with Croatia (see, for example, Rončević et al., 2020).

level of knowledge about the 3SI, the lack of a common identity, cultural and linguistic barriers (Čavrak & Šmaguc, 2018), and various other problems.

Different attitudes towards the Initiative and assessments of its relevance for the realization of Croatian strategic goals have also been present in Croatian politics and foreign policy, influencing the country's participation in the 3SI's activities as well as in its institutional development and projects.

The Croatian business community participates, with modest interest, in 3SI-related activities, especially in its Business Forum. Private and state companies connected with the main 3SI sectors have significantly stronger links with the Initiative.

Unlike in politics and business, the general public in Croatia is far from being well-informed about 3SI matters (Samardžija, 2023), though the changing security situation and new geopolitical circumstances have boosted public interest in the Initiative (Boromisla & Samardžija, 2022).

## **Views and Narratives of Croatia's Political Leadership on the Initiative**

There have been two phases in the development of the Croatian political leadership's views and narratives on the 3SI. The demarcation event between them was the presidential election of 2019/2020, in which Zoran Milanović won in the second round, on January 5, 2020. He then replaced Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović as the Croatian politician most enthusiastic about the 3SI. Her presidential term had been characterized by the initiation and robust promotion of the Initiative. Opposition to her 3SI enthusiasm was one of the main points of Milanović's election campaign. What is even more interesting is how the government, led by the same prime minister before and after the 2019/2020 presidential election, changed its view and narrative on 3SI-related issues.

The key political positions for 3SI-related matters are the president of the republic, the prime minister, the president of the Croatian Parliament, and the minister of foreign and European affairs.

The president of the Republic is directly elected for a five-year term of office. The constitutional powers of the president are concentrated in the fields of foreign policy, defense, and security. Despite the fact that real political power lies mainly with the government, which is appointed by and accountable to Parliament, Grabar-Kitarović seized a significant part of the foreign policy field during her presidential term and directed almost all her efforts into putting the 3SI into operation and then promoting and defending it.

For contextualizing the development of 3SI-related issues in Croatia, all the politicians in the above-mentioned positions need to be listed, along with their political affiliations. There are two dominant political blocks in Croatia, with the right-wing block having been much more successful since the country gained independence. From the time independence was proclaimed, 14 governments have been formed, and the Croatian Democratic Community (CDC) has been the dominant party in all but three (two in 2000–2003 and one in 2011–2016). After Tuđman's long rule during the 1990s, within the semi-presidential constitutional framework, only one presidential candidate from the CDC, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (2015–2020) was elected in the period after the constitutional amendments of 2000.

Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović's presidential term commenced on February 19, 2015 and ended on February 18, 2020, when Zoran Milanović's term began. During the first year of Grabar-Kitarović's term, until January 22, 2016, Zoran Milanović served as prime minister of the SDP-led government (2011–2016). The next prime minister was Tihomir Orešković (Most), who served only from January 22 to October 19, 2016. Since then, for more than seven years, the prime minister has been Andrej Plenković (CDC).

Josip Leko (SDP) was president of the Croatian Parliament until December 28, 2015, when Željko Reiner took office (HDZ). From October 14, 2016 to May 5, 2017, Božo Petrov (Most) was the speaker of parliament. Gordan Jandroković (HDZ) has been the parliamentary speaker from May 5, 2017 till now. The long-serving vice-president and former president of the Croatian Parliament, Željko Reiner, has also played an active role at 3SI events. Some members of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, such as Davor Ivo Stier, a former Croatian foreign affairs minister, have been active in 3SI-related activities.

In total, five foreign affairs ministers served during the two presidential terms since February 2015. They are Vesna Pusić (HNS; until January 22, 2016), Miro Kovač (HDZ; January 22, 2016 to October 19, 2016), Davor Ivo Stier (HDZ; October 19, 2016 to June 19, 2017), Marija Burić Pejčinović (HDZ; June 19, 2017 to July 19, 2019), and Gordan Grlić Radman (HDZ; since July 19, 2019).

### **The first phase: 2015–2020**

As stated, the 3SI was strongly backed by the then president of the Republic of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who won the presidential election as a member of the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Moreover, Croatia hosted the first 3SI summit, which was held in Dubrovnik in 2016. In opening the summit, Grabar-Kitarović emphasized the importance of the Initiative and described the area between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black seas as “the lifeblood” of Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Grabar-Kitarović’s strong commitment and serious attitude toward the Initiative were also expressed in her appointing a special

10 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/predsjednica-na-dubrovnik-forumu-prostor-jadrana-baltika-i-crnog-mora-zila-je-kucavica-europe-4643141>, Jutarnji list, August 26, 2016.

advisor and coordinator for the 3SI in May 2016. However, two years later, in October 2018, he was relieved of duty at his own request.<sup>11</sup> Grabar-Kitarović decided not to appoint a new advisor but to transfer the 3SI-related tasks to the presidential Cabinet for Foreign and European Affairs, which was an organizational unit of the Office of the President of the Republic.

The President's engagement in the Initiative included participation in the 3SI summits held in Warsaw (2017), Bucharest (2018), and Ljubljana (2019), in a series of bilateral meetings with other 3SI country representatives, and in many other important international events.

Grabar-Kitarović was extremely active in defending the 3SI in her foreign policy activities. In October 2017, she visited Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, where she tried to keep the focus on the economic cooperation of Croatia and Russia. She also stated that "it is impossible to address many of the issues on the global stage without Russia" and placed an emphasis on "security issues on the European continent, especially in Southeast Europe, and on global security issues in which Russia plays an important role."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, on April 10, 2019, she met the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang during his official visit to Croatia. At their meeting, Premier Li is reported to have said that "China is willing to strengthen the alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Croatia's Three Seas Initiative (3SI)."<sup>13</sup>

11 Decision on the dismissal of Vito Turšić from the position of director of the presidential Advisory Council of the President of the Republic of Croatia and the appointment of an advisor to the President of the Republic of Croatia as coordinator of the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Initiative (Official Gazette, 43/16).

12 <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/politics/president-meets-with-putin-in-sochi/>.

13 [http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2019/04/11/content\\_281476603936128.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2019/04/11/content_281476603936128.htm).

Highly illustrative of her view on the 3SI was the statement she made at the Atlantic Council's Global Forum in Warsaw on July 7, 2017: "This is an initiative that is not aimed against anyone. Not against the European Union, not against Germany, not against Russia; this is not an American Trojan horse in Central Europe," she said. "This is an initiative for better living standards for all of our citizens and the competitiveness of our economies, which will contribute to the cohesion of the European Union as a whole and which will, I believe, contribute to the competitiveness of the European Union as well."<sup>14</sup>

Grabar-Kitarović considers the 3SI to be a great success of her presidential term. In her concluding presidential statement, issued a few days before the end of her term, she assessed the 3SI to be a "quality tool for strengthening Croatia's foreign policy position, especially in Central Europe and the Mediterranean" (Frlan Gašparović, 2020). Shortly after the transition of power to the newly elected president, Zoran Milanović, she invited him to support Croatia's participation in the 3SI, because it is "one of the most important initiatives in Europe and the European Union."<sup>15</sup>

During the same period, the attitude toward the 3SI of the Croatian government, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, was relatively passive, without stronger engagement in the 3SI's activities. Moreover, the media speculated that the prime minister "does not actually support the Initiative" or that he was even "against the Initiative," and highlighted the theme of the 3SI as one of the ten greatest disputes between the president and the prime minister.<sup>16</sup>

14 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/private-sector-support-sought-for-three-seas-initiative/>.

15 <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/politics/three-seas-initiative-3/>.

16 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/od-veleposlanika-preko-tajnog-dokumenta-o-putu-u-ameriku-do-sukera-i-pozara-deset-tocaka-prijepora-izmedu-plenkovica-i-grabar-kitarovic-6385655>.

However, more realistically, in his capacity as prime minister he was unconcerned with the 3SI and left it to the ministers connected with 3SI sectors, the relevant business associations, such as the Croatian Chamber of Economy, and the then president, Grabar-Kitarović, who devoted much of her energy to the 3SI's development and institutional evolution.<sup>17</sup>

However, it seems the government adhered to Plenković's general assessment of the 3SI as being "good [for Croatia] for several reasons" related to politics, the economy, the energy supply, transport, and so forth.<sup>18</sup> Thus, during a videoconference of the 3SI foreign ministers on June 30, 2020, a state secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Andreja Metelko-Zgombić, confirmed that the Croatian government "continues to follow the path established by the Dubrovnik Declaration of 2016" and was committed to the 3SI goals.<sup>19</sup>

In the same period, the main opposition party, the SDP, was openly opposed to the 3SI. The then SDP president, Davor Bernardić, said that support for the 3SI was "a silly idea," because "the Adriatic is enough for Croatia."<sup>20</sup>

### **The second phase: 2020 onwards**

During the presidential election campaign of 2019, Zoran Milanović, as the left-wing Social-Democratic Party (SDP) candidate, was

17 See, for example: <https://mingor.gov.hr/vijesti/forum-inicijative-triju-morastaknuo-vaznost-digitalizacije-gospodarstva/6401>.

18 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/premijer-plenkovic-nastavit-cemo-s-realizacijom-ciljeva-iz-nacionalnog-programa-reformi-usmjerenim-jacanju-gospodarstva/21863>.

19 <https://mvpep.gov.hr/print.aspx?id=190876&url=print>.

20 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/suverenisticki-zaokret-sdp-a-politicki-koncept-koji-najcesce-koristi-desnica-bit-ce-temeljna-odrednica-socijal-demokrata-na-europskim-izborima-8385755>.

opposed to Grabar-Kitarović, who was campaigning for a second mandate, on the basis—among other issues—of her enthusiasm for the 3SI.<sup>21</sup> Milanović classified the 3SI as “a parade” (Frlan Gašparović, 2020).

He argued against the 3SI on such grounds and maintained a specific, openly 3SI-negative narrative even after being elected as the new president—although shortly after the inauguration ceremony, he had said he would not obstruct the Initiative but would rather follow its development with interest (Frlan Gašparović, 2020).

Later, Milanović’s rhetoric re-escalated, with a consequent huge shift in the Croatian political leadership’s narrative in regard to the 3SI. President Milanović was inclined to describe the 3SI as “useless” and “potentially dangerous for the country because of the possibility of provoking the resentment of Berlin and Moscow.” The president emphasized that “it is stupid, and harmful for Croatia,”<sup>22</sup> and refused to participate in the virtual 3SI summit hosted by Estonia in October 2020. He criticized Prime Minister Plenković for his participation and decided not to support the Initiative and investments in its Fund until “it is clear how, what, and when.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the government, headed by Andrej Plenković, continued to support the 3SI even after the parliamentary election in July 2020, but with new enthusiasm and strength. Government participation has been open and robust. Active engagement in the Initiative was declared to be one of the strategic priorities of Croatian foreign policy in the Government Program for

21 <https://n1info.hr/english/news/a469009-all-11-presidential-candidates-face-off-in-televised-debate/>.

22 <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/foreign/plenkovic-participates-in-virtual-summit-of-the-three-seas-initiative-1878856>.

23 <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/milanovic-protiv-tri-mora-nepotrebno-i-potencijalno-stetno/>, Novi list, October 19, 2020.



2020–2024<sup>24</sup> and in the National Strategy on the Development of the Republic of Croatia 2030 adopted by Parliament.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the new president's resistance to Grabar-Kitarović's policy on the Initiative, it was Prime Minister Plenković and his government ministers who attended the 3SI summits. At the summit held in Estonia in 2020, the prime minister proclaimed his government's commitment to the strategic goals of the Initiative and considered that this cooperation would "unlock enormous potential for growth, connectivity, and prosperity."<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, some concrete measures were taken to confirm the government's commitment to the 3SI. In October 2020, the government adopted the "Decision on establishing the national coordinating body and national coordinator for the 3SI" and the "Decision on the investment of the Republic of Croatia in the 3SI Investment Fund." According to the first decision, coordinative, professional, and administrative affairs related to the Initiative were transferred from the President's Office to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. In the second decision, it was decided that the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development (HBOR) would join the 3SI Investment Fund, with the amount of 20 million EUR.<sup>27</sup> Again, President Milanović vehemently mocked this financial engagement,<sup>28</sup> as he had mocked US

24 Croatian Government, Government Program 2020–2024, p. 54, available at: <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/ZPPI/Dokumenti%20Vlada/Program%20Vlade%20Republike%20Hrvatske%20za%20mandat%202020-%202024.pdf>.

25 Official Gazette, 13/21.

26 <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-protiv-tri-mora-nepotrebno-i-potencijalno-stetno-zbog-moguceg-zamjeranja-berlinu-i-moskvi-stocemo-dobiti-jos-jedan-sekretarijat-1051778>, Slobodna Dalmacija, October 19, 2020.

27 <https://mvpep.gov.hr/print.aspx?id=190962&url=print>.

28 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/world/2020/10/19/plenkovic-podrzava-inicijativu-tri-mora-milanovic-protiv>.

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's announcement, in February 2020, about investing a billion USD in the 3SI region, by stating that "if that is for the whole 3SI region it would not be sufficient even for a coffee."<sup>29</sup>

The holding of the last 3SI summit, in Bucharest in September 2023, revived the topic of the 3SI in public appearances of members of the Croatian government, whose support for the Initiative has seemed to be stronger than ever before. In his speech in Bucharest, the prime minister accentuated the idea that "Croatia is committed to cooperation within the 3SI both in the political sense and in concrete projects" and stressed its growing importance due to the war in Ukraine and changes on a global level, especially climate change.<sup>30</sup> The minister of foreign affairs, Gordan Grlić Radman, assessed that "the Initiative has never been stronger or more important." He referred to illegal migration, cyber-attacks, food safety, and the use of energy supplies for political purposes as new challenges that could be addressed more easily within the Initiative.<sup>31</sup> A large delegation of business people from the Croatian Chamber of Economy and nine large private and state companies participated at the Business Forum in Bucharest.<sup>32</sup>

## **The Institutional Framework and Projects of the Three Seas Initiative in Croatia**

### **Key elements of the Croatian 3SI-related institutional framework**

The key Croatian institutions involved in the 3SI are the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) and the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development (HBOR).

29 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30903089.html>.

30 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/hrvatska-je-predana-produblivanju-suradnje-unutar-inicijative-triju-mora/38947>.

31 <https://mvep.gov.hr/press/nikad-vaznija-inicijativa-triju-mora-glavna-tema-ministarskog-sastanka-kvadrilaterale/259874>.

32 <https://izvoz.gov.hr/najave/trgovinske-misije/111>.

By the above-mentioned Government Decision of October 2020, the MFEA was designated as the national body that would coordinate the participation of the Republic of Croatia in the 3SI on behalf of the government, while the minister of foreign and European affairs was designated the National Coordinator.

A new organizational unit responsible for 3SI-related affairs (the Independent 3SI Service) was established within the Ministry by government decree. The Independent 3SI Service has been entrusted with tasks related to the coordination of interdepartmental activities concerning the Initiative: encouraging and providing assistance in the cooperation of state administrative bodies; proposing and implementing activities that contribute to strengthening the position of Croatia in the Initiative and the visibility of its national projects; supporting the goals and projects of the Initiative, and actively monitoring the implementation of national 3SI infrastructure projects.<sup>33</sup> The decree established five posts for civil servants to work on 3SI affairs. As these were five out of 857 posts in the Ministry, this meant relatively weak institutional and personnel resources for 3SI coordination activities. Additionally, unlike in the other 3SI countries, there are no government or ministry internet pages dedicated to the 3SI, and thus the topic is less visible to the professional and general public.

At the parliamentary level, members of the Committee for Foreign Affairs participated in the second 3SI Parliamentary Forum.<sup>34</sup>

The HBOR is a national development and export credit institution to which the Republic of Croatia has 100 percent ownership rights. The HBOR was founded in 1992 by the Act on the Croatian Credit Bank for Reconstruction and its goal is to support and aid

33 Art. 133 of the Decree on Internal Organization of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, *Official Gazette*, 97/20.

34 <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/press/priopcenja/zastupnici-gari-cappelli-i-ivana-posavec-krivec-na-drugom-parlamentarnom-forumu>.

the development of the Croatian economy.<sup>35</sup> The name was later changed to the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>36</sup> The HBOR's activities are primarily related to financing the transformation and development of the Croatian economy, financing infrastructure investment, aiding exports, supporting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, aiding environmental protection, and insuring the export of Croatian goods and services against non-market risks.<sup>37</sup>

The Government Decision of October 2020 authorized the HBOR to invest 20 million EUR, increased by the fees and costs, in joining and participating in the 3SI Fund. This decision was realized a little later and the HBOR joined the 3SI Fund in the first quarter of 2021.<sup>38</sup> The president of its management board and the investment office manager of the HBOR represent Croatia in the 3SI Fund's supervisory and management boards.<sup>39</sup>

### **Croatian 3SI projects**

The 3SI Status Report of 2022 mentions that Croatia has participated in 17 out of 91 3SI priority interconnection projects (18.7 percent), being one of the two countries having the largest number of projects (along with Hungary).<sup>40</sup> Data from the official Database of the 3SI Interconnection Priority Projects indicate that there have been a total

35 Art. 2. Act on the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Official Gazette 138/06, 25/13.

36 Official Gazette, 33/92.

37 Art. 10. Act on the HBOR.

38 HBOR, *Report on Sustainability 2022*, p. 34, [https://www.hbor.hr/UserDocsImages/Odr%C5%BEivost/HBOR%20izvjesce%20o%20odrzivosti%202022\\_final.pdf?vel=3110274](https://www.hbor.hr/UserDocsImages/Odr%C5%BEivost/HBOR%20izvjesce%20o%20odrzivosti%202022_final.pdf?vel=3110274).

39 <https://3SIif.eu/fund-structure>.

40 <https://projects.3seas.eu/report>. The 2023 Report mentions a total of 102 3SI priority interconnection projects, but their structure has not yet been published.

of 34 such projects, since 17 national projects supporting 3SI goals have been added to the list (Appendix 1).

Croatia has already realized two projects within the 3SI framework. The first was the “Compressor Station 1 at the Croatian Gas Transmission System” project in the energy sector. It was completed in 2019 with a total cost of 25 million EUR. The second was the “FAIRway Danube” project in the transport sector. It was completed in 2021 with a total cost of 21,721,347 EUR. The partner countries were Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

The majority of ongoing projects are national projects in the transport sector. Projects in the energy and digitization sectors are also represented and have a predominantly international character, since other 3SI countries or even countries outside the 3SI platform have been included as beneficiaries.

The list and content of the projects seems promising for the prosperity and growth of the Croatian economy. The developmental potential and importance of certain infrastructural projects within the 3SI were emphasized in the National Strategy on the Development of the Republic of Croatia 2030. The projects include:

- the LNG Terminal on the Island of Krk, which could make Croatia an extremely important energy supply country;
- reconstruction and modernization of the port of Rijeka and the two-track railway Rijeka–Budapest, which would make Croatia an important import-export country for the transit of goods from other parts of the world to the Central and Eastern European market;
- construction of Corridor Via Carpathia through neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina,
- projects in river transport, which would strengthen the hitherto underutilized potential of the port of Vukovar on the Rhine–Main–Danube strategic European waterway.<sup>41</sup>

41 Official Gazette, 13/21.

For persons involved in the sector, and other interested public parties, the LNG Terminal on the Island of Krk was considered to be the key Croatian project with regional relevance, because of the diversification of gas supply routes, which is becoming more important in a time of security and energy crises in Europe. The following project on the list concerns the modernization of Rijeka Port and its transport connection to Budapest. Many of the 3SI-related projects would significantly add to the resilience of Croatia and other countries in the 3SI region (Boromisa & Samardžija 2022; Zenderowski & Skobejko, 2021; 2022; Hittner et al.; Dijanović, 2019; etc.).

Despite positive-seeming prospects, there is certainly some skepticism about the realization of 3SI-related and sponsored projects in the near future, because the costs of most of these projects have not been determined nor have the funds for their realization been provided.

Moreover, it can be observed that Croatian counties and cities have only a weak degree of interest in the Initiative, although the majority of 3SI-related priority interconnection projects would have significant positive effects on local economic and social well-being, development and resilience, as well as mixed but also strong effects on the natural environment. Croatian counties have not shown any interest in the Lublin Declaration on the Establishment of the Economic Network of the Three Seas Regions, which aims at fostering cooperation between local governments from 3SI countries and was signed during the 3SI Local Government Economic Congress on June 29, 2021.

However, it seems that the interest of Croatian local governments in interregional and transborder cooperation within the 3SI frame might increase in the future, as several representatives of the counties (Osječko-baranjska, Zadarska, etc.) and the City of Zagreb

have participated in various more recent activities.<sup>42</sup> Invigorated 3SI-related advocacy activities and inclusion of the three national associations of local and regional governments<sup>43</sup> are needed in order to intensify the participation of Croatian local and regional governments in 3SI activities.

## Preliminary Mapping of 3SI-Related Research

At the end of 2023, a mapping of relevant research, that is, studies that consider Croatia's general position within the 3SI, showed that, more than eight years after the 3SI was officially established, the literature on this topic in Croatia is still far from abundant. The mapping took into consideration monograph chapters and subchapters as well as articles published in scholarly and professional journals in Croatia and abroad whose authors were affiliated with Croatian or foreign academic or other institutions, or had researched or studied 3SI activities in Croatia or of Croatian actors. The literature referring to particular 3SI priority interconnection projects has not been analyzed because it is more technical and focused on the pragmatic issues of their implementation.

The results of the mapping exercise are presented in Table 1.

42 Cf. <https://www.zadarska-zupanija.hr/novosti/item/4030-u-lublinu-odr%C5%BEan-kongres-lokalne-samouprave-inicijative-triju-mora-sudjelovalo-izaslanstvo-zadarske-%C5%BEupanije>, <https://congress.lubelskie.pl/en/speakers-2023-i-day/>, etc.

43 They are the Croatian Community of Counties, the Association of Towns in Croatia, and the Croatian Community of Municipalities.

Table 1: The state of research on the 3SI in Croatian academic literature

Title	Authors and their affiliations	Perspectives
<b>Monograph chapters or subchapters</b>		
"Izvozna orijentacija Republike Hrvatske i makroregija Baltik – Jadran – Crno More," in: G. Družić, & I. Družić (eds), <i>Modeli razvoja hrvatskog gospodarstva</i> , Ekonomski fakultet u Zagrebu & HAZU, Zagreb, 2018.	Vladimir Čavrak, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia	Subject: Croatia's potential to improve its international trade results by strengthening economic cooperation with the 3SI countries. Outcome: insights into Croatian strengths and weaknesses regarding export and international trade in comparison to other 3SI countries.
"Report on Croatia," in: C. Xin (ed), <i>CEE Countries in Europe: Towards Centre to Periphery. Country Reports on Croatia, Latvia and Slovakia</i> , China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2020.	Ante Rončević, Darijo Čerepinko, Petar Kurečić, University North, Koprivnica, Croatia	Subject: overall analysis of the situation in the economy, politics and public governance, security, and geopolitics. Outcome: identification of strong and weak sectors of the Croatian public policy and governance.
"A Radical Reorientation or Status Quo: The CEE-USA Relations and Croatia," in: C. Xin (ed), <i>CEE Countries and the USA</i> . China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2021.	Valentino Petrović, Zagreb, Croatia	Subject: the possible consequences of Joe Biden's election to the US presidency. Outcome: prediction of positive effects for CEE countries, including the 3SI, from Biden's presidency.
"Croatia: In Search for Visibility and Stronger Support," in: A. Sprüds, M. Vargulis (eds), <i>Three Seas Initiative. Mapping National Perspectives</i> , Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Rīga, 2022.	Ana Maria Boromisa, Vesna Samardžija, Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb, Croatia	Subject: the influence of 3SI projects on Croatia's economic growth and position in geopolitics. Outcome: a ranking of 3SI priorities and a presentation of proposals for Croatia's stronger engagement in the 3SI.



Title	Authors and their affiliations	Perspectives
<b>Articles in academic journals</b>		
"The Adriatic-Baltic Sea Initiative as the Revival of 'Intermarium,'" <i>IRMO Brief</i> , no. 2/2016, pp. 1–5.	Janko Bekić, Marina Funduk, Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb, Croatia	Subject: potential change of the geopolitical situation after the launch of the 3SI. Outcome: insight into the historical roots of the 3SI and possible ways of utilizing the 3SI for the improvement of Croatia's geopolitical position.
"Europska makroregija Baltik – Jadran – Crno More," <i>Zbornik Sveučilišta Libertas</i> 3(3), 2018, pp. 5–34.	Vladimir Čavrak, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia Tamara Šmaguc, Faculty of Organization and Informatics, University of Zagreb, Croatia	Subject: analysis of the basic 3SI ideas in the light of economic cooperation in the CEE region. Conclusion: the economic cooperation of the 3SI countries has the potential to foster their economic and social development within the EU.
"Three Seas Initiative – between Economic Diplomacy and Geopolitics," <i>Acta Economica Et Turistica</i> 4(1), 2018, pp. 5–34.	Ivor Altaras Penda, Libertas University, Zagreb, Croatia	Subject: the realization of projects within the 3SI and the future geopolitical identity of Croatia. Conclusion: the 3SI will change power relations within the EU; active participation in the creation of such a multilateral agreement shows the first-class stride of Croatian diplomatic actions.

Title	Authors and their affiliations	Perspectives
"Can the Three Seas Bring a New Balance to European Politics?", <i>New Eastern Europe Postmodern Geopolitics: The Consequences of the Emerging Multipolar World 36(2)</i> , 2018, pp. 60–64.	Petar Kurečić, University North, Koprivnica, Croatia	Subject: the geopolitical and geo-economic grouping of post-socialist countries. Outcome: defining the common interests of the 3SI countries.
"The Three Seas Initiative: Geographical Determinants, Geopolitical Foundations, and Prospective Challenges," <i>Hrvatski geografski glasnik 80(1)</i> , 2018, pp. 99–124.	Petar Kurečić, University North, Koprivnica, Croatia	Subject: the geopolitical position of the 3SI. Outcome: defining the common interests of the 3SI countries.
"Inicijativa triju mora – korijeni, ideje i perspektive," <i>Obnova 12(1)</i> , 2019, pp. 168–189.	Davor Dijanović, Bjelovar, Croatia	Subject: the development and perspectives of the 3SI. Conclusion: the perspective of the 3SI is not clear.
"The Three Seas Initiative: Perspectives of Energy Sector Development Within the Croatian Foreign Policy," <i>Post-Soviet Issues 6(1)</i> , 2019, pp. 84–91.	Marta Zubović, Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow, Russia	Subject: the perspective of the Croatian energy sector within the 3SI frame. Conclusion: the 3SI may improve Croatia's geopolitical position in Europe.
"Chorwacja wobec Inicjatywy Trómorza (Croatia and the Three Seas Initiative)," <i>Studia Polilogiczne</i> No. 59/2021, pp. 280–301.	Radosław Zenderowski, Karolina Maria Skobejko, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland	Subject: Croatia's position and role in the 3SI. Outcome: identification of several important dimensions of Croatian participation in the 3SI.

Title	Authors and their affiliations	Perspectives
<p>"The Three Seas Initiative and the Graz Triangle Relations Towards the United Arab Emirates," <i>Croatian Political Science Review</i> 58(4), 2021, pp. 77–101.</p>	<p>Adam Krzymowski, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates</p>	<p>Subject: The United Arab Emirates' relations with the 3SI and Graz Triangle countries. Conclusion: the 3SI framework may positively influence cooperation of the Graz Triangle countries and the United Arab Emirates.</p>
<p>"The Changing Dynamics of Regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Three Seas Initiative," <i>Geopolitics</i> 28(1), 2023, pp. 216–238.</p>	<p>Gorana Grgić, University of Sydney, Australia</p>	<p>Subject: sub-regionalism dynamics in the EU with a particular focus on the CEE region. Conclusion: the 3SI marks a shift in the dynamics of European sub-regionalism.</p>
<p>"Infrastructure Diplomacy and Strategic Signalling with the Three Seas Initiative," <i>Journal of Southeast European &amp; Black Sea Studies</i> 23(2), 2023, pp. 229–249.</p>	<p>Gorana Grgić, University of Sydney, Australia Đuro Kolar, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia Maja Bašić, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia</p>	<p>Subject: the dynamics of infrastructure diplomacy and its use in changing a country's geopolitical position. Conclusion: formal state-to-state signals support corporate-to-corporate actions.</p>

Source: The authors.

In sum, the analysis showed that no one from the Croatian academic or professional communities has published a monograph on the topic yet. The number of published chapters in edited volumes and articles in scholarly and professional journals is small, indicating the low interest of Croatian authors in the topic of the 3SI. Authors from abroad, except those of Croatian origin or who are in some other way connected to the country, also rarely show interest in Croatian specificities within the 3SI framework. Authors have predominantly based their evaluations of the 3SI's contributions to the economy, (geo)politics, public governance, international relations, and so forth, on composite theoretical frames. Empirical research is scarce. Preliminary insights, mapping, or review analyses dominate. Research outcomes and conclusions are rather tentative and speculative in nature.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the role Croatia played in the creation and development of the Initiative. It mapped the political leadership's views and narratives on the Initiative, which range from enthusiasm (President Grabar-Kitarović, and Prime Minister Plenković during his second term of office), to unconcern (Prime Minister Plenković during his first term in office), and skepticism and hesitation (President Milanović).

The institutional framework for creating and implementing the Initiative's projects has been presented: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development held the dominant positions, except during Grabar-Kitarović's presidential term, when the Office of the President of Republic was at the institutional forefront regarding 3SI activities.

This chapter has offered a brief review of the projects Croatia has undertaken within the Initiative. Croatia is included in 34 3SI interconnection priority projects, half of which are national projects. Only two have been completed, while the others are in various stages

of development and implementation. The costs of the majority of them have not been determined or the funds for their realization have not been provided.

The chapter has reflected on the role of Croatian counties and their engagement in the Initiative. Invigorated 3SI-related advocacy activities and inclusion of the three national associations of local and regional governments are needed in order to intensify the participation of Croatian local and regional governments in 3SI activities, as this would improve the overall success of Croatia's participation in the Initiative.

Croatian academia is not interested in 3SI-related activities, except in regard to specific individual 3SI priority interconnection projects. This paper has provided a review of the literature on the topic from the Croatian perspective and in regard to Croatia's general position within the Initiative. Only 15 chapters and articles were found; they were briefly presented in order to show the profile and results of 3SI-related research on Croatian participation in the Initiative. An empirical approach is needed to improve research results, while much stronger institutional and financial support is of critical importance for more abundant 3SI-related research.

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## Appendix 1: Croatian 3SI Interconnection Priority Projects

	Title	Sector	Included countries	Status	Finances
1	Adria Flood and Drought Risk Mitigation System	Transport	Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Italy, Greece	Registered in 2020	10,5 M € (5% secured)
2	Bosiljevo – Sisak – Kozarac – Slobodnica Gas Pipeline	Energy	Hungary, Slovenia	Registered in 2023	577 M € (0% secured)
3	Compressor Station 1 at the Croatian Gas Transmission System	Energy	National project	Completed and put into operation by the end of 2019	25 M €
4	Construction of A5 Motorway	Transport	Hungary	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	46 M € (100% secured)
5	Construction of the Channel Danube – Sava	Transport	National project	Registered in 2023	Not determined
6	Construction of the Second Track, Renewal and Modernization of the Railway Section Škriljevo – Rijeka – Jurdani	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, to be completed in 2026	310 M € (100% secured)
7	Croatia – Bosnia and Herzegovina Gas Interconnection	Energy	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Registered in 2023, to be completed in 2024	169 M € (100% secured)
8	Croatia – Slovenia Gas Interconnection (Lučko – Zabok – Rogatec Pipeline)	Energy	Slovenia	Registered in 2023, to be completed in 2028	145 M € (0% secured)
9	Development of the Cross-Border Network of Data Centres	Digital	Austria, Czechia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Registered in 2020	To be determined

	Title	Sector	Included countries	Status	Finances
10	Development of the Cross-Border Optical Fibre Network	Digital	Austria, Czechia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Registered in 2020	To be determined
11	Digital Platform on Monitoring Hydrographic Bases in the 3SI Region	Digital	Austria, Czechia, Latvia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia + Albania, Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	2.5 M € (0% secured)
12	Expansion of the capacity of the LNG Terminal on the island of Krk	Energy	National project	Registered in 2023, to be completed in 2025	25 M € (100% secured)
13	FAIRway Danube	Transport	Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia	Registered in 2018, completed	21,72 M €
14	Ionic Adriatic Pipeline	Energy	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro	Registered in 2018	713 M € (0% secured)
15	Interoperability Solutions for a Digitized and Sustainable Energy Sector in the 3SI Area in the Field of Energy Storage	Energy, Digital	Romania, Austria, Czechia, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia + Germany, Sweden, Moldova	Registered in 2018	10 M € (0% secured)
16	LNG Terminal on the Island of Krk with evacuation pipeline	Energy	National project	Registered in 2018, completed	265 M €
17	NP – BBI Programme	Digital	National project	Registered in 2018	101.4 M € (100% secured)
18	North – South Gas Corridor – Expansion of Existing Capacity between Hungary and Slovakia	Energy	Austria, Czechia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia + Ukraine, Serbia	Registered in 2020	To be determined
19	Oil and Gas Terminal in the Port of Ploče	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018	35M € (100% secured)

	Title	Sector	Included countries	Status	Finances
20	Port of Rijeka infrastructure upgrading	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, completed	6,914 M €
21	Port of Rijeka infrastructure upgrading and development, development of multimodal platforms and interconnections – Adriatic Gate container terminal (POR2CORE – AGCT)	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, completed	35,56 M €
22	Zagreb Deep Sea Container Terminal in Rijeka	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	600 M € (100% secured)
23	Regulation works on the Danube River on km 1,322 (Sotin)	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	5,8 M € (100% secured)
24	Regulation works on the Sava River – Section: Račinovac – Sisak	Transport	National project	Registered in 2023	25 M € (0% secured)
25	Reconstruction of the railway section Čakovec – Varaždin – (Koprivnica) (63,32 km), and the railway lines Zaprešić – Čakovec and Varaždin – Dalj	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	58,7 M € (1% secured; sources to be determined)
26	SINCROGRID	Energy	Slovenia	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	88,6 M € (51% secured)
27	Sava IW Section between Jaruga and Novi Grad	Transport	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	489,4 M € (100% secured)
28	The 3 Seas Digital Highway	Digital	Austria, Czechia, Latvia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia + Finland	Registered in 2018, put on hold due to war in Ukraine	Not defined

	Title	Sector	Included countries	Status	Finances
29	Transportation Stock Exchange in the 3SI region	Digital	Austria, Czechia, Latvia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania + Albania, Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia	Registered in 2018, substantial progress	4,5 M € (0% secured)
30	Upgrade of the Rijeka Port Infrastructure – Bakar Bulk Cargo Terminal (POR2CORE – BCTB)	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, completed	6.095 M €
31	Upgrade of the Rijeka Port infrastructure – Rijeka Basin (POR2CORE – Rijeka Basin)	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, substantial project	3338 M € (100% secured)
32	Upgrade of the Rijeka Port infrastructure – Port Community System (POR2CORE – PCS)	Transport	National project	Registered in 2018, completed in 2023	4.1 M €
33	Via Carpathia	Transport	Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia + Greece, Turkey, Ukraine	Registered in 2018	6,5 B € (100% secured)
34	Zlobin – Bosiljevo Pipeline	Energy	National project	Registered in 2023	155M € (0% secured)

Source: the Authors on the basis of <https://3seas.eu/about/progressreport>

**Vít Dostál**

Executive Director of the Association for International Affairs – AMO

e-mail: vit.dostal@amo.cz

## **The Czech Republic and the Three Seas Initiative**

**Abstract:** This text examines the Czech approach to the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), from the format's inception to the Bucharest Summit in 2023, and with a focus on the role of domestic and external factors. Based on official documents, speeches, and interviews with actors in the 3SI, the author argues that it is not views shaped by the aggregation of domestic interest that determine the Czech approach but rather external conditions and the desire to adapt the Czech position to the views of other important partners.

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative, Central Europe, Czech foreign policy, security policy, infrastructure



## Introduction

The Czech Republic's approach to the 3SI is often described as cautious or passive.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the Czech Republic was not optimistic about the emergence of a new Central European cooperation format, did not have its own clear priorities regarding the 3SI, did not contribute to the 3SI Investment Fund (3SIIF), and did not make any proposals for further development of the format. Yet the Czech Republic has been part of the Initiative from the beginning and the question of leaving it was never really on the table. It is therefore important to ask whether it is domestic or foreign factors that contribute to maintaining and shaping Czech interest in the 3SI.

This text asks just such a question. It first reviews the Czech approach to the 3SI, analyzing in particular the Czech position at the time of individual 3SI summits, and then summarizes the Czech understanding of the 3SI from various perspectives. Finally, the text evaluates the domestic and foreign factors influencing the formation of the Czech position.

Given the very small degree of public interest in the 3SI in the Czech Republic, the text is based mainly on articles, political parties' manifestos, public and internal government documents, and, last but not least, on interviews with officials, politicians, and diplomats who are working or have worked on the topic of the 3SI in the Czech Republic.

1 P. Bajda, "Stanovisko Czech i Słowacji wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, 2020, no. 2, pp. 91–108. J. Jůzová, "To be or not to be: Czech Republic's ambiguous attitude towards the 3SI," <https://europeum.org/data/articles/wp-46-anticipating-the-2023-3si-bucharest-summit.pdf>, [accessed: November 11, 2023]. V. Dostál, T. Strážay, Z. Věgh, "The perspective of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative," [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO\\_The\\_Perspective\\_on\\_the\\_3SI.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO_The_Perspective_on_the_3SI.pdf), [accessed: November 11, 2023].

## Chronology of the Czech Attitude toward the 3SI<sup>2</sup>

The Czech Republic did not actively support the establishment of a novel cooperation framework in Central and Eastern Europe. Since the mid-2010s its Central European policy had rested on three key pillars: cooperation with Germany (strengthened nominally in 2015 to the level of a strategic dialogue), cooperation within the Visegrád Group, and the creation of the trilateral Slavkov Triangle with Austria and Slovakia in 2015. Czech foreign-policy makers deemed this amalgamation of established formats and a new orientation toward Vienna satisfactory and did not perceive an immediate need to launch a fresh initiative.<sup>3</sup>

The 3SI was initially viewed as a project aimed above all at contributing to infrastructural connectivity. During the inaugural summit in Dubrovnik, the highest political representative from the Czech Republic was the Minister of Transport. The Czech Republic's early participation in the initiative was motivated by the desire for information and contacts. In essence, from a national interest perspective, being part of the initiative was seen as preferable to being excluded, as it provided the opportunity to stay informed and have a chance to influence the project's future direction.<sup>4</sup>

In the period leading up to the 2017 Summit in Poland an elevated sense of caution or even a noticeable reserve on the part of the Czech

- 2 This section is partly based on the author's chapter in V. Dostál, T. Strážay, Z. Végh, "The perspective of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative", [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO\\_The\\_Perspective\\_on\\_the\\_3SI.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO_The_Perspective_on_the_3SI.pdf), [accessed: November 11, 2023].
- 3 Nástupní projev ministra zahraničních věcí Tomáše Petříčka, Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí, [https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/o\\_ministerstvu/archivy/clanky\\_a\\_projevy\\_ministru/clanky\\_a\\_projevy\\_ministra\\_petricka\\_2018/x2018\\_10\\_18\\_nastupni\\_projev\\_ministra\\_zahranicnich.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/o_ministerstvu/archivy/clanky_a_projevy_ministru/clanky_a_projevy_ministra_petricka_2018/x2018_10_18_nastupni_projev_ministra_zahranicnich.html), [accessed: November 11, 2023].
- 4 Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, March 25, 2021.

Republic could be observed. During this period, the 3SI was regarded in Prague as a political venture that raised concerns for Czech diplomacy. The newly established Polish Law and Justice government quickly found itself in conflict with EU institutions, earning a reputation as an unpredictable partner. The 3SI was perceived as an initiative that could potentially be leveraged by Poland in a power struggle with Berlin and Brussels, a sentiment that became evident around the time of the Warsaw Summit.<sup>5</sup>

The Bucharest Summit in 2018 marked a pivotal moment in shaping the Czech stance toward the 3SI. First, the active participation of high-ranking figures from German and European institutions alleviated concerns that the project was driven by a desire for rivalry with Berlin and Brussels or was intended as a precursor to an alternative to European integration. Second, the announcement of the establishment of the 3SI Investment Fund (3SIIF) provided tangible substance to the initiative. Additionally, sustained interest on the part of the United States and the translation of previously stated American objectives in the region, such as the enhancement of gas-pipeline infrastructure, into the framework of the 3SI lent greater credibility to Washington's involvement. This dispelled earlier perceptions that the initiative merely served as a tool for initial contacts between President Trump and his European partners.<sup>6</sup>

In 2019, President Miloš Zeman attended the inauguration of the 3SI Summit in Slovenia. In preceding meetings, the Czech Republic had been represented by the chairman of the Chamber

5 M. Kokot, "Wyłom w Trójmorzu. Czesi nie chcą być częścią antyniemieckiego paktu," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 19, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3xTLIWG>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

6 Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, March 25, 2021. Representative of the Office of the President of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, March 31, 2021.

of Deputies or a minister. Before the Tallinn Summit in 2020, the coordination of 3SI cooperation at the government level transitioned to the deputy minister of transport, shifting the responsibility from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Transport. This underscored a commitment to concrete outcomes and the infrastructural dimension, while summit coordination continued to be overseen by the Office of the President.

There was no fundamental shift in the Czech approach to the 3SI until 2021. The Czech Republic remained hesitant to establish a permanent 3SI secretariat and seat, emphasizing the Czech focus on practical projects and the original connectivity goals. However, the country faced challenges in contributing funds to the 3SI Investment Fund (3SIIF). The government led by Andrej Babiš initially intended to approve the contribution during its last session but ultimately withdrew the item from the agenda.<sup>7</sup>

During this period, the political discourse on the Czech approach to the 3SI gradually evolved, primarily spurred by the approaching parliamentary elections. While the 3SI did not dominate foreign policy discussions before the elections, such debate provided insights into the attitudes of key political players toward the project.

The SPOLU (Together) coalition included the 3SI among its seven foreign policy priorities, portraying it as a “geopolitical platform for strengthening cooperation between the US and Central Eastern Europe.” The coalition’s program also addressed energy security and expressed the intention to acquire a stake in a liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal in a neighboring country, potentially Germany or

7 D. Drake, “Rozhodnutí o fondu Trojmoří nechá Babišův kabinet na příští vládě,” *Novinky.cz*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-rozhodnuti-o-fondu-trojmori-necha-babisuv-kabinet-na-pristi-vlade-40375308>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

Poland.<sup>8</sup> Jan Lipavský, a representative of the second opposition bloc from the Czech Pirate Party, who later became the minister of foreign affairs, voiced support for the 3SI.<sup>9</sup> The manifesto of the newly formed center-right government also endorsed Czech involvement in the 3SI.<sup>10</sup>

The Czech approach, however, has not fundamentally changed with the arrival of the new center-right government. The Czech delegation that travelled to the 3SI Summit in Riga in 2022 did not have a different position than previously. The beginning of the war in Ukraine had an important impact on the Czech Republic, which became actively involved in supporting the defense of Ukraine and focused its international policy initiatives on this end. All bilateral or multilateral contacts served primarily as tools in the effort to support the invaded country— especially in the first weeks and months of the war. This is how the Czech Republic approached the 3SI. It saw it as a format for repeating appeals of support for Ukraine, and the final declaration of the Riga Summit was seen as such an opportunity.

In the first half of 2023, the Czech administration discussed its approach to the 3SI. The result was the government-approved document “Perspective for Further Czech Participation in the Three Seas Initiative,” prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The MFA had

- 8 Program SPOLU for a safe country, SPOLU, <https://www.spolu21.cz/program/spolu-pro-bezpecnou-zemi>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].
- 9 D. Drake, “Projekt Trojmoří: Plán, státy a jednotná střední Evropa v EU,” *Novinky.cz*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/clanek/stredni-evropa-se-sjednocuje-chceme-stejnou-kvalitu-zivota-jako-na-zapade-euburcuje-40372623>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].
- 10 Government Program Statement, Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, <http://www.vlada.cz/cz/jednani-vlady/programove-prohlaseni/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-193547/>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

been given responsibility for this agenda at the end of 2022, taking over from the Ministry of Transport.<sup>11</sup>

For the first time, the document explicitly identifies the benefits of the 3SI for the Czech Republic, stating that “the 3SI highlights the infrastructure and investment gap that is hampering the economic development of the region.” It sees the role of the 3SI in synergies with other EU formats and instruments. Membership is expected to be beneficial “in terms of sustainable development of regions and increasing their resilience and in terms of connectivity in transport, energy, and digitalization.” According to the document, “the multilateral nature of the initiative, as well as the current partnerships with the European Commission, the US, and Germany, also strengthen the prestige of membership for Czech diplomacy.” Last but not least, the document identifies the possibility of attracting new investors to the region and thus to the Czech Republic through the 3SI.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly before the second Bucharest Summit, a new Czech national 3SI coordinator, Jan Marian, deputy minister of foreign affairs, was chosen. On his appointment, he commented that he considered “the Three Seas Initiative to be an important initiative, both with regard to connecting the North and South of Europe and with regard to the current geopolitical and strategic developments in Europe.” He also regarded Ukraine’s involvement in the initiative as being important.<sup>13</sup>

However, these steps did not bring a decision on the Czech contribution to the 3SIIF. On the other hand, the approved government

11 Perspektiva další účasti Česka v Iniciativě Trojmoří, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023.

12 Ibidem.

13 Náměstek Jan Marian byl jmenován národním koordinátorem Iniciativy Trojmoří, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti\\_a\\_media/tiskove\\_zpravy/namestek\\_jan\\_marian\\_byl\\_jmenovan.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/namestek_jan_marian_byl_jmenovan.html), [accessed: November 11, 2023].

material explained the 3SIIF in detail and pointed out that on a political level the absence of a Czech contribution would call into question the credibility of Czech involvement in the 3SI. Nevertheless, there has been an important change in the identification of priority projects. The Czech Republic has decided to replace the megalomaniacal idea of the Danube-Oder-Labe Canal, which the government emerging from the 2021 elections also decided not to support any longer, with more practical projects: first, the “V4 and Baltic High-Speed Rail Synergy” project and second, the “STORK II” two-way gas interconnection project between the Czech Republic and Poland.<sup>14</sup>

### Summarizing the Czech approach to the 3SI<sup>15</sup>

As previously mentioned, Czech representatives assert that the primary focus of the Three Seas Initiative should center on infrastructure development in the region.<sup>16</sup> This inclination also arises from the Czech Republic’s hesitancy to engage in significant new regional political cooperation projects, a topic to be discussed later.

- 14 Perspektiva další účasti Česka v Iniciativě Trojmoří, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023.
- 15 This part is partly based on V. Dostál, “Czech Republic: A stalemate and promising circumstances,” in: A. Sprūds, M. Vargulis (eds.), *Three Seas Initiative: Mapping National Perspectives*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga 2022, p. 58–70, [https://www.liia.lv/en/publications/three-seas-initiative-mapping-national-perspectives-1002?get\\_file=1](https://www.liia.lv/en/publications/three-seas-initiative-mapping-national-perspectives-1002?get_file=1), [accessed: November 11, 2023].
- 16 Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, March 25, 2021. Representative of the Office of the President of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, March 31, 2021. Representative of the Ministry of Transport of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, March 31, 2021. Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic in discussion with Vít Dostál, May 5, 2022.

Despite highlighting infrastructure development as a pivotal aspect of the 3SI, the Czech Republic did not approach the process of nominating its priority projects responsibly before the first Bucharest Summit. The sole proposal was a waterway connecting the Danube, Oder, and Elbe rivers, championed by President Zeman. However, this project faced scrutiny due to its questionable economic viability and adverse environmental impact, and individual ministries failed to contribute ideas during consultations on potential Czech priority projects for the 3SI. Ultimately, the Office of the President, which at that time was serving as a coordinating body, took over the responsibility of proposing and elevated the president's favored project to an official priority.

Petr Fiala's government ultimately stopped the project and replaced it on the list of priorities with more realistic and practical project ideas before the Bucharest summit.

Another distinctive aspect of the Czech approach, which has an infrastructure focus, is the absence of a Czech government contribution to the 3SIIF. Despite repeated expressions of interest, the government, led by Andrej Babiš, has not committed to joining the fund and has withheld support for the economic dimension of the 3SI. The government had planned to discuss the contribution, but after the last election defeat, and following public criticism, particularly directed at the Danube-Oder-Labe Canal, the item was withdrawn from the agenda.<sup>17</sup>

17 D. Drake, "Projekt Trojmoří: Plán, státy a jednotná střední Evropa v EU," *Novinky.cz*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/clanek/stredni-evropa-se-sjednocuje-chceme-stejnou-kvalitu-zivota-jako-na-zapade-euburcuje-40372623>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

M. Tomeš, "Vláda chce těsně před odchodem poslat půl miliardy na projekt Trojmoří. Česko v něm má jen Zemanův oblíbený kanál," *Deník N*, October 14, 2021, <https://denikn.cz/727177/vlada-chce-tesne-pred-odchodem-poslat-pul-miliardy-na-projekt-trojmor-i-cesko-v-nem-ma-jen-zemanuv-oblibeny-kanal/>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].



This approach has not changed and as mentioned above, the Czech Republic has still not contributed to the 3SIIF. The most skeptical entity in regard to Prague's contributing to the 3SIIF remains the Ministry of Finance, which always questions the returnability of an investment.

Structural reasons also contribute to Czech reticence, as entities in the country are accustomed to financing projects through grants, particularly under EU cohesion policy, which is making ample funds available to the Czech economy from 2021 to 2027. Consequently, the 3SIIF, with its investment logic, is not currently perceived as an essential instrument. However, the National Development Bank, which includes the 3SIIF in its portfolio, emphasizes that as the Czech Republic's socio-economic position within the EU improves, traditional grant schemes will wane. In the interim, Czech entities will need to adapt to alternative instruments such as the 3SIIF.<sup>18</sup>

Second, there is the geopolitical dimension of the 3SI. Prague is adamant that the 3SI should not replace existing Central European cooperation formats, especially the Visegrád Group, despite debates in the Czech Republic sparked by the war in Ukraine and Hungary's approach to Russia. The Visegrád Group remains the cornerstone of multilateral Central European cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

The Czech Republic contends that the 3SI can only find a place in its Central European politics if it complements existing formats and adds value. The Initiative's involvement in intra-EU contentions will not be deemed a constructive contribution. Czech diplomacy aims to avoid a repetition of the tensions between the western and eastern parts of the EU witnessed during the so-called refugee

18 Representative of the Czech-Moravian Guarantee and Development Bank in discussion with Vít Dostál, April 12, 2021.

19 V. Dostál, "Let's Not Abandon Central Europe," *Visegrad Insight*, April 26, 2022, <https://visegradinsight.eu/lets-not-abandon-central-europe/>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

crisis in 2015–2016. Accordingly, the Czech Republic advocated for Germany's involvement in the 3SI between 2017 and 2018. Prague views Germany, a key trading partner in the region, as essential for the effective implementation of the 3SI's intentions. The Czech Republic expresses openness to full German membership in the 3SI in the future.<sup>20</sup>

One perceived political benefit of the 3SI is its ability to attract US attention to the region, creating a platform for future Central European and American cooperation. The Czech Republic viewed the waning of US interest in (Central) Europe over the last decade as detrimental. The 3SI was initially conceived as a complement to essential projects for the Czech Republic, such as those in the field of cybersecurity, which provided a robust agenda for relations between Central and Eastern Europe and Washington. However, this concept is undergoing a fundamental change due to the war in Ukraine. The US has redirected attention to Central and Eastern Europe, and the region will be of interest in the coming years regardless of the 3SI. Questions have arisen on the Czech side regarding the sincerity of the Biden administration's declaratory support for the 3SI, particularly with regard to contributions to the 3SIIF.

In addition to the geopolitical considerations relative to other EU countries and the US, the Czech Republic's perception of the 3SI's geopolitical significance is evolving. With Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the region is gaining security and political significance for the Czech Republic. In the first half of 2022, bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and Poland were reinvigorated. When the new Czech government took office, it had to deal with the issue of the Turów lignite mine in Poland, and Prague and Warsaw had to present a united front to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

20 Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Office of President Pet Pirunčík at the conference "České priority v rámci iniciativy Trojmoří," September 29, 2020, <https://bit.ly/33iOhn9>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

The Czech army has been involved in NATO activities in Slovakia, Lithuania, and Latvia, yet the preferred regional format for discussing security issues remains the Bucharest format, which brings together NATO's eastern flank countries, rather than the 3SI.

From the 3SI's beginning, its energy security dimension has not been perceived as particularly advantageous for the Czech Republic. Despite the country's participation in the Partnership for Transatlantic Energy Cooperation, there has been no perceived urgency in strengthening its energy infrastructure in relation to the 3SI region. Historically, the Czech Republic has obtained gas from the spot market and had an alternative connection to the Družba oil pipeline via the Ingolstadt–Kralupy nad Vltavou–Litvínov pipeline to Germany.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the European Union's commitment to reduce dependence on Russian gas and oil, have prompted a reassessment of the Czech stance on energy security. Though the matter was previously considered settled, the Czech Republic now aims to enhance alternative oil and gas pipeline routes. In the case of gas, negotiations on the STORK II interconnection are being revived. This initiative, which both the Czech and Polish sides had abandoned in 2016 due to its unprofitability, is now being revisited as it could bring gas to the Czech Republic from existing or future Polish LNG terminals on the Baltic Sea.

The government's manifesto from the turn of 2021 to 2022 already indicated Czech interest in acquiring a stake in one of the LNG terminals in a neighboring country.<sup>21</sup> The urgency of this endeavor has significantly escalated as the Czech Republic seeks to secure its future gas supply, even though it lacks direct access to the sea and

21 Government Program Statement, Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, <http://www.vlada.cz/cz/jednani-vlady/programove-prohlaseni/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-193547/>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

the capacity to construct its own terminal. So far, Prague has seen opportunities mainly in the Netherlands and Germany. Nevertheless, the STORK II was added to the list of Czech 3SI priority projects.<sup>22</sup>

The Czech Republic places particular emphasis on transport connectivity, especially within the Central European context. The Czech Republic is actively preparing new transport links, particularly in rail and road transport. In the realm of railways, the primary focus is on constructing high-speed railways to establish two connections to Poland (Prague–Wrocław and Ostrava–Warsaw) and a connection to Austria and Slovakia from Břeclav within the 3SI region. However, the Czech Republic's priority is to ensure connections between its major cities (Prague–Brno–Ostrava) and a link to Germany.

Road infrastructure with the 3SI participant countries is set to be augmented by a second expressway connection with Poland (Hradec Králové–Wrocław) and two connections to Austria (České Budějovice–Linz and Brno–Vienna) by 2030. Austria is currently the sole neighbor to which the Czech Republic lacks an expressway connection. Nonetheless, these plans are not currently being considered within the context of the 3SI. Funding is envisioned to come from European sources, and the topic of transport infrastructure is not aligned with the perceived benefits of the 3SI within the Czech context.

The dimension of ICT connectivity is not receiving intensive consideration in the Czech Republic. However, international cooperation in the ICT field holds importance for the country, particularly concerning the establishment of secure 5G networks. A Czech initiative led to the development of the Prague Proposals, which outline a path

22 A. Urbanová, "Náhrada za ‚Zemanovu oblíbenou hračku‘. Kanál Dunaj–Odra–Labe vystřídají hned dva projekty," *iRozhlas.cz*, July 12, 2023, [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/trojmori-ceska-vlada-dunaj-odra-labe-cinsky-vliv-plynovod\\_2307120700\\_aur](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/trojmori-ceska-vlada-dunaj-odra-labe-cinsky-vliv-plynovod_2307120700_aur), [accessed: November 11, 2023].

for securing next-generation networks.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, this element did not find its way into Czech involvement in the 3SI.

## Summary

It is evident from the above that the Czech Republic's interest in the 3SI stems mainly from the external environment. Yet the motivating factors could be both positive and negative.

The positive factors include the desire to attract new investors to the region, to increase the interest of the United States in Central and Eastern Europe, to draw attention to infrastructure gaps in parts of the EU, and to strengthen support for war-torn Ukraine. The negative motivations were mainly concern about the original interests of the main initiator of the project (Poland), and the need to be present when shaping the format. There was a desire to include Germany in the 3SI in order to avoid the creation of a new instrument that divided the EU into its western and eastern parts.

From the Czech perspective, the benefits of participation in the 3SI are perceived mainly in diplomatic and political terms, as it serves to draw attention to some of the needs of the region. However, the projection of domestic infrastructural or policy needs into the practical interests of the Czech Republic within the 3SI has not been very successful so far. In other words, the Czech Republic has not found that it has tangible interests that it could actively transpose to the level of the 3SI format. It was only with the change of government and the deterioration of the security of energy supplies due to the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war that the Czech Republic changed

23 Prague 5G Security Conference Announced Series of Recommendations, Government of the Czech Republic, <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/prague-5g-security-conference-announced-series-ofrecommendations-the-prague-proposals-173422/>, [accessed: November 11, 2023].

its priority projects. Its hesitation in contributing to the 3SIIF is indicative of its low confidence in the immediate benefits of the project.

Notwithstanding this ambivalent approach, the option of leaving the 3SI has never been on the table. On the contrary, Czech involvement is becoming increasingly formalized. First, the 3SI began to appear in the programs of political parties, then in the government's program, and finally, dedicated government material was produced. However, the further development of the Czech approach will primarily depend on external factors. Nonetheless, a clear identification of the benefits of membership for the development of the Czech Republic and the sharing of that idea across the state administration may contribute to a stronger anchoring of the 3SI in the Czech Republic's Central European policy.

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**Matthew Crandall**  
Tallinn University, Estonia  
ORCID: 0009-0000-2588-009X  
e-mail: crandall@tlu.ee

## **The Three Seas Initiative and Estonia after the Outbreak of War in Ukraine**

**Abstract:** This chapter looks at Estonia's engagement with the Three Seas Initiative and evaluates the impact of the war in Ukraine in that respect. The focal points of the Initiative reflect key Estonian interests, including energy security, digital unity, and cooperation. Yet, despite the natural overlap between Estonia's interests and the priorities of the Three Seas Initiative, the Initiative itself has not been articulated as a priority for Estonia. The war in Ukraine has ushered in a new era, changed perceptions, and rearranged the order of interests. Consequently, new opportunities for sub-regionalism have opened within the EU and could change Estonia's prioritization of the Three Seas Initiative. This chapter looks at how the Three Seas Initiative fits Estonia's post-Ukraine geopolitical interests and also evaluates how Estonia will attempt to influence the Three Seas Initiative to help it align with those interests.

**Keywords:** Transatlantic relations, capital, infrastructure, resilience, sub-regionalism

### **Introduction**

When Central and Eastern European states joined the European Union in 2004, it was politically speaking an “end of history” moment, in which these countries could again be fully part of Europe in the political sense. From an infrastructure standpoint, accession

marked the beginning of a long process, which after twenty years is nowhere near complete. This is especially true with the three Baltic states. During the time of their occupation by the Soviet Union, Soviet infrastructure was built with Moscow as the center. After the Baltic states regained independence in 1991, it might have been conceptually appropriate to view them as an island, as the infrastructure linkages to Europe were minimal. Thanks to European Structural funds, and the overall development of the region, infrastructure within individual EU member countries, as well as between member countries, has greatly improved. The result has been a reorientation of the flow of goods, services, and people away from the East and toward the West. Almost twenty years later, the development of infrastructure still has a long way to go, as key infrastructure projects such as Rail Baltic<sup>1</sup> will not be completed until 2030. In addition to completing ongoing infrastructure projects, there is a need for more North-South infrastructure, which is what the Three Seas Initiative hopes to accomplish.

As a small Baltic Sea state, how does Estonia perceive the need for enhanced North-South connections? How does increased North-South connectivity fit with Estonia's vision for regional integration? Why has the Three Seas Initiative not been communicated as a priority in the Estonian public discourse? This chapter looks at Estonia's engagement with the Three Seas Initiative while placing it in a geopolitical framework, and specifically at Estonia's geopolitical interests. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has created many changes for the European Union and for European integration processes. The war in Ukraine has also impacted the Three Seas Initiative, as well as how Estonia, and other states, view the Initiative. This chapter will address Estonia's engagement with the Three Seas

1 Rail Baltic is an EU-funded high-speed rail project that would link the Baltic states to Germany. Please see the Rail Baltic website for more information: <https://www.railbaltica.org/>

Initiative, Estonia's perception of the Initiative after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and how the war in Ukraine will impact that engagement. Official documents, statements, and an interview with an Estonian official with expertise on the Three Seas Initiative were used in this analysis.

## Subregional Integration and Estonian Foreign Policy Interests

The Three Seas is another platform for sub-regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).<sup>2</sup> Estonia cannot be considered a typical CEE state, and thus its participation in the Three Seas Initiative is an intriguing subject of analysis. After regaining its independence in 1991 Estonia's primary foreign policy goals were to join the EU and NATO. Estonia has strongly supported EU integration as well as an engaged NATO and solidarity with the United States.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these overarching regional interests, subregional integration formats have also been an important tool to help Estonia pursue these larger interests. Engagement and integration with Nordic countries has been a priority. Of the CEE countries, Estonia is the furthest north, with cultural and linguistic ties to Finland. Accordingly, the three seas that make up the Three Seas Initiative (the Adriatic Sea, Baltic Sea, and Black Sea) are not the only seas in which Estonia has an interest. In 2020, Estonia applied to become an observing member of the Arctic Council, and though the application was not approved, Estonia still has an interest in the region<sup>4</sup> (ERR News 2021).

- 2 G. Grgić, "The changing dynamics of regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe: The case of the Three Seas Initiative," *Geopolitics*, 2023, 28(1), pp 216.
- 3 A. Wivel, & M. Crandall, "Punching above their weight, but why? Explaining Denmark and Estonia in the transatlantic relationship," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 2019, 17(3), 392-419.
- 4 "Estonia's bid for Arctic Council observer status unsuccessful," *ERR News*, June 22, 2021, <https://news.err.ee/1608254889/estonia-s-bid-for-arctic-council-observer-status-unsuccessful>

One of the goals of that effort was to increase economic and cultural cooperation with Nordic-Arctic countries.<sup>5</sup> Cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic forum, or NB8, is an example of successful ongoing cooperation with Nordic countries.

Despite Estonia's traditional focus on having a strong Brussels and closer integration with Nordic countries, this does not mean that there is less interest in the Three Seas Initiative. In an interview with an Estonian official dealing with the Three Seas Initiative, one word that was emphasized in regard to the nature of the Initiative was "complementary." For Estonia, the Three Seas Initiative is a "small-scale complementary format...to further the objectives that the EU already has." According to the official, cooperation in the Baltic Sea region has not been negatively impacted by the Initiative in the slightest, and in fact its impact could be viewed as just the opposite. Discussions of Baltic positions within the Three Seas Initiative have been coordinated within Baltic-state cooperation frameworks.

Estonia has long been a supporter of European integration and the liberal economic concepts with which it is associated. For example, Estonia was among the first countries to leave the ruble zone, in 1992, and it was the first Baltic state to adopt the euro, in 2011.<sup>6</sup> One example of how the Three Seas Initiative fits with Estonia's liberal economic views is the nature of the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund, which Estonia sees as the key added value of this integration format. Globally, there is a gap between infrastructure needs and infrastructure funding. Estonia sees the Three Seas Initiative

- 5 E. Varik, "Mapping Estonia's Arctic Vision: Call for an Influential European Union in Securing the Arctic," *The Arctic Institute*, August 29, 2023, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/mapping-estonia-arctic-vision-call-influential-european-union-securing-arctic/>
- 6 M. Dabrowski, "Post-communist transition and monetary disintegration," *CESifo Forum*, vvol. 17, no. 4, München: ifo Institut-Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung an der Universität München, 2016.

Investment Fund as a pilot project that could offer an example of how to solve this significant problem. The fund is “politically inspired and commercially run” and should enable an improved use of private capital to solve the need for better and more infrastructure. Although the fund is still mostly made up of public money, there is optimism that the model will be successful. Estonia was the third country to join the fund in 2020 and contributed 20 million to it.<sup>7</sup> The fund aims to be commercially viable, and as such, makes the investment decisions. So far in Estonia, the fund has invested in the company Greenergy Data Centers, in accord with the country’s standing as an expert in cyber security and e-governance and its long-standing interest in furthering digital infrastructure and services.<sup>8</sup>

## The Geopolitics of Connectivity

The rapid pace of technological advancements means that the line between digital and physical infrastructure is smaller than ever. Estonia’s intense focus on e-governance and cyber security does not mean the country can ignore physical infrastructure. The Estonian official interviewed noted that “digital and physical components are so integrated they are almost indistinguishable from each other.” Connectivity in the twenty-first century also involves new security risks because there is a digital aspect to most infrastructure. For Estonia, one way of limiting the security risks is to consider with care the connections it makes. For Estonia, the Three Seas

7 Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Three Seas Initiative (3SI). Updated August 26, 2022, <https://www.vm.ee/en/international-relations-estonian-diaspora/regional-cooperation/three-seas-initiative-3si#:~:text=On%2016%20April%2C%202020%2C%20Estonia,Sea%20and%20Adriatic%20Sea%20region.>

8 Ibidem.

Initiative is an opportunity to increase connectivity with the country's trusted partners. There is a great need for North-South infrastructure, and Estonia hopes the Three Seas Initiative can help fill the gap.

The rise of China and the aggression of Russia mean that in regard to connectivity there are two aims that need to be pursued and that the Three Seas Initiative can help achieve. The first is to counter the potential global influence of Chinese infrastructure funding. The Estonian official interviewed for this chapter stated that "certain governments' models and ways of political thought or philosophy are exported in forms of connectivity and connectivity investments." This was a not-so-subtle reference to the discussions that have already taken place in Europe over Chinese investments in infrastructure and IT technologies. In Estonia, the debate was settled when Estonia and the United States signed a joint declaration that ensured Estonia would not sign any deals with the Chinese company Huawei to invest in 5G technology infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

The second aim is resilience. Russia's military aggression in the region has changed Estonia's focus from digital infrastructure to energy security and transport infrastructure as well. Russia has long demonstrated its willingness to use gas and energy as a tool of political coercion,<sup>10</sup> and Estonia thus has the need for energy resilience. Infrastructure can play a large role in increasing energy security, as the resilience of energy transport is largely dependent on the existence of multiple routes. If one electric cable or gas pipeline is attacked, then an alternate route can compensate. In October of 2023, the Baltic Connector gas pipeline was severely damaged by an anchor belong-

9 US Embassy in Estonia. United States–Estonia Joint Declaration on 5G Security. November 1, 2019, <https://ee.usembassy.gov/joint-declaration-on-5g/>

10 R. W. Orttung, & I. Overland, "A limited toolbox: explaining the constraints on Russia's foreign energy policy," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2011, 2(1), 74–85.

ing to the Chinese ship *Newnew Polar Bear*.<sup>11</sup> The pipeline connected the Baltic and Finnish gas markets. However, as Estonia gets most of its gas from a gas storage facility in Latvia and holds a strategic reserve there,<sup>12</sup> its supply was not disrupted. Finland's resilience is also sufficient, because it has added LNG capabilities in recent years and is able to boost LNG shipments for winter.<sup>13</sup>

One aspect of infrastructure resilience that has received renewed attention from Estonia since the war in Ukraine broke out has been transportation and, specifically, military mobility. Transportation projects need to factor in military mobility to ensure there are logistical options for increased military support from NATO allies, if needed.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also changed perceptions of the region. Moldova and Ukraine are now associated states of the Initiative. Estonia has long been an advocate for Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia and has supported them in their quest for deeper EU integration. Estonia sees the reconstruction of Ukraine and

- 11 At the time of writing, the investigation is ongoing and while the incident bears all the traditional marks of Russian hybrid warfare, the details of the incident are not available. It is likely that at the time of publication the public will already know the main actors involved and whether this incident was intentional or not. "Chinese vessel even nearer to Balticconnector pipeline at time of leak," *ERR News*, October 17, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1609134998/chinese-vessel-even-nearer-to-balticconnector-pipeline-at-time-of-leak>
- 12 Council of the European Union. Information Note. "Balticconnector disruption between Finland and Estonia on 8 October 2023". October 13, 2023. No. 14089/23, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14089-2023-IN11/en/pdf#:~:text=Regarding%20Estonian%20security%20of%20gas,whole%20winter%20consumption%20for%20Estonia.>
- 13 *Ibidem*.
- 14 For a detailed analysis on the subject see B. Hodges, R. Wojcik, & T. Lawrence, "Until Something Moves: Reinforcing the Baltic Region in Crisis and War," International Centre for Defence and Security, March 31, 2020, <https://icds.ee/en/until-something-moves-reinforcing-the-baltic-region-in-crisis-and-war/>.



the integration of Ukraine with the European Union to be a monumental task that will need all of Europe's resources. The Three Seas Initiative can play a role in this process.

The last geopolitical aspect of the Initiative that should be mentioned is the engagement of the United States. The United States is a strategic partner of the Three Seas Initiative and has committed significant funds to the investment fund. For Estonia, this is seen as a positive development. A long-standing pillar of Estonia's foreign policy has been to encourage US engagement in the Baltic Sea region and Europe in general. Estonian diplomat Jaap Ora described the attitude best when he penned an opinion piece titled "More America!"<sup>15</sup> According to the Joint Statement from the 2020 Three Seas summit, which was held in Tallinn,<sup>16</sup> the participating states "reaffirm that the continuous economic and strategic presence of the United States of America in the Three Seas region contributes to the strengthening of the Transatlantic link."<sup>17</sup> In the early years, the Initiative could be seen as an "American and CEE partnership,"<sup>18</sup> which, of course, is not in and of itself a bad development, but the 2003 Iraq war and US efforts to create tensions in Europe with talk of a new and old Europe might be remembered. US interest in the Initiative came at a time when US tensions with Germany were increasing. In the early stages

15 J. Ora, "More America!" (Rohkem Ameerikat!), *Diplomaatia*, 2014, NR. 130/131, June, <https://diplomaatia.ee/rohkem-ameerikat/>

16 Due to Covid, the summit was held in a hybrid manner, with mostly online participation.

17 Three Seas Virtual Summit. Joint Statement. October 19, 2020, [https://www.vm.ee/en/international-relations-estonian-diaspora/regional-cooperation/three-seas-initiative-3si?view\\_instance=0&current\\_page=1#-joint-declarations-](https://www.vm.ee/en/international-relations-estonian-diaspora/regional-cooperation/three-seas-initiative-3si?view_instance=0&current_page=1#-joint-declarations-)

18 G. Zbińkowski, "The Three Seas Initiative and its economic and geopolitical effect on the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Economic Research. Central and Eastern Europe*, 2019, 22(2), p. 114.

of the Three Seas Initiative, it was even seen by some as anti-EU.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the US has maintained an interest in the Initiative over two successive presidential administrations bodes well for the endurance of such interest. The inclusion of the European Commission as a strategic partner in 2018 ensured that the Initiative would remain complementary to EU integration.<sup>20</sup>

## Estonia and the Three Seas Initiative

Taking all the above into consideration, what does the Three Seas Initiative mean for Estonia? To answer this question, we should look at Estonia's perception of the Three Seas Initiative in the context of the region. Gorana Grgić notes that the Three Seas Initiative is occurring at a time when illiberalism is on the rise in some CEE countries.<sup>21</sup> Sub-regional organizations such as the Visegrád 4 have been used to promote illiberal practices and oppose policies from Brussels.<sup>22</sup> As the Initiative seeks to improve North-South connectivity, in some ways it also emphasizes the East-West divide. This was one reason why a Czech official expressed reservations about Poland's leadership role in the Initiative.

Estonia supports a strong US presence in Europe, but it also supports a strong EU and would certainly side with Brussels on most issues. In regard to the Initiative, this means that Estonia embraces

19 P. Kuusik, "How Does the Three Seas Initiative Help Estonia?" *International Centre of Defence and Security* 2020, <https://icds.ee/en/how-does-the-three-seas-initiative-help-estonia/>.

20 "State of Poland. The Three Sea Initiative—A Fascinating History," Report and Communication Strategy. Warsaw. 2023, p. 22, [https://stateofpoland.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Report\\_The\\_Three\\_Seas\\_Initiative.pdf](https://stateofpoland.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Report_The_Three_Seas_Initiative.pdf)

21 G. Grgić, "The changing dynamics of regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe", p. 232.

22 Ibidem.

the Initiative but also treats it as what it is: a small-scale, complementary format for practical cooperation to boost investments and infrastructure. In Estonia's communication with the public, often little is said about the Three Seas Initiative and the promotion of the Initiative has not been a priority for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That said, Estonia has made considerable effort to include the relevant stakeholders. It has involved Estonian businesses in the Three Seas Initiative Business forums. Certain civil society actors have also been encompassed. In 2020, in connection with the summit Estonia organized, parliamentary cooperation was encouraged and will hopefully be ongoing.

Estonia's decision to focus on the funding instrument rather than emphasize the summit, where regional politics can come into play, is a conscious choice to ensure that the Three Seas Initiative remains a format focused on infrastructure and not on politics of a kind that could help reinforce the East-West divide. This does not mean that the funding instrument is the only aspect of the Initiative that is important. As was mentioned by the Estonian official interviewed, if the infrastructure is built, then other aspects of integration, such as human and business flows, will follow on their own.

## **Conclusions**

Estonia is eagerly participating in the Three Seas Initiative, which has the potential to be a regional solution for regional problems and to utilize private capital better to solve the country's infrastructure deficit. In order to ensure that the Initiative does not become something it is not, Estonia has not promoted the Three Seas Initiative to the public. The ultimate value of the Initiative is in its complementary role in deepening EU Integration and strengthening transatlantic relations.

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**Miklós Mitrovits**

HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities  
Institute of Central European Studies of Ludovika University  
of Public Service in Budapest  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4774-8046  
e-mail: mitrovits.miklos@abtk.hu

## **The Hungarian Reception of the Three Seas Initiative in Academic Publications**

**Abstract:** In Hungary, the Three Seas Initiative has not generated much public response, political debate, or reflection. However, this chapter attempts to summarize the publications and academic articles on the Three Seas Initiative that have been published in Hungarian or written in English by Hungarian authors since 2015. The analysis presents the authors' approaches and main findings, as well as their criticisms and suggestions. It reveals not only the (common) knowledge about the Three Seas Initiative in Hungary, but also the Hungarian government's reservations about cooperation and the reasons for them.

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative, Intermarium, Visegrad Cooperation, Central Europe, public discourse

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which was launched in the summer of 2015 and inaugurated on August 25, 2016 in Dubrovnik, Croatia, received almost no coverage in the Hungarian press or among Hungarian experts. There were press reports about the Dubrovnik Forum, but they did not contain any information about the historical background of the Initiative or the circumstances of its launch, and only mentioned the topics of the roundtable (the development

of the missing North-South infrastructure in the fields of energy, transport, and the digital world). The signing of the declaration itself was not reported in the newspapers either.

The next time Hungarian readers had the opportunity to see mention of the 3SI in the press was in January 2017, when Jarosław Kaczyński gave an interview to *Heti Válasz*, the most popular conservative weekly at the time. However, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) leader was extremely laconic when asked about the subject, saying that “there is only one common issue: secure energy supplies, including gas and oil imports, which will expand the circle of exporting countries.”<sup>1</sup>

However, a year later, when Donald Trump attended the Warsaw 3SI Summit on July 5–6, 2017, the Hungarian media discovered the fact of cooperation in this format, which had already existed for a year. Almost all the Hungarian newspapers reported on the US president’s participation, but no new information about the project was transmitted to the public. Only the left-wing daily *Népszava* published a lengthy article. In it, Tamás Rónay noted that “the obvious aim of the initiative is to strengthen the role of Central and Eastern Europe in the EU. Moreover, the importance of North-South cooperation should be emphasized alongside traditional West-East cooperation.” He also pointed out the existing divergences. “[...] However, experts argue that Poland’s first target is not really Brussels but Berlin.” The article also cites historical arguments: “Since the inter-war period, Poland has dreamed of cooperation between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in order to limit the influence of the Soviet Union and Germany. At the same time, it would bring the Poles closer to the Baltic states for historical reasons.” In regard to Hungary’s position, the author pointed out that “the foreign policy

1 *Heti Válasz*, January 12, 2017. Since then, the newspaper has ceased to exist and some of its editors have founded the online news service [valaszonline.hu](http://valaszonline.hu).

priorities of the two governments are not really the same” and that Budapest was interested in demonstrating the unity of the Visegrád Four. The article was accompanied by a commentary by Gábor Miklós, *Népszava*'s Polish expert, who expressed extreme skepticism about the whole Initiative and Trump's visit to Warsaw.

Overall, it can be said that the summer of 2017 saw a turnaround, if not a breakthrough, in the Hungarian press. From then on, current events related to the 3SI were covered more frequently.

### **Newspaper Articles, Academic Analyses**

The author of this chapter was the first to write a newspaper article in Hungarian on the formulation and promotion of the Three Seas Initiative concept. My first article, on the Hungarian government's opening to the East and South, the deterioration of relations with the then Polish government (under Ewa Kopacz), and the marginalization of Central European regional cooperation, was published in October 2015. This was the moment when the Austrian–Czech–Slovak “Slavkov Triangle” was established, the 3SI was announced by Polish President Andrzej Duda, and the “united Visegrád front,” against the wave of illegal migrants from the south, was already falling apart. I merely pointed out that if Law and Justice were to win a majority in the October parliamentary elections, the new

government will seek to strengthen Warsaw's regional influence, which in practice means expanding the Visegrád Four to include Romania and the Western Balkans, and bringing Ukraine closer to the alliance. This would be a revival of the interwar concept of the *Mediterranea*, close regional cooperation between countries in the area from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Black Sea. The Law and Justice Party wants this region—as already announced by the new president, Andrzej Duda, elected in May—to be a political and economic potential that can prevent Russia and Germany from becoming dependent on each other.



I also pointed out that Budapest risked becoming isolated in the region if it did not follow and react to new developments.<sup>2</sup>

A few months later I wrote another article on the subject. This one was more specific about the initiative announced by the new Polish government:

Polish governments have always been serious about distancing Central Europe from Russia and using all means to stop Russian expansion. The new Polish government's concept for Central Europe also aims to achieve this. It is not just about cooperation between the Visegrád Four but about the so-called Intermarium: close economic, political, and security cooperation between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea countries. This was already a milestone of Polish foreign policy in the interwar period, so it is not a new idea.

The article emphasizes first of all that “closer cooperation between the countries of the region could be a guarantee for the security and energy independence of Central Europe and its ability to deter Russia. On the other hand, such a system of alliances could also secure Poland's status as a regional power.”<sup>3</sup>

My third article was written in the summer of 2017, before the Three Seas Initiative summit in Warsaw, although it was published two days afterward. It also had a telling title: “The Three Seas—the Future of Central and Eastern Europe?” The article was the first attempt to briefly summarize the historical background of the idea. It also referred to Józef Piłsudski's federation plans and Józef Beck's idea of a “Third Europe.” It drew attention to the obstacles that had already existed in the interwar period. These included the Hungarian–Romanian disputes, the memory of the Hungarian–Polish alliance

- 2 M. Mitrovits, “Közép-Európa nem számít?” [Does Central Europe Not Matter?] *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], October 9, 2015.
- 3 M. Mitrovits, “Válaszúton a visegrádi együttműködés” [Visegrad Cooperation at a Crossroads] *Élet és Irodalom*, April 8, 2016.

against Czechoslovakia, and the Polish–Lithuanian feuds, which did not inspire sympathy for the renewal of the plan. I argued at the time that the Russian invasion of Crimea argued for unity in the region, and that Poland could of course play a leading role.

The article quotes Polish politicians who, precisely to overcome the opposition of smaller states, tried to emphasize that the new initiative was not geopolitical in nature and that its objectives were purely pragmatic. At the time, I believed that “the two are not mutually exclusive, and pragmatic economic, security, and infrastructure cooperation would be the basis for a broad regional alliance.”

The development of North-South infrastructure and economic links is seen as a legitimate and necessary goal, I said: “The Three Seas Initiative would be successful if cooperation could help the region become more competitive and if its integration could facilitate its connection to the center.”

I highlighted two aspects of Donald Trump and the US’s role: on the one hand, security policy and military development plans, and on the other, the possibility of importing US liquefied natural gas. “Overall, the current situation is that the security and energy interests of the region and the US are converging. There is a chance that the dependence of Central and Eastern Europe on Russia will be eliminated and its threat reduced,” I concluded.

The Warsaw Summit and Trump’s visit to Warsaw also attracted the attention of other researchers. Beatrix Tölgyesy, a former fellow at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade, has published an analysis on the subject.<sup>4</sup> The stated aim of the article is “to provide Hungarian foreign policy with a broader insight into the background

4 B. Tölgyesy, *A Három tenger kezdeményezés és az Intermarium koncepció háttere és kilátásai*, [Context and Perspectives of the Three Seas Initiative and the Intermarium Concept.] *KKI elemzések*, E-2017/30. Budapest: Külügyi és Külgazdasági Intézet 2017, [https://kki.hu/assets/upload/30\\_KKI-elemzes\\_POL\\_Tolgyesi\\_20171121.pdf](https://kki.hu/assets/upload/30_KKI-elemzes_POL_Tolgyesi_20171121.pdf).

and prospects of the initiative." The occasion for the text was the summit attended by Donald Trump on July 6, 2017: "Although the concept itself has been present in Polish foreign policy thinking for about a century, this is probably the first time that the public in other countries (including our own) has heard about it on a wider scale."

Tölgyesy, like myself, defines the 3SI as a "Polish geopolitical concept." She also presents the historical antecedents of the project, which is "based on the Polish geopolitical concept, the idea of an Intermarium/Międzymorze, which is about one hundred years old." She mentions Józef Piłsudski, Jerzy Giedroyc, and Lech Kaczyński, and finally quotes President Andrzej Duda's inaugural speech on "Poland's Leadership in Central Europe and NATO." Croatia's role in the Initiative is mentioned in passing. She then refers to the "Intermarium Project" as the ABC Project, after the Polish initials for the three seas, and thus reinforces the claim that the Initiative is a Polish concept.

On the historical background of the concept, she mentions that in the interwar period "it was originally intended to be some kind of federated state," but forgets to mention that Józef Piłsudski's federation concepts included only Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine, and that these were also taken off the agenda after the 1921 Riga Peace Treaty. She does, however, rightly emphasize the "defense aspect" of the original concept, and then, moving on to the current initiative, sees this aspect as no longer dominant, but rather superseded by energy policy and energy security, with "the military aspect being less prominent." She notes that "the joint task force formed by the Visegrád Four in 2011 under Polish command also seems to be inspired by the Intermarium." On the other hand, she disputes Polish claims that the current approach is fundamentally different from the one before the two world wars, that is, it is not geopolitical but "purely pragmatic."

Tölgyesy then goes on to analyze the summit on July 6, 2017. This was the main inspiration for the text. She quotes the text of the final declaration adopted at the meeting, which states that "North-South relations also need to be strengthened, especially in the areas of infra-

structure, economic, and social interconnection. This is also necessary because of the disparities in the region's transport, energy, and telecommunications networks, which hinder the region's economic development." She also cites the document as a reference point for the objectives and priorities of cooperation. "It is therefore clear that this is not a declared initiative in competition with the EU, but one that complements it. This can also be seen from the complementarity in its slogan (connectivity, commerciality, complementarity ),"<sup>5</sup> she concludes.

Tölgyesy also describes the nature of the cooperation on the basis of the resolution adopted at the summit, which defines it as "a flexible forum of heads of state to strengthen cooperation between business, governments, and civil society organizations through the development of regional relations, but concrete results depend primarily on the commitment of the governments concerned."

The next part of the study is entitled "The American Strand." Here the presence and role of Donald Trump is presented. Tölgyesy notes that for Trump "the summit was a great opportunity to improve his own image among eastern NATO members (which is overshadowed by his statements on the use of Article 5 and his pro-Russian image)." On the other hand, "the Poles took the opportunity to dispel the narrative of the country's foreign policy isolation by hosting the US president. One of Poland's ambitions in this initiative is to become an energy distribution center for Central Europe."

As for US-Polish cooperation, the author points to the Baltic Pipe project and US-Polish opposition to North Stream II. She quotes retired US General James L. Jones, who said that "the Three Seas Initiative should be a strategic priority for the Trump administration," and mentions German criticism of the Initiative. However, as far as Trump is concerned, she suggests that he wanted to use the Initiative "for his own purposes, which the Polish leadership is not necessarily aware of."

5 Ibidem.

Finally, Tölgyesy talks about the chances of implementation. Here she remarks that it is difficult not to notice that the whole thing “reflects Polish power ambitions” and that it also includes “territories once under Polish influence and belonging to the Polish state, such as Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, (partly Latvia and Estonia).” It should be noted that this statement is inaccurate, first, because it does not refer to territories belonging to the Polish state but to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, and second, because Belarus and Ukraine were never members of the Three Seas Initiative, while several countries that were never under the influence of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth are.

Tölgyesy goes on to discuss the objections of the Czechs and others but concludes that in the end, two factors will determine whether the Initiative has a future: is there economic interest and political will behind it? In terms of economic interests, she cites independence from Russian gas supplies as the single factor that could “interest America” in the project. However, she immediately refutes this supposed common interest with the contrary position of the Hungarian government, and backs it up with the fact that just the day before the summit, Hungary had signed an agreement to join the Turkish Stream pipeline, through which it could buy Russian gas. She also mentions Bulgaria, which also signed a long-term contract with Gazprom.

Finally, she also describes the collective political will as weak, suggesting that in a “two-speed Europe” many fear confrontation with Berlin and Brussels if they deepen cooperation too much. She also points to the fact that all three EU commissioners invited to the summit refused to attend and cites views to the effect that Trump’s participation would be politically counterproductive and “could turn [the Initiative] into some kind of separatist, anti-EU bloc.”

As far as I know, Tölgyesy’s study is the only one published on the subject by the Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade (now the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs). Overall, it is a good summary that reflects the situation and dilemmas of the summer

of 2017 well. However, two main criticisms can be made of the article: 1) the historical background of the concept is incomplete and inaccurate, 2) the author does not mention at all that in 2014 Russia annexed Crimea, a territory belonging to sovereign Ukraine, and supported so-called separatists in two eastern regions of Ukraine. These facts had a profound impact on the foreign policy of the Polish government and the direction of the Three Seas Initiative.

Three years later, in 2020, Andrea Schmidt published a longer study entitled “The Lifeblood of Europe... Poland’s Ambitions for Regional Supremacy in the 21st Century and Its Roots.”<sup>6</sup> The article is divided into three parts. The first presents the historical background of Poland’s foreign policy ambitions; the second looks at the countries Poland has regarded as potential partners in its foreign policy; and the final part analyzes Poland’s geopolitics today.

In her introduction, Schmidt sets the political context for the topic by citing two different visions of foreign policy. The first is that of Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski (2007–2014, from 2023), who believes that “Poland’s success was clearly visible in its support for the joint efforts of (friendly) great powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany.” The second was summarized by Krzysztof Szczerski, President Andrzej Duda’s chief of staff, in his 2017 book<sup>7</sup> (also published in Hungarian in 2018<sup>8</sup>), as the need to have strong and independent Central European countries capable

- 6 A. Schmidt, “Három tenger mossza.... Lengyelország regionális nagyhatalmi ambíciói a 21. században és annak gyökerei” [The Lifeblood of Europe... Poland’s Ambitions for Regional Supremacy in the 21st Century and Its Roots] *Pólusok* 2020, no. 1, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15170/PSK.2020.01.01.06>
- 7 K. Szczerski, *Utopia europejska. Kryzys integracji i polska inicjatywa naprawy* [European Utopia: The Crisis of Integration and the Polish Initiative for Recovery], Kraków: Biały Kruk 2017.
- 8 K. Szczerski, *Az európai utópia. Az integráció válsága és a lengyel reformkezdményezés*. Budapest: Rézbong Kiadó 2018.

of resisting German and Russian hegemonic ambitions. He describes Germany not so much as a partner but as a rival.

Schmidt then attempts to show the Hungarian reader the historical roots of these two Polish foreign policy concepts. In regard to our topic, she uncovers the historical antecedents of the current opposition in the “Piast position,” which was articulated at the end of the First World War, and the “Jagiellonian position,” which can be contrasted with it. The former refers to the so-called “realist” view of Roman Dmowski, who “imagined Poland as a unified nation-state with a smaller territory,” and the latter to Józef Piłsudski’s “Promethean strategy,” according to which “the pledge of Poland’s independence would be the surrounding states of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus (the so-called ULB), which would also play a role in the federation of Poland.” The latter “also adopted a balanced pro-Western stance.”<sup>9</sup>

Here Schmidt introduces the central idea of Polish ambitions to become a great regional power, the “Intermarium.” She identifies this with Piłsudski’s plan for a Polish–Lithuanian–Belarusian–

9 I note here that the author of this chapter provides a broad overview of Polish geopolitical thought in a three-part study that aims to provide the Hungarian audience with a detailed historical background of the Trilateral Initiative. See Miklós Mitrovits, *A lengyel geopolitikai gondolkodás története I. rész – A kezdetek*, [History of Polish Geopolitical Thought, Part I–Beginnings], <https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/horizontokblog/2023/06/12/a-lengyel-geopolitikai-gondolkodas-tortenete-i-a-kezdetek>; Idem, *A lengyel geopolitikai gondolkodás története II. rész – Az újjászülető Lengyelország*, [History of Polish Geopolitical Thought, Part II–Rebirth of Poland], <https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/horizontokblog/2023/06/19/a-lengyel-geopolitikai-gondolkodas-tortenete-ii-resz-az-ujjaszuleto-lengyelorszag>; Idem, *A lengyel geopolitikai gondolkodás története III. rész – A „lengyel Ostpolitik”*, [History of Polish Geopolitical Thought, Part III–“Polish Ostpolitik”], <https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/horizontokblog/2023/06/28/a-lengyel-geopolitikai-gondolkodas-tortenete-iii-resz-a-lengyel-ostpolitik>.

Ukrainian federation, in order “to create a unified alliance that would effectively compete with the growing influence of the two great powers, Germany and the Soviet Union.”

The text clearly identifies the federation plans and the Intermarium project with Piłsudski’s so-called Jagiellonian position, which remained in the concepts of Foreign Minister Józef Beck, who continued to promote cooperation in Central Europe after Piłsudski’s death. Schmidt concludes her text with a description of the complete failure of this concept, which was ended by the Molotov–Rippentrop Pact but revived in exile during the war.

According to Schmidt, Dmowski’s line of realism could also be found in the official foreign policy of the Polish People’s Republic, but the ideas of the émigré circles are still important for our subject. Here she presents the new ideas—which became known as the Giedroyc–Mieroszewski doctrine—of the Paris intellectual circle, in opposition to Dmowski’s heirs.

The change of regime created a new situation. Schmidt, referring to a 2020 text of Oleksii Polegkyi, a Ukrainian researcher, distinguishes three main currents. The first is political realism, which is the stance of the intellectual heirs of Dmowski, who are found mainly among nationalist groups. According to this view, Poland “seeks balanced economic relations with Russia, mainly in the interests of energy security. The price of this, of course, is that it overshadows Poland’s involvement in Ukraine and Belarus.” The second tendency is political romanticism, that is, the Jagiellonian approach, which is “nothing more than an expression of Polish great power ambitions.” The third tendency is political pragmatism, which emphasizes Poland’s character as a middle power and the tasks this entails, rather than “great power ambitions” or “maritime sympathies,” that is, Polish great power ambitions in connection with the ABC or Three Seas Initiative.

In practice, Schmidt argues, Polish foreign policy after 1990 has been made up of these three strands, with forces within



the government deciding which one prevails. Although she does not state it explicitly, she makes clear that the idea of the Three Seas Initiative is a practical manifestation of Polish romanticism. Yet she remarks in a footnote that “the issue of the Intermarium was for many years a matter of radical far-right platforms.” At the time of writing, she could have added that the radical national side is now more in line with Dmowski’s “realism.”

Turning to the present, Schmidt rightly concludes that 2015 brought significant changes. The Law and Justice Party, which came to power, first included the Jagiellonian idea in its program, then restored Poland’s great power ambitions (romanticism), and thus the 3SI became a central foreign policy program. However, the author sees signs of this tendency already in the 2009 Eastern Partnership program.

In summary, Schmidt stresses that the current 3SI should not be confused with the pre-1939 Intermarium program: “One of the main differences between the two is that while the former was designed as a federation-oriented program, approaching the interwar reality of Central Europe from a Polish perspective, the latter is more in line with the geopolitical and even geo-economic challenges of our time.”

Finally, I must mention an article titled “Trimarium–The Three Seas Initiative,” by Czech studies scholar Andor Mészáros, published after the Riga 2022 summit in the moderately conservative weekly *Országút*.<sup>10</sup> Mészáros takes a different approach. In his introduction, he draws attention to the first cooperation in the Central European region, the Visegrád cooperation, an idea that originated in the dissident movement of the 1980s. On the other hand, he argues that the success of the V4 “did not mean that other forms of cooperation with different goals and emphases were not born.” In his view, the Three Seas Initiative, established in 2015, “focuses on specific geo-

10 A. Mészáros, “Trimarium – a Három Tenger Kezdeményezés,” [Trimarium–The Three Seas Initiative]. *Országút*, 2022, no. 3, <https://orszagut.com/kitekinto/trimarium-a-harom-tenger-kezdemenyeze-3284>.

political, infrastructural and economic goals of our region and now covers 100 million people” and is “the broadest economic and infrastructural cooperation in the region. Its size makes it one of the partnerships in the region that can be considered a major player not only in European but also in global politics.” Mészáros also sees the reasons for the 3SI’s creation in the regional tradition of Polish history (he points to Polish ancestors in the interwar period) and in the European partnership policy of the United States.

Mészáros identifies economic cooperation as the main goal of the Initiative but criticizes the fact that its success is hampered by the fact that it has not been institutionalized: “It is not entirely clear how to move from the level of presidential declarations to the governmental and, above all, the economic sphere, in order to implement the planned projects and create a Central European grouping that would be larger and more influential than the Visegrád Four, as envisioned by Poland, and situated between Germany and Russia.”

The other half of his criticism is also economic: it concerns the use and scope of the money paid into the 3SI Investment Fund, which was to be created in 2019: “Can part of the public payments be used for national investments, or can they be divided, and in what proportion, between different economic objectives? On the other hand, are the amounts paid sufficient to achieve the objectives?”

In conclusion, “the Three Seas Initiative can be important for the implementation of development projects in the Central European region with high economic development potential, according to their own economic needs” (e.g., offshore LNG terminals in the Baltic and Adriatic Sea, and connecting gas pipelines, Via Carpathia, Via Baltica).

### **Academic Papers in English Written by Hungarian Scholars**

In addition to the sparse literature in Hungarian, there are several publications in English written by Hungarian experts from

a Hungarian perspective. Three of these will be highlighted below for their quality.

The first to be discussed here, both thematically and chronologically, is Andrea Schmidt's study "From Intermarium to the Three Seas Initiative—The Implications of the Polish Orientation over the Central and Eastern European Region on Hungarian Foreign Policy," published in the volume *Baltic–Black Sea Regionalisms Patchworks and Networks at Europe's Eastern Margins*, edited by Olga Bogdanova and Andrei Makariev.<sup>11</sup> Schmidt's aim is to explore whether European integration can change Polish attitudes and what role the Three Seas Initiative can play in Hungarian foreign policy.

This study also begins with a historical introduction. This time—probably in response to the foreign reader's lack of knowledge—the author explains Hungary's historical heritage in more detail. In comparison with Poland, she notes that after the First World War, the collapse of the Austro–Hungarian monarchy, the dismemberment of the historic Kingdom of Hungary, and the ensuing hostility with the successor states led to unsolvable conflicts in Hungary, "which hampered any cooperation, since they now treated each other as enemies." "Hungary hence grabbed every opportunity to point to the injustice of the Treaty of Trianon." Poland, on the other hand, found itself in a very different situation after the war. Not only was there an independent Poland, but there was also the possibility of changing its borders. Here Schmidt again presents the Piast–Jagiellonian opposition, which we have already described above, from the same author's work.

11 A. Schmidt, "From Intermarium to the Three Seas Initiative—The Implications of the Polish Orientation over the Central and Eastern European Region on Hungarian Foreign Policy," in: O. Bogdanova, A. Makarychev (eds), *Baltic–Black Sea Regionalisms*, Cham: Springer 2020, pp. 149–168, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-24878-9.

In the next chapter, Schmidt describes the origins of the Intermarium project, from Pilsudski's ideas to Foreign Minister Józef Beck's "Third Europe" plan, covering the interwar period. At the same time, the author points out that the convergence of Hungarian and Polish policies in the 1930s contradicted those of Czechoslovakia, and that Hungarian–Romanian differences were not resolved. Thus, the realization of the Intermarium project in any form was an illusion. All this was sealed by German expansion, the Anschluss, and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

In discussing the period after the Second World War, Schmidt highlights the role of the Polish émigrés in Paris and of Jerzy Giedroyc in particular in keeping the idea of the Intermarium alive. He notes that Ferenc Nagy, the former prime minister of Hungary, also played an important role in the debate on Central and Eastern Europe in 1946–1947, but that the Hungarians and Romanians in exile feared Slavic domination of the cooperation initiated by Poland.

The question of regional cooperation only emerged in the 1980s and became a real possibility after the fall of communism—but this was cooperation not in the sense of the Polish concept of Intermarium but in the sense of the Polish–Czechoslovak–Hungarian Visegrád grouping. Although the author does not emphasize it here, it is worth noting that, unlike the Intermarium concept, Visegrád cooperation was not a geopolitical but a cultural cohesion. It was formed by a sense of belonging to the West, a common desire to return to the West, and people-to-people ties that grew out of the oppositional cooperation of the 1970s and 1980s.

Schmidt then moves on to the creation of the Three Seas Initiative, which became the focal point of Polish foreign policy after the election of Andrzej Duda as president in 2015 and the victory of Law and Justice in the elections. According to Schmidt, the 3SI "was treated partly as a revision of the Intermarium plan, with some modifications, and as a new way of redefining the role of Central and Eastern Europe as located on the Eastern periphery of the European

Union.” Interestingly, the impact of Russian aggression, which was barely mentioned in the Hungarian texts, is emphasized. According to Schmidt,

the Ukrainian crisis and growing fears of Russian actions, combined with an awareness that certain core EU members might not firmly resist Russian aggression in the Black Sea and Baltic regions, have led Poland to look for an alternative regional counterweight. The Three Seas Initiative could be a response to energy dependence on Russia and economic dependence on Germany, or a natural reaction from the Central European region to the second-rate position these states experienced, even after entrance into the European Union, but it could also be treated as a pure geo-economic concept....Hungarian participation in the TSI is rather controversial or at least not openly discussed. The confusing elements are its anti-Russian approach and pro-US standpoint, not to mention its openness towards the inclusion of Chinese capital for investment. During the third Orbán government (between 2014 and 2018), Hungarian and Russian relations have been getting closer at the level of the Hungarian government, while since 2014, American–Hungarian relations have been in somewhat of a deep freeze.

In the end, Schmidt concludes that the Hungarian government was not interested in this Initiative because it did not fit into its foreign policy strategy at all.

Another important study that should be mentioned here is Zsombor Zeöld’s essay “Hungary: Giving the Minimum,” which was published in a volume before the Riga 2022 Summit by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs. This paper was written after Russia launched an open war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022.<sup>12</sup>

12 Z. Zeöld, “Hungary: Giving the Minimum,” in: *Three Seas Initiative: Mapping National Perspectives*, A. Sprūds, M. Vargulis (eds), Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs 2022, pp. 81–97.

Zeöld<sup>13</sup> is a Hungarian researcher who, while sympathetic to the Three Seas Initiative, is a fierce critic of what he sees as the modest results achieved so far and would like to see more financial support from member states and the US to make the cooperation a success. He begins his article by noting that key issues related to the financial component of the Initiative remain unresolved ahead of the Riga Summit. But he goes on to make a strong case for the expected impact of the Russian–Ukrainian situation, in particular that the military dimension of the Initiative will come to the fore. Moreover, he points out that at least two of the three main areas of cooperation (energy security, physical infrastructure development, digital development) are directly related to military issues.

Zeöld's main criticism concerns the behavior of the US. On the one hand, after the 2020 presidential elections, Washington significantly reduced its potential support for the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund, cutting its potential financial commitment from \$1 billion to just \$300 million. On the other hand, the 3SI even disappeared from US communications after President Biden took office, as exemplified by his visit to Warsaw in April 2022, during which the subject was completely absent from public pronouncements.

The main part of the article also deals with the geopolitical future of the Initiative—from our point of view. According to Zeöld, it will depend on 1) Germany's position toward the region, 2) the future of European strategic autonomy, 3) the success of Polish foreign and military policies in striving for a regional leader position at the expense of Germany, 4) the future of Ukraine's EU membership,

13 I note here that Zsombor Zeöld wrote a joint study with Łukasz Janulewicz on the Triple Seas Initiative in 2020. See Ł. Janulewicz, Z. Zeöld, "The Three Seas Initiative after the Tallinn Summit: Progress with Unfinished Business," *The Warsaw Institute Review*, 2020, no. 4, pp. 61–68.

and 5) larger processes that affect the 3SI as a regional cooperation framework.

The article then turns to Hungary and, more specifically, the Hungarian government's relationship with the Initiative. Zeöld cites two geographical arguments as to why Budapest is not prioritizing the project. First, the country has no coastline and is therefore dependent (at least in part) on neighboring members of the trilateral for non-Russian energy sources. On the other hand, transport is a top priority for Hungary, which has already developed its infrastructure without the 3SI, thanks largely to EU funding. The Hungarian section of the Via Carpathia is of marginal importance (if only it were not seen as a military-strategic north-south transport route). But this has never been publicly acknowledged by either Hungary or the other member states of the Initiative.

Zeöld mentions three possible reasons for Hungary's "minimal" role in this cooperation. The first is the historical and geographical factors already mentioned (the role of an adopter rather than an initiator). The second are internal factors, such as the divided structure of the government. He probably means that in Hungary it is not always clear who is responsible for energy or economic policy. Finally, there are external factors, such as the fact that Hungary's foreign policy strategy prioritizes relations with Russia and China, and other forms of cooperation (e.g., Visegrád cooperation).

Hungary's position on this issue could be influenced by two factors: one at the strategic level (including relations with the US, Russia, and China) and the other at the regional level. Relations with the US, Russia, and China are largely known, but the Hungarian government would have to reconsider its regional policy in light of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the author points out.

A year later, on the eve of the Bucharest summit of the Three Seas Initiative, an article titled "Hungary towards the Three Seas Initiative" by a young Hungarian researcher, Dénes András Nagy, appeared in a volume edited by Łukasz Lewkowicz and published

by the Institute for Central Europe in Lublin.<sup>14</sup> It is clear from the summary at the beginning of the article that Nagy has a radically different view of Hungary's approach to the 3SI than Zsombor Zeöld had a year earlier, but overall, he is much more positive about Hungary's involvement in the Initiative than the researchers quoted above. The main conclusions of the article are as follows:

- 1) Hungary has played an active, engaged, positive, and constructive role as a co-founding Member State of the 3SI from the outset.
- 2) Hungarian support has contributed to the institutionalization of the Three Seas Initiative via the creation of a Business Forum, a Network of Chambers of Commerce, an Investment Fund, and a Parliamentary Forum, and Hungarian decision-makers have welcomed the launch of the Collegium Intermarium University.
- 3) The Hungarian government's proposal to create a "permanent secretariat for the Three Seas Initiative"-headquartered in Budapest-should be seriously considered.

Nagy also takes a historical approach in the first part of his study. I would like to highlight just two of his findings. The first is that the "baseline condition of Hungarian engagement in any form of regional cooperation is to preserve the central, coordinative, and connective nature of the Hungarian state as the geographic, and thus geoeconomic and geopolitical, center of the region demarcated by the three seas." The second is that "in order to ensure that Hungarian national interests are effectively represented within the EU and NATO arenas, Hungary seeks to form regional cooperation alliances with countries that pragmatically share the same fundamental worldview." From this basic position, Nagy concludes that "From a Hungarian perspective, the Visegrád Four (V4) countries

14 D. A. Nagy, "Hungary towards the Three Seas Initiative," in: *The Three Seas Initiative before the Bucharest Summit 2023: The perspective of selected participating countries*, Ł. Lewkowicz (ed.), Lublin: IES 2023, pp. 13–35.



form the central geopolitical core of the Intermarium region, and thus the success of the Three Seas Initiative depends on the unity of the V<sub>4</sub> and their ability to act together.” These harsh statements reflect the official position of the Hungarian government.

The middle part of the article reviews the history of the 3SI (summit by summit) and presents the main messages of Hungarian participation. It shows that the sole Hungarian initiative to be advanced had to wait until 2020, when the Hungarian government proposed that the permanent secretariat of the Three Seas Initiative be located in Budapest. Nagy quotes the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who argues that “launching an international secretariat will increase the visibility and capacities of the Initiative and enhance continuity, coordination, and information sharing among stakeholders.” Nagy adds that “if adopted, this proposal would be a major milestone in the institutionalization of the Three Seas Initiative. Sadly, hitherto this constructive formalization proposal from the Hungarian side has not been appropriately addressed and the issue has been sidestepped by the Member States who seek to preserve the informal nature of the Three Seas Initiative.” In the conclusion of the analysis, Nagy reiterates that “should the 3SI wish to continue to enjoy constructive Hungarian participation in it, the proposal of the Hungarian government to establish a Three Seas Initiative Permanent Secretariat in Budapest—the symbolic center of the region—should be seriously considered.” This formulation is also interesting from the perspective that Dénes András Nagy, unlike other researchers, does not see the 3SI as an extension of Poland’s central power or as a distinctive trend in Polish foreign policy thinking, but emphasizes Hungary’s central role in it. Unfortunately, there is no justification for this position in the text, so we can only take it as the official position of the Hungarian government. (Although it should be added that the Hungarian government representatives are not as strongly in favor of the institutionalization of the 3SI as Nagy claims. In fact,

Budapest often says that the V4 format—that is, cooperation without a joint secretariat—is the most appropriate for it.)

Finally, it is worth mentioning the Hungarian position adopted at the 2022 Riga Summit that only EU members can join the 3SI, and therefore the accession of Ukraine and Serbia to the EU should be supported, which would pave the way for them to join the Initiative. (However, it has since emerged that the government in Budapest only supports Serbia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the EU, although it has not vetoed the opening of negotiations with Ukraine). Toward the end of the article, Nagy, recalling the plans that emerged when the Initiative was launched, also proposes membership for Italy, Serbia, Macedonia, Turkey, and Georgia, and mentions Finland in the north (the latter is interesting in view of the fact that the Hungarian parliament has been postponing a vote on Finland's NATO membership for months).

In addition to the academic papers, it is worth noting that two academic conferences (in English) of a different nature have taken place in Budapest recently. The first was organized by the author of this paper on October 20, 2023 at the Institute for Central European Studies of the Ludovika University of Public Service, in Budapest, with the title "The Place of Poland in Central Europe and the Role of Regional Cooperation." In addition to the author of this paper, the speakers at the conference included Prof. Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, project leader of the Three Seas Initiative ISP PAN, Łukasz Lewkowicz, senior analyst of the Visegrád Department of the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin, and Marlena Gołębiowska, analyst of the Baltic Department of the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin.<sup>15</sup>

15 <https://keki.uni-nke.hu/english/news/2023/place-of-poland> (accessed May 13, 2024).

The other conference, titled the “3+2 Seas Initiative–Connectivity through the Middle Corridor and the Three Seas Initiative,” was organized at the Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs on April 23, 2024, with the participation of James Jay Carafano, senior counselor to the president, and E. W. Richardson, fellow at The Heritage Foundation, Mihai Sebe, head of department, European Affairs, European Institute Romania, Natko Vlahović, president of the New Frontier Foundation, and Sándor Seremet, senior research fellow, research center coordinator, Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs.<sup>16</sup>

The first conference, after a review of the historical background of the 3SI, focused on the present of the Initiative, in particular its economic aspect. At the second conference, the Hungarian government’s intention to extend the 3SI eastwards and link it with the countries of Central Asia was stressed.

## Summary

It can be concluded that there are very few texts on the 3SI in the Hungarian press and academic publications. Without exception, the articles published in Hungarian and English were written by researchers dealing with Polish, Lithuanian, or Czech issues, so it is understandable that their main source of information was material published in Polish or English. It can be concluded that most Hungarian researchers perceive the 3SI as a Polish geopolitical project aimed at establishing and maintaining Poland’s status as a regional central power.

Most of the Hungarian articles are descriptive, focusing on the historical background and criticism of the Initiative. Some of them (e.g., those by Zeöld, Nagy) also contain suggestions for the further development of cooperation.

16 <https://kki.hu/en/event/3-2-seas-initiative-meeting-at-the-hungarian-intersection/> (accessed: May 13, 2024).

It is also clear from the texts presented here that all Hungarian authors agree that Hungary has played a passive, “adaptive” role in this cooperation from the very beginning. They see the reasons for this behavior in the country’s geographical and historical location and in the foreign policy strategy of the governments in power since 2010, which differs from Poland’s strategy.

The lesser attention of Hungarian researchers is also due to the fact that the Hungarian government (the role of the prime minister is especially important here) has not paid attention to the 3SI so far. As a result, there are no Hungarian state funds available for in-depth academic research on the 3SI, and Hungarian researchers deal with the topic mostly out of their own interest, almost as an afterthought to their main research. As a result, the Hungarian academic and public discourse on 3SI is not only limited but unfortunately also full of misinformation.

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**Andrzej Puksto**

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

ORCID: 0000-0001-7469-4824

e-mail: andzej.puksto@vdu.lt

**Robertas Eismontas**

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

ORCID: 0009-0001-0057-718X

e-mail: robertas.eismontas@gmail.com

## **Lithuania and the Three Seas Initiative: From Skepticism to Leadership**

**Abstract:** After acceding to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union in 2004 the Republic of Lithuania invested heavily in regional cooperation. Lithuania is active in a number of regional organizations: the Baltic Assembly, the Nordic-Baltic Eight, the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Bucharest Nine, and the Lublin Triangle. Lithuania has increased its participation in the Three Seas Initiatives intensively, especially over the last four years. Lithuania takes the view that the Three Seas Initiative must be closed to the politics of the European Union and EU institutions. The Republic of Lithuania will coordinate the Three Seas Initiative in 2024 and will organize in Vilnius the ninth edition of the 3 Seas Summit.

**Keywords:** The Intermarium Causus; Rail Baltica; Via Baltica; energy security; cyber security; Bucharest Three Seas Summit; Vilnius Three Seas Summit

## **The Attitude and Expectations of Lithuanians in Regard to the Three Seas Initiative**

The Republic of Lithuania's attitude toward regional cooperation initiatives coming from Warsaw has not usually been optimistic. When Lithuania regained independence in 1990, it was said that the Lithuanian approach to Euro-Atlantic integration would be similar to that of the Scandinavian countries.

Yet the political reality of the early 21st century changed old visions and projects: cooperation between Lithuania and Poland became one of the main vectors and overall reasons for Lithuania's being invited in 2004 to become a member of NATO and the EU.

The Joint Parliamentary Assembly of Lithuania and Poland, the Lithuanian-Polish Joint Committee for Presidential Consultations, and other joint institutions have produced a number of positive initiatives. These projects have been useful in different areas—security, defense, European politics, the economy, transportation, and so on. As a result of changes taking place in the world, regional cooperation came to be seen in a more favorable light; it became more than clear that East-Central European integration could be developed along with Nordic-Baltic cooperation (the Nordic-Baltic Eight). Rather than being mutually opposed, the two dimensions strongly connected and complemented each other.

It is necessary to add that after 2004, Lithuanian foreign and security policy faced new challenges and developed in new geopolitical realities—mainly connected with Russian imperialism and Vladimir Putin's plan to rethink the future of the post-soviet area. Optimistically, Lithuania joined the Bucharest Nine and created the Lublin Triangle together with Poland and Ukraine. At the same time, it joined the Three Seas Initiative. Our country would like to adopt the Three Seas Initiative as a political project within the European Union, in close collaboration with European institutions.

The main Lithuanian priorities in the Three Seas Initiative are energy and transportation development projects, especially new railway and highway networks. These will go a long way toward deepening Lithuania's integration with the EU, and will open new possibilities for Lithuania to cooperate with Ukraine, bypassing Belarus and Russia.

Thus, Lithuania is a good example of a small state that has transformed from a post-soviet republic to an active political player in the regions of East Central and Northern Europe. In 2024, the Republic of Lithuania will take on coordination of the Three Seas Initiative and will organize the ninth edition of the Three Seas Initiative Summit, in Vilnius.

### **Attitudes, Aspirations, and Statements of Members of the Lithuanian Seimas**

Exclusively for this article, Laurynas Kasčiūnas, member of the Lithuanian Seimas and chairman of the National Security and Defense Committee, granted an interview about the Three Seas Initiative and its current prospects.

The Intermarium Caucus, which is a temporary group established in the Seimas in 2023, consists of eleven parliamentarians. It is headed by Laurynas Kasčiūnas, with Jonas Jarutis as the group's deputy chairman.

The first group of its kind was established in 2020, in Ukraine, to provide state-level support for the geopolitical line developed by a non-governmental organization, the Mediterranean Support Group of Ukraine. The group was founded by Azov veterans, and seeks to strengthen the connection between Central and Eastern Europe, based on principles of pan-Europeanism and anti-chauvinism, and on a policy of anti-totalitarian historical memory. The goal of the Intermarium group is to create a regional interparliamentary institution, similar to the Crimean platform, to develop a regional



security strategy and coordinate initiatives to combat Russian aggression at the legal and informational levels.<sup>1</sup> This includes strengthening defense cooperation, developing information campaigns to create a common information space, consolidating the region geopolitically, strengthening the region's energy security, increasing support for Ukraine being admitted to the Three Seas Initiative, organizing visits to Ukraine, and so forth.

Members of this group also took part in the most recent summit of the Three Seas Initiative in Bucharest. Afterwards, the group's leader, Laurynas Kasčiūnas, agreed to share his thoughts about the meeting. The interview, based on four essential questions, gives us some insight into how a member of the ruling majority of the Republic of Lithuania sees the Three Seas Initiative—what Lithuania expects to achieve, and how it positions itself in the project.

I asked Kasčiūnas whether the 3SI is more political or economic:

I think it's more of an economic project right now. However, the main idea of the project is to strengthen the north-south direction in the infrastructural sense, and by strengthening this direction to reduce the divide within the European Union between the west and the east, so that the economy and infrastructure of the countries of this region are equal to those in Western Europe. Also, one practice of this initiative is the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative Fund, through which three economic projects have already been implemented, such as the creation of data centers, infrastructure projects, etc. This shows that the initiative is aimed at practical economic projects. However, the attention the United States of America has shown in this initiative already allows us to talk about politics and geopolitics, because the US is very active here. Their idea is to reduce the dependence of the states of this three-seas region

1 Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, Statement by Laurynas Kasčiūnas, Member of the Seimas: "The Intermarium Caucus was established in the Parliament of Lithuania," 2023, [https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p\\_r=35403&p\\_k=1&p\\_t=285326&p\\_kade\\_id=9](https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=35403&p_k=1&p_t=285326&p_kade_id=9) [accessed: September 23, 2023].

on Russia, China, and other third countries. However, not everything is so simple. The initiative also includes Hungary, which currently sees itself as a recipient of Chinese investments and does not shy away from communicating with Russian investments.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking specifically about Lithuania's objectives in the Three Seas Initiative, Kasčiūnas singled out the most important economic projects to be pursued.

I think it would be very good to obtain funding in the Three Seas Initiative for the current projects of Lithuania and the Baltic region. Like the "Rail Baltic" project and others. Then in the Baltic region the initiative would no longer be just theoretical, but practical, and the residents of those countries could feel and see real practical results and benefits for the Baltic region. Estonia has already received funding for one of its projects. Lithuania has not yet, but I think this will happen in the near future.<sup>3</sup>

From this interview, we can identify what Kasčiūnas considers to be the most important points about the Three Seas Initiative for Lithuania. First, that the 3SI is mainly intended to develop economic projects in Eastern Europe, in order to reduce the divide between Western and Eastern Europe. Second, that the project also has a political dimension, since the United States has become involved in it.

Kasčiūnas indicated two main aspirations of Lithuania in the 3SI, namely, large-scale projects in the Baltic region, such as Rail Baltic and Via Baltic, and working to have Ukraine and Moldova included as full-fledged states of the Western world in the future. The chairman of the National Security and Defense Committee also identified what he sees as a threat to the Initiative—one that should be treated seriously. This is Hungary's participation in the 3SI, because

2 R. Eismontas, personal communication, September 28, 2023.

3 Ibidem.

Hungary is simultaneously positioning itself as a Chinese investment hub, which means that China has great economic and strategic influence over it.

## **Attitude, Aspirations, and Statements of the President of Lithuania**

To find out what Lithuania seeks to achieve by participating in the 3SI, it is necessary to look at statements the country's leaders have made and at important discussions regarding the Initiative.<sup>4</sup> We begin with speeches given by the head of state, the president of the Republic of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda.

During a remote meeting held in the fall of 2020, President Nausėda emphasized that the Three Seas Initiative is a strategic tool that contributes to the strengthening of relations between the states of the region and the United States, as well as to regional and national security:

Lithuania considers the Three Seas Initiative a unique regional tool that deepens strategic cooperation with the United States. The transatlantic link is the guarantor of our region's security. This platform is aimed at strengthening the region's soft power through the development of infrastructure and technology.

In this way, in his first Three Seas Initiative meeting, Nausėda emphasized the importance of transatlantic relations and of strengthening relations with the United States of America.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President will attend the meeting of leaders of the Three Seas Initiative," 2021, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/36275>, [accessed: October 12, 2023].
- 5 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President will participate in the remote summit of the Three Seas Initiative," 2020, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/34883>, [accessed: October 3, 2023].

At the same meeting, the President emphasized that progress in implementing the Rail Baltica and Via Baltica projects, accelerating the synchronization of the electricity networks of continental Europe, and connecting Lithuania's gas network with that of Poland, are all strategically important for Lithuania. In his view, innovation, digitization, and sustainable development are the engines of competitiveness and economic breakthrough in the Three Seas region.<sup>6</sup>

The President emphasized that the transatlantic connection both guarantees regional security and contributes significantly to solving European energy security issues. The investment potential and diverse energy resources of the US are particularly important elements in strengthening Eastern Europe's soft power. He said,

The countries of our region are united by similar geopolitical economic challenges and the desire to ensure the connectivity of energy and transport infrastructure. Effective development of infrastructure and its inclusion in the common market of the European Union are our strategic goals, which, if implemented, will ensure the economic development and growth of the region, and increase resistance to external threats.

Here the President indicates Lithuania's desire to synchronize its electricity grids with those of Europe as soon as possible and to put an end to its energy dependence on Russia.

In the summer of 2021, as Lithuania struggled with the crisis of illegal migrants from the territory of Belarus, President Nausėda drew attention to the geopolitical, military, and hybrid threats posed by Russia, to the deteriorating democratic situation in the EU's neighborhood, and to the desire of some countries to destabilize the international environment. According to Nausėda, the response needed

6 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President: The Three Seas Initiative must strengthen regional security," 2020, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/34896> [accessed: October 5, 2023].

in order to achieve shared goals is very clear—the transatlantic partnership with the USA must be further strengthened. “The 3SI provides opportunities to involve the US more closely in regional cooperation and to contribute to increasing the security of Europe as a whole,” the president said.<sup>7</sup>

In the fall of 2021, the leaders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia signed a declaration titled the “Baltic Road to Climate Neutrality,” which calls on countries to address climate change and environmental pollution. In the declaration, the Three Seas Initiative is indicated as a means of solving these problems. The declaration includes the following goal: “To work more closely together on the development of the Three Seas Initiative to implement climate-neutral cross-border energy, transportation, and digital infrastructure projects and promote reliable and secure digital and green connectivity across the region.” President Nausėda stated that “The fight against climate change, attention to the environment and sustainability are conditions for the prosperity of the Baltic region. I hope that this declaration will become a positive impetus for the green transformation in our states. We have to move from words to deeds.”<sup>8</sup>

In 2022, the president took time to mention the Three Seas Initiative in his annual report.

The main emphasis of our foreign policy strategy is to ensure that a strong transatlantic influence is felt throughout Europe, and especially in the Baltic region. We have always sought this and will seek it in the future. Therefore, we continue to strengthen military and technological cooperation with the United States, including through

7 LRT, “The US will allocate up to 300 million dollars to the Three Seas Initiative,” 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/verslas/4/1723856/jav-triju-juru-iniciatyvai-skirs-iki-300-milijonu-doleriu> [accessed: September 17, 2023].

8 President of the Republic of Lithuania, “Declaration ‘Baltic Road to Climate Neutrality,’” 2021, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/deklaracija-baltijos-kelias-link-klimato-neutralumo/36981>, [accessed: October 8, 2023].

the implementation of the Three Seas Initiative. With the United Kingdom—by creating the Joint Expeditionary Force.<sup>9</sup>

In the summer of 2022, the president said that

It is also very important for us that the broken East-West connections or transportation corridors from East to West are replaced by highly efficient North-South connections.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the Three Seas Initiative is exactly that project, and this political direction, a strategy that will allow us to solve this transience or connection issue, and to solve it in a truly geopolitically correct way.<sup>11</sup>

With Europe facing a possible food and energy crisis after the sanctions imposed on Russia, the president also highlighted at the same meeting that

Food products and grain stored in Ukrainian warehouses can be transported and brought to the ports of the Baltic Sea through logistic corridors. On the other hand, the possibilities of our already created energy infrastructure (...) provide not only theoretical, but also practical possibilities, using the Klaipeda liquefied natural gas terminal to supply gas even to Moldova and Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

- 9 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "Annual report of the President of the Republic of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda," 2022, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/prezidento-kalbos-ir-sveikinimai/38609> [accessed: September 23, 2023].
- 10 LRT, "Nausėda: the East-West transport corridor, which is cracking due to the war, must be replaced by the North-South," 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/verslas/4/1723702/nauseda-del-karo-trukinejanti-transporto-koridoru-rytai-vakarai-turi-keisti-pietus-siaure> [accessed: 15 September 2023].
- 11 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "Annual report of the President of the Republic of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda," 2022, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/prezidento-kalbos-ir-sveikinimai/38609> [accessed: September 23, 2023].
- 12 Ibidem.

In September 2023, President Nausėda attended the eighth summit of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) in Bucharest.<sup>13</sup> Addressing the leaders of the region, he emphasized that the altered geopolitical situation in Europe, due to Russia's war against Ukraine, highlighted even more strongly the importance of the Three Seas Initiative, which is based on a strategic North-South axis.<sup>14</sup>

We must harness this potential and reorient the continent's transportation links, energy sources, and supply routes. We must build resilient infrastructure for civil and military use. I am glad that the importance of military mobility was emphasized at the NATO summit in Vilnius. In order to ensure the security of the eastern flank of the Alliance, we must speed up the implementation of the most important projects—primarily Rail Baltica, the Via Baltica, and the Via Carpatia.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking about the energy sector, the president stressed the importance of Ukraine to the economy and security of the region.

Yes, today Ukraine needs our help in order to secure the necessary energy supply for the country. As the second winter of the war approaches, I call for the mobilization of aid for the most essential energy needs. However, in the near future, Ukraine will become an important energy center that will significantly contribute

13 LRT, "Nausėda will go to the Summit of the Three Seas Initiative in Bucharest," 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2070262/nauseda-vyks-i-triju-juru-iniciatyvos-virsuniu-susitikima-bukareste> [accessed: 19 September 2023].

14 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President: for regional business success, we need to ensure reliable North-South transport connections," 2023, <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/41107>, [accessed: October 15, 2023].

15 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President: The shared history and experience of Lithuania and Poland oblige us to strengthen regional integration," 2023, <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/41171>, [accessed: October 20, 2023].

to solving the problems of energy security and climate neutrality in our region.<sup>16</sup>

Nausėda emphasized the most important steps that the countries of the Three Seas Initiative need to take today to help Ukraine: providing assistance to Ukraine so it can rebuild its infrastructure, advocating loudly and clearly for the earliest possible start of Ukraine's negotiations on EU membership, helping rebuild Ukraine without waiting for the end of the war, and at the same time ensuring the supply of Ukrainian grain exports.<sup>17</sup>

At the Bucharest Three Seas Summit, Nausėda also took part in a discussion at a business forum for policy leaders, "Investments in a Resilient Future." He described Lithuania's experience in achieving energy independence and abandoning imports of Russian oil, gas, and electricity. "Lithuania was not only the first European Union country to refuse Russian energy resources. By successfully participating in liquefied natural gas projects in Croatia, and now in Germany, we have contributed to the energy security and independence of our partner countries," he said.<sup>18</sup>

Looking to the future, Nausėda emphasized the importance of creating an integrated regional transportation system.

16 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President: The reorientation of Europe's transport and energy connections in the North-South direction is a contribution to the security of our region," 2023, <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/41079>, [accessed: October 12, 2023].

17 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President will attend the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Bucharest," 2023, <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/41076>, [accessed: October 23, 2023].

18 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President: Lithuania has become the gas supply center of the region and is ready to expand its geography," 2023, <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/38621>, [accessed: October 17, 2023].



It is necessary to properly assess the important role played by the reliably functioning railway system of Ukraine for the defense of this country. We need to accelerate key infrastructure projects and initiatives such as Rail Baltica, the Via Baltica, and the Via Carpatia. These transportation arteries will ensure that allied supplies and support reach NATO's eastern flank—the Three Seas region.<sup>19</sup>

In 2024, a Three Seas Initiative summit will be held in Lithuania. Addressing participants of the business forum in Bucharest, President Nausėda emphasized that, in addition to the political agenda, great attention will also be paid to business. The International Transport Forum, organized together with the OECD, will discuss green transportation, digitization, mobility in cities, and the reconstruction of Ukraine's infrastructure.

## **Approach, Aspirations, and Statements of the Lithuanian Government**

### **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania**

On February 8, 2021, during his first visit to Poland, Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis met with Poland's marshal of the Sejm, Elżbieta Witek, and minister of foreign affairs, Zbigniew Rau. One of the highlights of this meeting was an agreement to cooperate actively in the 3SI format to prevent energy produced at the unsafe Astravets nuclear power plant from entering the EU market.

Speaking about the effects and consequences of Covid-19, the minister of foreign affairs highlighted that the Three Seas Initiative can help deal with such problems. Minister Landsbergis stated that

19 President of the Republic of Lithuania, "The President: The unity of the Baltic States and Poland is a path towards regional security and stability," 2023, <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/41220>, [accessed: October 13, 2023].

The Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences have highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and well-developed, interconnected infrastructure. Therefore, it is very important to deepen the political and economic cooperation among the 3SI countries, with the aim that the 3SI format can help promote the economic recovery of the 3SI region and the EU post-Covid-19.<sup>20</sup>

On June 20–21, 2022, a Three Seas Initiative (3SI) Business Forum was held in Riga, Latvia, and Gediminas Varvuolis, ambassador of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Three Seas Initiative and the Community, participated along with a delegation of Lithuanian representatives of business and other institutions. Speaking during a discussion organized by the Atlantic Council Association of the United States of America on strengthening energy security, decarbonization, and resilience in the Three Seas region after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ambassador Varvuolis set out Lithuania's contribution and leadership in strengthening the energy independence of the region.<sup>21</sup> At the initiative of Poland and Lithuania, a round table discussion, "Digital Pillar of the Three Seas: Regional Cyber Security and Connectivity," was also held during the event, with input from InfoBalt's European Union and International Relations Manager, Virgilijus Dirma, and the manager of the Regional Cyber Defense Center, Romualdas Petkevičius. The panelists discussed ideas for creating a cyber platform for the Three Seas region.

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, "The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund conference is taking place in Vilnius," 2021, <https://www.urm.lt/default/lt/naujienos/vilniuje-vyksta-triju-juru-iniciatyvos-investicinio-fondo-konferencija> [accessed: September 23, 2023];

21 LRT, "The President will go to the Summit of the Three Seas Initiative in Riga," 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1723132/prezidentas-vyks-i-triju-juru-iniciatyvos-virsuniu-susitikima-rygoje> [accessed: September 7, 2023].

### Ministry of Transportation and Communications

In 2021, the Lithuanian minister of transportation, Marius Skuodis, and the Czech minister of transportation, Karel Havlíček, discussed the free transport of goods along green transportation corridors in Europe. The situation was difficult at the borders of Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic, where, in order to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus and its mutations, additional security measures had been introduced and traffic jams were forming. Skuodis said that

The current situation is another, unfortunately, recurring challenge for all EU countries: how to ensure compliance with the fundamental principles and values of the Community in the context of a complex epidemiological situation. It is clear that an urgent coordinated response is needed at both the EU and regional levels; it is necessary to coordinate the movement of people and goods across the borders more actively, because emerging traffic jams only create more problems.<sup>22</sup>

The ministers also discussed cooperation in the field of rail transportation. Lithuanian Railways has been using electric trains manufactured by Škoda Vagonka for more than ten years. They run on electrified sections between Vilnius and Kaunas, Vilnius and Trakai, and Vilnius and Minsk. Economic cooperation among the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Adriatic Sea regions could be accelerated by developing high-speed rail lines connecting Poland, the Czech Republic,

22 Minister of Communications, “The issues of free movement of goods across borders, cooperation in the fields of logistics and freight transportation by rail were discussed with the Czech Minister of Transport,” 2021, <https://sumin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/su-cekijos-transporto-ministru-aptarti-laisvo-prekiu-judejimo-tarp-sienu-klausimai-bendradarbiavimas-logistikos-ir-kroviniu-gabenimo-gelezinkeliais-srityse> [accessed: September 22, 2023].

Slovakia, and Hungary. Such a project is scheduled to begin in 2025. According to Minister Skuodis, the Rail Baltica project, which is planned for completion in 2026, will improve travel and freight transportation between the Baltic and Central European countries, and thus the work must not be delayed. It is expected that the agreement reached last year in the Council of European Leaders regarding the financing of the Rail Baltica project will be maintained, and it will be possible to continue the “ambitious agenda.” The ministers expressed their hope that the railway sectors of both countries will find further opportunities for cooperation in the future, while Skuodis noted that Lithuania intends to actively participate in the energy, transportation infrastructure, and digitization development projects implemented by the Three Seas Initiative.

On June 6–7, 2022, the development of the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Aegean Sea transportation corridor in the new geopolitical context was discussed at the Three Seas Initiative Congress and Economic Forum in Lublin, Poland. In a bilateral meeting, the Lithuanian Deputy Minister of Transportation, Julius Skačkauskas, and the Polish Minister of Infrastructure, Andrzej Adamczyk, discussed an extension of this corridor to the territory of Lithuania and cooperation on transporting Ukrainian products through Poland to the seaports of the Baltic countries. According to Skačkauskas,

The north-south transportation corridor connecting the three seas—the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Aegean—is more important than ever and must be multimodal, connecting both roads and a European standard railway. We support Poland’s proposal to expand this transportation corridor to Lithuania. The current geopolitical situation dictates the need to foresee new, additional transportation corridors and infrastructure connections between Lithuania and Poland, ensuring alternatives to the priority projects of Rail Baltica and the Via Baltica. One such possibility is to develop a road through Lazdijus, which would allow the creation of two strategic connections

across the border between Lithuania and Poland, strengthening logistics chains and military mobility.<sup>23</sup>

The vice-minister said that an alternative road link could run from Białystok through Augustava and Lazdių, then connect with the branch of the North Baltic Sea Corridor connecting Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda, and further to the north, Latvia and Estonia. This road is planned to be included in the TEN-T trans-European transportation network and adapted for military mobility.

## **Lithuania's Cooperation with Other Countries in the 3SI Region**

### **Gas Interconnection Poland–Lithuania (GIPL)**

On May 1, 2022, on schedule, the GIPL gas pipeline connecting Lithuania and Poland started operating, and the first physical and commercial gas flows were transmitted through the new connection. The 508 km-long GIPL gas pipeline actually expands the European gas market by integrating the Baltic countries and Finland, further strengthening the energy independence of the region, and increasing the utility of the Klaipėda LNG terminal.

Amber Grid CEO Nemunas Biknius stated that

For the first time, after a long period of implementing the GIPL connection, gas is flowing. Today, it is being sent to Poland, but depending on the needs of the market participants, it can be transported to both Lithuania and Poland. This is an event of special importance in the history of the development of the two countries' energy independence, primarily in the context of gas supply security.

23 J. Skačkauskas, "Lithuania and Poland are discussing additional transport connections and a corridor for transporting Ukrainian cargo to the ports of the Baltic countries," 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/eismas/7/1714438/lietuva-ir-lenkija-tariasi-del-papildomu-transporto-jungciu-ir-koridoriaus-ukrainos-kroviniams-vezti-i-baltijos-saliu-uostus> [accessed: August 20, 2023].

By being able to import and export gas through the GIPL connection, Lithuania and Poland have increased the energy security not only of their countries but also of all the Baltic countries and Finland. This is particularly important in the context of current geopolitical conditions. A reliable infrastructure that ensures uninterrupted energy exchange is an essential element determining the economic growth of the region.<sup>24</sup>

The GIPL connection has a value of about 500 million EUR, making it the largest investment in the Lithuanian gas transmission system since the country regained independence. About 60 percent of the funds were allocated by the European Commission. Latvian and Estonian gas transmission system operators also contributed to the financing. The Three Seas Initiative contributed to the project implementation.

### **Rail Baltic**

One of Lithuania's priority projects, which is planned to be implemented with the help of the Three Seas Initiative, is Rail Baltic. Four 3SI countries are participating: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.

In the spring of 2023, Lithuanian Transportation Minister Marius Skuodis inspected the progress made on Rail Baltic in the Jonava district, in the section from Kaunas to the Latvian border. He discussed ways to hasten construction work as much as possible on the European-gauge railway:

The Rail Baltic project is strategic for Lithuania. We can see that the first works towards the Latvian border are intensively underway; connecting roads are being built in several sections, but the companies

24 Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Lithuania, "The gas pipeline connection between Lithuania and Poland GIPL has started to operate," 2022, <https://enmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/pradejo-veikti-dujotiekiu-jungtis-tarp-lietuvos-ir-lenkijos-gipl/> [accessed: September 27, 2023].

responsible for implementing the project must move forward even faster. It is vital that by the end of 2024 most of the work on the section from Kaunas to Panevėžys will have been completed and we will be ready for construction in other sections and facilities.<sup>25</sup>

Dovydas Palaima, a manager at LTG Infra's Rail Baltic Management, added that "Rail Baltic is a priority project that requires non-standard solutions. One of these is to implement project activities in parallel so that activities of a completely different nature can be carried out at the same time, creating the conditions for a smooth transition from one stage to the next."<sup>26</sup>

Irmantas Butkauskas, head of the Lithuanian branch of Rail Baltic, said that

The development of high-speed train infrastructure in the region required additional time for planning and coordination. Despite the difficulties, the project promoters are ready to implement a quality infrastructure project that will greatly benefit the region. We are working diligently to overcome all obstacles and to ensure that the project is completed as soon as possible.<sup>27</sup>

25 Rail Baltica, "Minister of Transport Marius Skuodis visits the construction sites of 'Rail Baltica' in the Jonava district," 2023, <https://www.railbaltica.org/lt/susisiekimo-ministras-marius-skuodis-lankosi-rail-baltica-statybvietese-jonavos-rajone/>, [accessed: October 18, 2023].

26 Government of the Republic of Lithuania, "A specialized department has been established to speed up the Rail Baltica project," 2023, <https://sumin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/ikurtas-specializuotas-padalynys-rail-baltica-projektui-spartinti/> [accessed: September 25, 2023].

27 Rail Baltica, "Minister of Transport Marius Skuodis visits the construction sites of 'Rail Baltica' in the Jonava district," 2023, <https://www.railbaltica.org/lt/susisiekimo-ministras-marius-skuodis-lankosi-rail-baltica-statybvietese-jonavos-rajone/>, [accessed: October 18, 2023].

### *The Via Baltic*

In the spring of 2023, the Lithuanian chancellor of the government, Giedrė Balčytytė, inspected construction on the A5 Kaunas-Marijampolė-Suvalkai section of the Via Baltic highway and met with representatives of the Lithuanian Road Directorate and companies involved in the work, who reported on the progress made.<sup>28</sup> Balčytytė said,

Traffic capacity and safety are extremely important for the intensive movement of people and goods that takes place every day along the Via Baltic artery. On this renewed road, even closer trade, cultural, and human relations between Lithuania and other EU countries will be forged. In addition, in today's geopolitical context, the Via Baltic is an important component of military mobility and communication with our strategic partner, Poland.<sup>29</sup>

The reconstruction will ensure better mobility in both civil and military transportation, thereby increasing the security of Lithuania and the entire eastern flank of NATO. Considering the requirements of military mobility and infrastructural standards, in fact the entire Via Baltic project is designed to meet the standards required for the rapid deployment of NATO forces.<sup>30</sup>

The traffic load on the section of the Via Baltic currently under reconstruction is very high, so completion of the work will improve conditions both locally and internationally. Increased commercial transport should bring economic benefits to local communities and

28 Government of the Republic of Lithuania, "Chancellor of the Government G. Balčytytė participated in the Tallinn summit on digitalization," 2021, <https://lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/vyriausybes-kanclere-g-balcytyte-dalyvavo-talino-auksciausiojo-lygio-susitikime-skaitmenizavimo-tema> [accessed: August 25, 2023].

29 Ibidem.

30 Ibidem.



regions, and to the states connected by the highway. This is especially relevant for border communities. The challenges Lithuania and Poland have faced in recent years have highlighted the importance of border services. In that context, close bilateral cooperation is particularly important, and Chancellor Balčytytė referred to some successful examples provided by Lithuanian and Polish institutions.

## Final Remarks

Lithuania was quite skeptical at the beginning of the Three Seas Initiative but reconsidered and has become one of the most active participating countries. Holding the Three Seas Summit in Vilnius illustrates this large change.

For Lithuania, the Initiative is not so much about politics or security as about the economy. It is a tool rather than a goal of Lithuanian foreign policy—a part of the European affairs realized by Lithuanian diplomacy. The Initiative would be unimaginable without the close collaboration of the European Commission. Nevertheless, priority areas such as transportation, energy, cyber security, and so on are crucial in the context of security and defense. Thus, Lithuania has proposed the establishment of a Three Seas Initiative Cyber Security Platform.

Lithuania would like to engage in deeper cooperation with Finland, a new NATO member, and to invite Finland to invest in transportation and infrastructure, which will connect that part of Scandinavia with the Baltic states and East-Central Europe. Vilnius will be hosting not only the Presidential Summit and Business Forum, but also a Transport Forum. Lithuania would like to build good quality airways and railways, and to connect with East-Central and Northern Europe, as well as with Ukraine. It would also like to open up a discussion about the 3SI's budget and funding. New, more flexible financial instruments must be found for both the old and new projects of East-Central Europe, and so it will be hosting investors not just

from Europe and the US, but also from East and South-East Asia. During the Three Seas Summit in Vilnius, special emphasis will be placed on Ukraine and Moldova, because Lithuania is still a great supporter of Ukraine in its fight for freedom and democracy.

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**Łukasz Lewkowicz**

The Institute of Political Sciences and Administration

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

ORCID: 0000-0002-0129-785X

e-mail: lukasz.lewkowicz@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

**Marlena Gołębiowska**

The Institute of Economics and Finance

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

ORCID: 0000-0002-6513-5841

e-mail: marlena.golebiowska@kul.lublin.pl

## **The Three Seas Initiative as a Subject of Academic and Expert Discourse in Poland**

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to analyse the academic and expert discourse on the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) in Poland from 2015 to 2023. This analysis endeavours to examine the varied perspectives and insights presented in these publications, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the conceptualization, debate, and evaluation of the 3SI within the Polish context. The focus is on two primary types of literature: academic research and expert analyses. Within both these types, two distinct categories of texts have emerged. The first category examines the 3SI as a model of regional cooperation, exploring its strategic implications, while the second category views the 3SI as a backdrop for broader socio-economic analysis in Central Europe. This study demonstrates that the Three Seas Initiative has not only sparked a new discourse in Poland about international relations in this region but has also become a reference point for understanding the evolving landscape of Central Europe.

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative, Central Europe, Poland, regional cooperation, literature review

## Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is a format of regional cooperation among Central European countries, designed to strengthen connectivity and build strategic infrastructure interconnections in transport, energy, and digital networks. Initially comprised of 12 nations and later expanding to include Greece, the 3SI aims to enhance economic integration and regional development.

Poland's engagement as a participating state in the formation and evolution of the 3SI also found its reflection in the country's academic and expert circles. Polish authors contributed scientific publications and expert analyses, delving into various dimensions of the 3SI. These works, characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, blend insights from political science, international relations, and economics.

The aim of this article is to analyse the academic and expert discourse among Polish authors concerning the 3SI, focusing on the period from 2015 to 2023. This analysis endeavours to examine the varied perspectives and insights presented in these publications, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the conceptualization, debate, and evaluation of the 3SI within the Polish context. Through this exploration, the article contributes to a more profound understanding of the 3SI as a subject of academic and expert discourse in Poland.

The article is structured into two main sections. The first section provides a review of the academic literature. The second section focuses on expert analyses.

### 1. Academic literature

In the analysis of academic literature concerning the Three Seas Initiative in Poland, a division into two types of publications can be observed. The first category comprises works that directly focus on the 3SI as a model of regional cooperation. These publications

delve into the origins, objectives, and operational mechanisms of the 3SI, giving considerable attention to its role in regional politics and its influence on international relations. Authors in this category are primarily concerned with the intricacies of the 3SI and its strategic implications.

The second category perceives the 3SI as a backdrop for broader socio-economic analysis. Here, the 3SI is treated not just as a cooperative framework, but as a geopolitical and geographical context for examining diverse socio-economic trends and phenomena across Central European countries. This perspective mirrors earlier approaches to studying the “new” European Union member states, a term that gradually became obsolete as these countries accrued more significant tenures within the EU framework. Referring to some of these nations as “new” EU members becomes less appropriate, especially given that the EU membership of at least several among them is nearing two decades. In this context, the 3SI serves as a contemporary frame of reference, providing a context for understanding the dynamics of socio-economic processes in this part of Europe.

Based on the table listing the most frequently cited publications by Polish authors regarding the 3SI (Table 1), it can be observed that most of these works fall into the above-mentioned first category of academic literature.

**Table 1. List of the most frequently cited publications by Polish authors regarding the Three Seas Initiative**

No.	Authors	Titles	Citations
1.	Kowal P., Orzelska-Stączek A.	Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie [The Three Seas Initiative: Origins, Objectives and Operation]	55
2.	Górka M.	The Three Seas Initiative as a Political Challenge for the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe	48



No.	Authors	Titles	Citations
3.	Zbińkowski G.	The Three Seas Initiative and Its Economic and Geopolitical Effect on the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe	35
4.	Ukielski P.	Inicjatywa Trójmorza w polskiej polityce zagranicznej [The Three Seas Initiative in Poland's Foreign Policy]	30
5.	Soroka G, Stępniewski T.	The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests	29
6.	Tutak M., Brodny J.	Analysis of the level of energy security in the three seas initiative countries	28
7.	Sienkiewicz M.	Koncepcja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski po 2015 r. [The Three Seas Initiative in Polish foreign policy since 2015]	27
8.	Stępniewski T.	Inicjatywa Trójmorza: Uwarunkowania Geopolityczne i Nowy Model Regionalnej Współpracy [The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and a New Model of Regional Cooperation]	20
9.	Orzelska-Stączek A.	Inicjatywa Trójmorza w świetle teorii realizmu. Polityczne aspekty nowej formy współpracy dwunastu państw [The Three Seas Initiative in the light of the theory of realism: The political aspects of the new form of cooperation between the twelve countries]	17
10.	Baziur G.	Trójmorze jako koncepcja bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju ekonomicznego Europy Wschodniej [The Three Seas Initiative as a concept of security and economic development of Eastern Europe]	16

Source: Own compilation based on data in Google Scholar as of November 30, 2023.

The monograph by P. Kowal and A. Orzelska-Stączek, which is the most frequently cited work in scholarly literature on the 3SI among publications written by Polish authors, stands out as a prominent example within the first category. Furthermore, this publication – as noted by J. Szymanek<sup>1</sup> – was the first monograph to comprehensively focus on the origin, objectives, and operations of this new project of cooperation in the Central European region. The authors observe, “the issue of how to arrange relations, especially economic ones, among many small Central European countries, (...) has remained unresolved since the collapse of the great empires after World War I”.<sup>2</sup> In this context, in the first chapter of the monograph, Paweł Kowal delves into historical concepts designed to integrate the region between Russia and Germany, stretching across the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas, and positions the 3SI as a revival of these integration ideas, perceiving it as a vehicle for fostering additional forms of regional cooperation. In the second and third chapters, Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek discusses the still existing division between Central-Eastern and Western European countries and the resulting search for additional regional cooperation, and in this context draws attention to the international context of establishing the 3SI. She also highlights discrepancies between the declared, implemented, and perceived objectives of this format of regional cooperation. The 3SI’s declared goals are to strengthen infrastructure, energy, digital and economic cooperation between participating states, serving to reinforce the cohesion of the European Union. However, these goals are diversely perceived, as the author indicates: while some criticize them

- 1 J. Szymanek (reviewer), “Paweł Kowal, Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, Inicjatywa Trójmorza. Geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie”, *Mysł Polityczna-Political Thought* 2020, vol. 4, no. 5, p. 163–171.
- 2 P. Kowal, A. Orzelska-Stączek, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie* [*The Three Seas Initiative: Origins, Objectives and Operation*], Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 2019, p. 47.

as “unrealistic and even harmful aspirations to strengthen Poland’s position and its role as a leader of Central and Eastern Europe”,<sup>3</sup> others see them as “noble efforts to enhance not only the EU itself but also the entire Euro-Atlantic community”.<sup>4</sup> In terms of implementation, despite the limited time frame, the author assesses the realization of these goals, concluding that the 3SI was “primarily a political construct, existing at the level of narrative”,<sup>5</sup> while acknowledging its role in popularizing the new concept of intensifying cooperation of the countries of this region.

Certainly, we can highlight several other monographic publications authored by Polish scholars. Among them, the monograph edited by A. Zbaraszewska and B. Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt features a collection of articles that delve into the historical, geopolitical, and economic dimensions of the 3SI.<sup>6</sup> Another monograph by A. Orzelska-Stączek and P. Ukielski provides insights into the 3SI from the viewpoint of its participants, drawing from interviews with diplomats.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to the most frequently cited publications, several subsequent also focus – similarly to the mentioned monographs – on the operational aspects of the 3SI. M. Górka’s study delves into the initiative’s potential in modernizing and aligning the Central European countries with more developed EU regions. It underscores the need for strategic unity in securing funding, highlight-

3 Ibidem, p. 80.

4 Ibidem, p. 80.

5 Ibidem, p. 85.

6 A. Zbaraszewska, B. Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt (eds.), *Inicjatywa Trójmorza w wymiarze historycznym, geopolitycznym i gospodarczym* [*The Three Seas Initiative in historical, geopolitical and economic dimensions*], Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiki i Administracji im. Mieszka I w Poznaniu, Poznań 2019.

7 A. Orzelska-Stączek, P. Ukielski, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza z perspektywy jej uczestników* [*The Three Seas Initiative from the Perspective of Its Participants*], Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 2020.

ing the essential steps like developing cross-border cooperation and implementing macro-regional projects. Furthermore, the author highlights the challenge of reconciling the 3SI participating states relationships with major EU players, France, and Germany.<sup>8</sup> About the 3SI as a model of regional cooperation also wrote: T. Stępniewski,<sup>9</sup> A. Orzelska-Stączek,<sup>10</sup> G. Baziur,<sup>11</sup> Ł. Lewkowicz,<sup>12</sup> K. Popławski, J. Jakóbowski.<sup>13</sup>

- 8 M. Górka, "The Three Seas Initiative as a Political Challenge for the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe", *Politics in Central Europe* 2018, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 55-73, DOI: 10.2478/pce-2018-0018.
- 9 T. Stępniewski, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza: uwarunkowania geopolityczne i nowy model regionalnej współpracy" [The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and a New Model of Regional Cooperation], *Studia Europejskie-Studies in European Affairs* 2018, vol. 22, no. 2 (86), p. 33-43.
- 10 A. Orzelska-Stączek, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza w świetle teorii realizmu. polityczne aspekty nowej formy współpracy dwunastu państw" [The Three Seas Initiative in the light of the theory of realism: The political aspects of the new form of cooperation between the twelve countries], *Sprawy Międzynarodowe-International Affairs* 2019, vol. 72, no. 1, p. 131-155, DOI: 10.35757/SM.2019.7.2.1.07.
- 11 G. Baziur, "Trójmorze jako koncepcja bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju ekonomicznego Europy Wschodniej" [The Three Seas Initiative as a concept of security and economic development of Eastern Europe], *Przegląd Geopolityczny-Geopolitical Review* 2017, vol. 23, p. 24-38.
- 12 Ł. Lewkowicz, "Format of Regional Cooperation in Statu Nascendi: Origins and Functioning of the Three Seas Initiative in Central Europe", *Studia Politica Slovaca* 2023, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 21-29, DOI: 10.31577/SPS.2023-1.2; idem, "The Three Seas Initiative as a new model of regional cooperation in Central Europe: A Polish perspective," *Revista UNISCI* 2020, no. 54, p. 177-194, DOI: 10.31439/UNISCI-101.
- 13 K. Popławski, J. Jakóbowski, "Trójmorze jako odpowiedź Europy Środkowej na globalne i unijne wyzwania" [The Three Seas Initiative as a response of Central Europe to global and European Union's challenges], *Sprawy Międzynarodowe-International Affairs* 2020, vol. 73, no. 2, p. 24-42, DOI: 10.35757/sm.2020.73.2.10.

G. Zbińkowski's study, which resonates with the previously mentioned discourse on the distinction between "new" and "old" EU member states, highlights the ongoing developmental differences within the EU, and positions the 3SI as an important framework for addressing these disparities, contributing to a more balanced and cohesive development across the EU.<sup>14</sup> In this context, A. Nitszke examines the hypothesis that the 3SI "does not add value to European integration and is a forum for realizing the national interests of individual countries, not the entire group".<sup>15</sup>

Several of the most frequently cited publications address the Polish perspective on the operational aspects of the 3SI. G. Soroka and T. Stępniewski in their study reflect on the growing importance of regional cooperation in Polish foreign policy since 2015, particularly noting Poland's keen interest in the 3SI.<sup>16</sup> M. Sienkiewicz emphasizing that the Polish-led agenda of the 3SI focuses on consolidating the states of the region in dealing with specific problems, rather than creating new formalized structures.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, P. Ukielski highlights the controversial nature of the 3SI – from expectations that it will become a strong alliance of the participating states and one of the strongest

- 14 G. Zbińkowski, "The Three Seas Initiative and Its Economic and Geopolitical Effect on the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe", *Comparative Economic Research. Central and Eastern Europe* 2019, vol. 22, no. 2, p. 105–119, DOI: 10.2478/cer-2019-0015.
- 15 A. Nitszke, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza. Role – funkcje – kontrowersje z perspektywy teorii europeizacji" [The Three Seas Initiative. Roles – functions – controversies from the perspective of the theory of Europeanization], *Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej-Yearbook of European Integration* 2022, vol. 16, p. 307–322, DOI: 10.14746/rie.2022.16.18.
- 16 G. Soroka, T. Stępniewski, "The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests", *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej-Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe* 2019, vol. 17, no. 3, p. 15–29, DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2019.3.2.
- 17 M. Sienkiewicz, "Koncepcja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej polski po 2015 r." [The Three Seas Initiative in Polish foreign policy since 2015], *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo-Diplomacy and Security* 2016, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 139–151.

tools of Poland's foreign policy, to criticism arguing that it makes no sense given the divergent interests of the states forming it.<sup>18</sup>

Polish authors' publications on the 3SI often focus on the perspectives and positions of individual participating states and the 3SI's relations with key global actors. These works include, for example, perspectives from Bulgaria by M. Czernicka,<sup>19</sup> Croatia by R. Zenderowski and K. Skobejko,<sup>20</sup> Estonia by A. Legucka and A. Orzelska-Stączek,<sup>21</sup> Hungary by D. Héjj,<sup>22</sup> Slovakia and Czech Republic by P. Bajda,<sup>23</sup> Romania by P. Lewandowski,<sup>24</sup> and analyses

- 18 P. Ukielski, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza w polskiej polityce zagranicznej" [The Three Seas Initiative in Poland's Foreign Policy], *Studia Europejskie-Studies in European Affairs* 2018, vol. 22, no. 2 (86), p. 45–58.
- 19 M. Czernicka, "Trójmorze w bułgarskiej polityce bezpieczeństwa" [The Three Seas Initiative in the Bulgarian security policy], *Przegląd Geopolityczny-Geopolitical Review* 2018, vol. 26, p. 142–154.
- 20 R. Zenderowski, K. Skobejko, "Chorwacja wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza" [Croatia and the Three Seas Initiative], *Studia Politologiczne-Political Science Studies* 2021, vol. 59, p. 280–301, DOI: 10.33896/SPolit.2021.59.15.
- 21 M. Roger, A. Legucka, A. Orzelska-Stączek, "Estonia's vision of the Three Seas Initiative. Interview with The Ambassador of Estonia to Poland H. E. Martin Roger by prof. Agnieszka Legucka and prof. Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, 10 September 2020", *Sprawy Międzynarodowe-International Affairs* 2020, vol. 73, no. 2, p. 13–21, DOI: 10.35757/sm.2020.73.2.13.
- 22 D. Héjj, "Czy bez dostępu do morza Węgry przyłączą się do Trójmorza?" [Will Hungary join to the Three Seas Initiative without access to their 'own sea?'], *Sprawy Międzynarodowe-International Affairs* 2020, 73(2), 109–124; idem, "The Three Seas Initiative in the Foreign Affairs Policy of Hungary", *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej-Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe* 2019, vol. 17, no. 3, p. 116–135, DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2019.3.7.
- 23 P. Bajda, "Stanowisko Czech i Słowacji wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza – od inauguracyjnego szczytu w Dubrowniku po spotkanie w Lublanie" [The Position of the Czech Republic and Slovakia towards the Three Seas Initiative: From the Inaugural Summit in Dubrovnik to the Latest One in Ljubljana], *Sprawy Międzynarodowe-International Affairs* 2020, vol. 73, no. 2, p. 92–108 DOI: 10.35757/sm.2020.73.2.03.
- 24 P. Lewandowski, "The Warsaw-Bucharest axis and Romania's place in the Three Seas Initiative? Polish-Romanian Leadership in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)", *Wschód Europy-East of Europe* 2021, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 45–59, DOI: 10.17951/we.2021.7.2.45-59.

of Polish-Lithuanian relations by A. Czichos.<sup>25</sup> Relationships with external powers are examined in contexts such as the United States by A. Chojan<sup>26</sup> and Ł. Jureńczyk,<sup>27</sup> Germany by A. Nitszke,<sup>28</sup> and Japan by S. Matusiak and T. Masuyama.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the monograph edited by K. W. Olszowska primarily addresses the 3SI in the context of Turkey, the Western Balkans and China, enriching the discourse with a wider geopolitical perspective.<sup>30</sup>

Transitioning to the second category of academic publications viewing the 3SI as a backdrop for broader socio-economic analysis, a notable example in the most frequently cited list is the analysis by M. Tutak and J. Brodny on the level of energy security in the 3SI countries.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Tutak and Brodny have contrib-

- 25 A. Czichos, "Idea Trójmorza a stosunki polsko-litewskie" [The idea of the Three Seas Initiative and Polish-Lithuanian relations, *Ante Portas – Studia nad Bezpieczeństwem- Ante Portas – Security Studies* 2019, vol. 2, no. 13, p. 79–94, DOI: 10.33674/20194.
- 26 A. Chojan, "The United States on the Three Seas Initiative", *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej-Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe* 2019, vol. 17, no. 3, p. 79–91, DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2019.3.5.
- 27 Ł. Jureńczyk, "Cooperation between Poland and the United States within the Three Seas Initiative", *Athenaeum* 2021, vol. 3, p. 165–177, DOI: 10.15804/athena.2021.71.10.
- 28 A. Nitszke, "Postrzeganie Grupy Wyszehradzkiej i Inicjatywy Trójmorza w niemieckiej przestrzeni politycznej" [Perception of the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative in the German political space], *Przegląd Zachodni-Western Review* 2022, vol. 3, no. 384, p. 97–110.
- 29 S. Matusiak, T. Masuyama, "The Three Seas Initiative: Potential Areas of Cooperation with Japan", *Bulletin The Department of Economics Josai University* 2020, vol. 40, no. 45, p. 59–71.
- 30 K. W. Olszowska (ed.), *Konteksty dla Trójmorza: Turcja, Bałkany Zachodnie i Europa Środkowa w polityce międzynarodowej* [Contexts for the Three Seas Initiative: Turkey, Western Balkans and Central Europe in international politics], Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków 2020.
- 31 M. Tutak, J. Brodny, "Analysis of the level of energy security in the Three Seas Initiative countries", *Applied Energy* 2022, vol. 311, DOI: 10.1016/j.apenergy.2022.118649.

uted another publication that evaluates the level of digital maturity in the 3SI region, particularly in the context of Industry 4.0 technologies in enterprises.<sup>32</sup> This category of publications, which adopts the 3SI as the geographical scope of analysis, also includes works such as the analysis of the socio-economic transformation by M. Cierpiął-Wolan et al.,<sup>33</sup> the competitiveness by L. Wei, B. Wierzbiński, and T. Surmacz,<sup>34</sup> the characteristics of the current level of entrepreneurial potential by M. Kozera-Kowalska et al.,<sup>35</sup> the information, and communication infrastructure by M. Czaplewski and R. Nacheva,<sup>36</sup> the energy transformation by A. Krzymowski,<sup>37</sup> and the role of biogas in building the energy independence by G. Ślusarz et al.<sup>38</sup>

In this category, two monographs published by the War Studies University Publishing House can also be highlighted. The first edited

- 32 M. Tutak, J. Brodny, "Assessing the level of digital maturity in the Three Seas Initiative countries", *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 2023, vol. 190, DOI: 10.1016/j.techfore.2023.122462.
- 33 M. Cierpiął-Wolan et al., *European Economic Megaregion Intermarium and the Socio-economic Transformation of the Countries of the Three Seas Initiative in 2012–2019*, Publishing House of Rzeszów University, Rzeszów 2022.
- 34 Li Wei, B. Wierzbiński, T. Surmacz, "Three-Seas Initiative countries and their competitiveness in Europe", *Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy-Social Inequalities and Economic Growth*, vol. 62, no. 2, p. 75–88, DOI: 10.15584/nsawg.2020.2.5.
- 35 M. Kozera-Kowalska et al., "A framework to measure the taxonomic of economic anchor: A case study of the Three Seas Initiative countries", *Plos one* 2021, vol. 16, no. 5, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0252292.
- 36 M. Czaplewski, R. Nacheva, "Information and Communication Infrastructure as an Important Tool for Developing the Three Seas Initiative", *Studia Maritima* 2023, vol. 36, DOI: 10.18276/sm.2023.36-07.
- 37 A. Krzymowski, "Energy Transformation and the UAE Green Economy: Trade Exchange and Relations with Three Seas Initiative Countries", *Energles* 2022, vol. 15, no. 22, DOI: 10.3390/en15228410.
- 38 G. Ślusarz et al., "The Role of Biogas Potential in Building the Energy Independence of the Three Seas Initiative Countries", *Energles* 2023, vol. 16, no. 3, DOI: 10.3390/en16031366.



by M. Gębska presenting a holistic perspective on the economic security challenges faced by the 3SI participating countries.<sup>39</sup> The second, edited by L. Drab, M. Gębska, and M. Marszałek, focuses on the geopolitical, military, and socio-economic dimensions of the 3SI countries<sup>40</sup>.

Polish scientists are also developing a project at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (ISP PAN) titled “The Three Seas Initiative Research Center”. The aim of this project is to advance scientific research and promote knowledge about the cooperation within the 3SI framework. The project is led by Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek. In 2022, as part of the project, The Three Seas Library was established by the Library of Richard Pipes at the ISP PAN. Additionally, a literature review on the 3SI is regularly updated on the project’s website.<sup>41</sup>

## 2. Expert analysis

An important role in the study of the Three Seas Initiative in Poland is played by both public and non-governmental analytical centres, which have prepared a lot of expert publications, reports, and analyses on this issue in recent years. As in the case of scientific texts,

39 M. Gębska, *Ekonomiczny wymiar bezpieczeństwa państw Inicjatywy Trójmorza. Teoria i praktyka* [*The economic dimension of the security of the Three Seas Initiative countries: Theory and practice*], Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki Wojennej-War Studies University Publishing House, Warszawa 2022.

40 L. Drab, M. Gębska, M. Marszałek, *Bezpieczeństwo w wymiarze geopolitycznym, militarnym i społeczno-gospodarczym państw Inicjatywy Trójmorza. Współczesność i perspektywy* [*Security in the geopolitical, military, and socio-economic dimensions of the Three Seas Initiative countries. Contemporaneity and Prospects*], Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki Wojennej-War Studies University Publishing House, Warszawa 2022.

41 See more: Project The Three Seas Initiative Research Center website, <https://3si.politic.edu.pl/literature-review/> [accessed: December 02, 2023].

some of them were devoted directly to the analysis of 3SI, and some concerned the study of the broadly understood region or sectoral cooperation.

An important analytical institution dealing with 3SI has been the Institute of Central Europe (IEŚ) in Lublin since its inception. In the years 2018–2023, IEŚ analysts prepared several expert comments, mainly regarding individual 3SI summits (starting with the summit in Ljubljana in 2019, ending with the summit in Bucharest in 2023). In 2019, the Institute published an entire issue of its scientific journal devoted to the external perspective of 3SI. The Institute also organized several conferences, webinars and recorded numerous podcasts on the functioning of 3SI.<sup>42</sup>

In 2022, the IEŚ published a publication titled *(Nie)potrzebny format współpracy regionalnej? Inicjatywa Trójmorza w dyskursie publicznym państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej [(Un)necessary format of regional cooperation? The Three Seas Initiative in the public discourse of the Visegrad Group countries]* by Ł. Lewkowicz and A. Szwed-Walczak. The aim of the publication was to show the features of public discourse on the 3SI in the V4 countries in 2015–2022. The analysis showed a fundamental difference in the perception of this regional format in Poland and other V4 countries. In Poland, 3SI was perceived as an opportunity to strengthen the position of Central European countries on the international arena, and above all on the EU forum. It was treated as one of the pillars of ensuring security (economic, energy, and infrastructure). At the same time, the publication showed that the involvement of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary in 3SI remained small, and the readiness to promote it at the presidential level was decreasing. The public discourse on the 3SI in these countries was of marginal importance and was limited to a few politicians'

42 See more: Institute of Central Europe website, <https://ies.lublin.pl/> [accessed: December 02, 2023].

statements and analyses. For these three countries, the priority was the economic dimension of the Initiative's activities.<sup>43</sup>

Recently, policy papers were published in English under the title *The Three Seas Initiative before the Bucharest Summit 2023: The perspective of selected participating countries*, edited by Ł. Lewkowicz. The main purpose of this publication was to analyse the functioning of the 3SI from the perspective of selected participating countries, the relationship between the 3SI and the Western Balkan countries was also examined. The publication includes two analyses by foreign experts – from Hungary and Lithuania – presenting the approaches of both countries to the 3SI. The third analysis prepared by an analyst from Poland presents the approach of the Western Balkan countries to the 3SI. The three texts presented the conditions of regional policy, an overview of events, and the most important projects related to the 3SI as well as the prospects for cooperation in the context of the upcoming summit in Bucharest in September 2023.<sup>44</sup>

In 2022, IEŚ, in cooperation with the local government of the Lublin Voivodeship, published a report on local government cooperation in the 3SI countries in two language versions, edited by B. Surmacz, T. Stępniewski and M. Gołębiowska. The main aim of the study was to identify the regions of the 3SI countries and present their specificity, especially in competences of regional policy and international cooperation, as well as to analyse their socio-economic potential.<sup>45</sup>

43 Ł. Lewkowicz, A. Szwed-Walczak, *(Nie)potrzebny format współpracy regionalnej? Inicjatywa Trójmorza w dyskursie publicznym państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej [(Un)necessary format of regional cooperation? The Three Seas Initiative in the public discourse of the Visegrad Group countries]*, "Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowej", Instytut Europy Środkowej, Lublin 2022.

44 Ł. Lewkowicz (ed.), *The Three Seas Initiative before the Bucharest Summit 2023: The perspective of selected participating countries*, "IEŚ Policy Papers", Institute of Central Europe, Lublin 2023.

45 B. Surmacz et al. (eds.), *Raport Regiony Inicjatywy Trójmorza [Regions of the Three Seas Initiative]*, Instytut Europy Środkowej, Lublin 2022.

An important role in analysing the economic dimension of 3SI is played by the public economic think-tank Polish Economic Institute (PIE) in Warsaw, also established in 2018. In 2020, PIE published a report by Grzegorz Lewicki titled *Belt and Road meets Three Seas. Chinese and American sticky power in the context of Polish security and other strategic interests*, which analyses the competition between the superpowers – the US and China – for the 3SI region. The author of the analysis presented not only economic and identity competition on the West-Confucian values axis, but also over control over the 5G infrastructure and international image in the context of responsibility for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>46</sup> PIE together with the CEE Digital Coalition, a coalition of the digital industry from Central and Eastern European countries, recently published a report entitled *Sektor ICT w krajach Trójmorza regionalnym motorem wzrostu* [*The ICT sector in the Three Seas countries as a regional driver of growth*] presenting the state of digital development of 3SI economies and the role and importance of the ICT sector in the region.<sup>47</sup>

In 2020, PIE published a report by analysts of the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) entitled *W kierunku budowy bliższych powiązań. Trójmorze jako obszar gospodarczy* [*Building closer connections. The Three Seas as an economic area*]. The authors of the report, K. Popławski and J. Jakóbowski, analysed the economic and demographic and cultural potential of the 3SI region, the development of the network of connections of the region's countries in the energy, infrastructure, and digital areas, as well as the method of financing

46 G. Lewicki, *Belt and Road meets Three Seas. Chinese and American sticky power in the context of Polish security and other strategic interests*, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2020.

47 B. Michalski et al., *Sektor ICT w krajach Trójmorza regionalnym motorem wzrostu* [*The ICT sector in the Three Seas countries as a regional driver of growth*], Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, Warszawa 2023.

the network of connections within the 3SI framework (EU, 3SI, external countries and external capital).<sup>48</sup>

The public analytical centre Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) also devotes a lot of attention to 3SI issues. This institution, similarly to the IEŚ, prepares ongoing expert comments on individual 3SI summits, selected areas of cooperation, and the approach of external partners. Noteworthy is a multi-author commentary on the promotion of 3SI in individual Participating States entitled: *Promocja Inicjatywy Trójmorza w krajach członkowskich i wśród państw-obszerników* [*Promotion of the Three Seas Initiative in the Member States and Among Observer States*]. This commentary analyses the approach to 3SI in Croatia, the Visegrad Group states, the Baltic states, the Balkan states, Austria, and the observer countries of this format. According to the authors, the involvement of presidents and governments of participating states in promoting the 3SI has in most cases increased. This was facilitated by the support for the Initiative from the US and the European Commission. However, there are countries that have remained passive from the beginning (e.g. Austria) and those that have reduced their involvement (e.g. Slovakia). PISM analysts devoted to the 3SI a significant part of one of the issues of their scientific journal “Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny – The Polish Diplomatic Review” from 2017.<sup>49</sup>

48 K. Popławski, J. Jakóbcowski, *W kierunku budowy bliższych powiązań. Trójmorze jako obszar gospodarczy* [*Building closer connections. The Three Seas as an economic area*], Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, Warszawa 2020.

49 T. Żornaczuk et al., “Promocja Inicjatywy Trójmorza w krajach członkowskich i wśród państw-obszerników” [*Promotion of the Three Seas Initiative in the Member States and Among Observer States*], *PISM Strategic File* 2021, no. 12 (104); B. Wiśniewski et al., “Trójmorze – nowy instrument w polskiej polityce zagranicznej” [*Three Seas Initiative: A New Instrument in Poland’s Foreign Policy*] *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny-The Polish Diplomatic Review* 2017, no. 4, p. 26–82.

In Poland, expert activity is also carried out by non-governmental organizations, which often implement 3SI research projects commissioned or financed by state institutions. An example of this type of research centre is the Institute for New Europe (INE), which conducts analytical activities in the field of international politics, economy, security, and new technologies. In 2023, the Three Seas Program was launched under INE, which will focus on 3SI analysis. A number of “Three Seas Talks” talks were held with experts from 3SI countries. Analyses on the 3SI cooperation are regularly published on the Institute’s website. There are, among others, analyses describing individual 3SI summits, the approach of various countries to the Initiative, and texts on military or social cooperation within 3SI. An example of a more in-depth analysis of INE regarding the functioning of 3SI is the report by Ł. Kobierski and J. Błaszczak entitled *Trójmorze z perspektywy państw członkowskich* [*The Three Seas Initiative from the perspective of the Member States*] in 2021. This analysis describes the approach of participating states and third countries to 3SI and analyses the Three Seas Fund.<sup>50</sup>

In 2020–2021, the private think-tank Collegium Interethnicum (IC) implemented a grant from public funds regarding research of the 3SI. As part of it, IC experts published several detailed analyses of 3SI. In the first publication in the “Barometer” series, P. Bajda analysed the first five years of 3SI’s activity, described the evolution of this format, its perception by participating states and the role of third countries towards 3SI.<sup>51</sup> Another analysis by R. Zenderowski concerned the geopolitics of the 3SI. The author analysed the resources of the 3SI, the interests of participating states, and other

50 Ł. Kobierski, J. Błaszczak, *Trójmorze z perspektywy państw członkowskich* [*The Three Seas Initiative from the perspective of the Member States*], Instytut Nowej Europy, Warszawa 2021.

51 P. Bajda, “Inicjatywa Trójmorza 2016–2020 in statu nascendi” [Three Seas Initiative at the end of 2020 in statu nascendi], *Barometer* 2020, no. 1.

key geopolitical players.<sup>52</sup> The latest publication by J. Wilczek and Andrzej Rudowski describes in detail the creation, structure, and activities of the Three Seas Fund.<sup>53</sup>

The online portal Trójmorze (Trimarium) is also quite active in promoting 3SI. It is a “medium for the description and analysis of the most important phenomena, events, and processes in the Three Seas Initiative region”. Analyses, reports, and comments on Central and Eastern European countries are regularly added to the website. Most of them concern individual countries in the region, only a few directly analyse 3SI, e.g. describe 3SI summits, analyse the approach of participating states and external actors to 3SI. The website features several articles about stock exchanges in 3SI countries. The portal also publishes links to publications about 3SI on other websites.<sup>54</sup>

There are also grassroots initiatives promoting 3SI in Poland of a cultural, educational, and sporting nature. An example is the State of Poland Foundation, established to promote Poland, responsible for organizing a series of GenFree conferences, the aim of which is to promote the potential of the 3SI participating states. The Foundation is also the author of a report entitled *Trójmorze – fascynująca historia. Raport i strategia komunikacji* [*The Three Seas – a fascinating history. A report and communication strategy*] that analyses the method of promoting 3SI.<sup>55</sup>

52 R. Zenderowski, “Geopolityka Trójmorza. Przestrzeń – Historia – Dawne idee i współczesne koncepcje” [Geopolitics of the Three Seas. Space – History – Old ideas and contemporary concepts], *Barometer* 2021, no. 2.

53 J. Wilczek, A. Rudowski, “Fundusz Trójmorza. W stronę instytucjonalizacji Inicjatywy?” [Three Seas Fund. Towards institutionalization of the Initiative?], *Barometer* 2021, no. 3.

54 See more: Trimarium website, <https://trimarium.pl/> [accessed: December 02, 2023].

55 *Trójmorze – fascynująca historia. Raport i strategia komunikacji* [*The Three Seas – a fascinating history. A report and communication strategy*], Fundacja State of Poland, Warszawa 2021.

There are relatively few publications in the expert space in Poland that would take a more critical approach to the 3SI. One of the examples of such a publication is the analysis by A. Balcer prepared for the Stefan Batory Foundation. In the text, the author described the state of 3SI during the change of the presidential administration in the US. He put forward the thesis that Joe Biden's team will continue to support this regional format and, at the same time, unlike Donald Trump, it will support close cooperation between the US, the EU and Germany. Balcer emphasized that tensions in Poland's relations with Berlin and Washington may pose a challenge to the Three Seas project. The publication analyses the potential and diversity of the 3SI, the origins of this format and, most importantly, the current successes of 3SI (e.g. obtaining support from the US, the European Commission and Germany) and the weak points of 3SI (e.g. varying degrees of involvement of its participants, low level of project implementation).<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

The analysis of both academic and expert discourse in Poland from 2015 to 2023 reveals a relatively significant volume of publications on the Three Seas Initiative. This scholarly and analytical evident in the analysed period proliferation mirrors the alignment of the 3SI with the foreign policy imperatives endorsed by both the presidential office and governmental administrations after 2015.

In the academic sphere, the literature on the 3SI in Poland is characterized by a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach. Scholars analyse the historical context and development of the 3SI, examining its strategic, geopolitical, and economic implications. This

56 A. Balcer, *Polska i Trójmorze po Trumpie: szansa na nowe otwarcie? Komentarz [Poland and the Three Seas after Trump: a chance for a new beginning? Comment]*, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, Warszawa 2021.



includes inter alia assessments of its role in regional and international relations, critical evaluations of its objectives versus actual achievements, and explorations of individual countries' perspectives and positions.

In the realm of expert analysis, there is a visible dominance of analytical publications prepared by public analytical centres and non-governmental institutions, which, however, largely implement projects from public funds. There is a noticeable dominance of political analyses, and to a lesser extent economic ones (and it should be remembered that 3SI is primarily an economic project). Many analyses are descriptive and describe the origins and current functioning of this format. At the same time, there is a lesser emphasis on publications that offer critical insights or provide specific recommendations.

The literature on the 3SI in Poland can be broadly categorized into two distinct streams. The first stream focuses on the 3SI as a model of regional cooperation, exploring its strategic implications, origins, objectives, and operational mechanisms. These publications often delve into the political and international relations aspects of the 3SI, examining its role and impact in the broader geopolitical landscape. The second stream uses the 3SI as a backdrop for broader socio-economic analysis, treating it as a lens through which various socio-economic trends and phenomena in Central Europe are examined. This includes discussions on socio-economic transformation, competitiveness, energy security, and digital maturity among the 3SI countries.

This study demonstrates that the Three Seas Initiative has not only catalysed a new discourse in Poland regarding international relations in the region but has also emerged as a reference point for understanding and interpreting the evolving landscape of Central Europe, encapsulating both its challenges and opportunities.

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**Mihai Sebe**

Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest

Head of the European Affairs Department, European Institute of Romania

# **The Three Seas Initiative: A Romanian Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

## **From Riga to Bucharest**

**Abstract:** The present chapter tries to fulfil two complementary objectives—a chronological presentation of Romania's actions within the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) between the Riga Summit (2022) and Bucharest Summit (2023) and an initial evaluation of things to come. It is an exploratory chapter that intends to be the starting point of further, more in-depth analyses. It considers how the 3SI is reflected in Romania's official statements, scholarly literature, and similar sources while also presenting the relevant research initiatives undertaken at a local level. More importantly, as Romania is the first country to host a second 3SI Summit, the chapter summarizes the national authorities' interest in regard to the 3SI. The chapter also provides a brief description of the results of the 2023 3SI Summit in Bucharest and addresses the questions of why the 3SI is important, why Romania matters in the regional equation, and whether Romania has had a continuous national vision on the Initiative.

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative; Romania; future; energy

1 All the opinions expressed here are those of the author alone and do not reflect the official position of the European Institute of Romania or any other institution or organization with which the author is affiliated. The material was drafted at the end of 2023.



From the very beginning, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) has been well received by Romanian officials, both because of past positive bilateral experiences (such as the relationship with Poland) and because it aligns with official initiatives aimed at developing a more coherent and visible regional profile.<sup>2</sup>

This is even more obvious if we review the academic literature in Romania dedicated to the Three Seas Initiative. Since Romania became a participating member of the Initiative, the topic has mostly been addressed in a series of mass-media articles and online postings, and there does not seem to have been any strong academic research interest in it. However, as I mentioned in my 2022 monograph, I have identified a series of academic articles that address the topic of the Three Seas Initiative, including some that address it in the context of bilateral Polish and Romanian relations.<sup>3</sup> Still, there is a need for academic analysis in the future and as Romania has held

- 2 For an in-depth analysis of Romania's activities and projects within the Three Seas Initiative from 2016 until 2022 please see the chapter dedicated to Romania by Mihai Sebe, *Romania: Transforming the Three Seas Initiative into a Strategic Opportunity: A Short Overview*, in A. Sprūds, M. Vargulis (ed), *Three Seas Initiative: Mapping National Perspectives*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2022, pp. 142–156, <https://www.liia.lv/en/news/an-insight-book-presentation-three-seas-initiative-mapping-national-perspectives-1003> [accessed: October 29, 2023].
- 3 As examples of academic articles and book chapters see: S. Petre, "Polonia și tabla de șah. Gambitul polonez și tabla de șah est-europeană. Lecții pentru România" [Poland and the chessboard: The Polish gambit and the Eastern European chess board—Lessons for Romania], *Monitor Strategic*, Issue No. 3–4, 2019 (only in Romanian); M.-D. Chiriac, "România între Proiectul Intermarium și Proiectul Eurasiatic" [Romania Between Intermarium Project and Eurasiatic Project], *Buletinul Universității Naționale de Apărare "Carol I,"* Issue 3, 2017 (available only in Romanian), Alba Iulia Catrinel Popescu book chapter dedicated to the Three Seas Initiative in *Analize incomode* [Uncomfortable Analyses], Militara Publishing House, 2020.

a Three Seas Initiative summit in Bucharest for the second time, it can reasonably be expected that we will see an increase in the number of analyses done in Romania or by Romanian authors.

As the current paper focuses on Romania's most recent actions in regard to the Three Seas Initiative, starting with the Riga Summit of 2022, we should first look at official statements concerning the Initiative. Such statements demonstrate constant interest on the part of the officials, through various government changes and political reshuffles. In fact, the Three Seas Initiative appears to be a non-conflictual topic in Romania's foreign policy, one that is not contested at the political level and seems to be accepted by both opposition and governing parties. It is mentioned in the Government Programs and is managed at the level of the presidential administration and the government of Romania.

A good example of this acceptance is the continuity of mentions of the Three Seas Initiative in the Romanian Government Governing Programs of 2022 and 2023, which also provide clues as to who is in charge of it.

We see that from one government to another some things have remained the same: the infrastructure projects are Via Carpathia and Rail-2-Sea, and there is a focus on energy (the Small Modular Reactors SMRs). A novelty is the accent in the most recent Program on the 2023 Bucharest Summit, as a reflection of things to come. Furthermore, the Initiative is seen as having the potential to enhance cooperation in the area of defense (not in terms of military construction but rather as supporting an increase in mobility (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Mentions of the Three Seas Initiative in the Romanian Government Governing Programs between 2022 and 2023**

GOVERNMENT PROGRAM 2021–2024 <sup>4</sup> Coalition for Resilience, Development and Prosperity		GOVERNMENT PROGRAM 2023–2024 Vision for the nation <sup>5</sup>	
MINISTRY OF TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	Intensification of collaboration within the Three Seas Initiative Partnership, with a view to developing transport infrastructure projects of regional strategic importance, which will contribute to economic development and European cohesion.	N/A	N/A
MINISTRY OF ENERGY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The 3 Seas Initiative (3SI) – Continuation of the dialogue with the beneficiaries of the projects and with EximBank [the representative of the Romanian state within the 3SI fund] regarding the status and the updated list of projects in the energy field to be promoted and financed from the 3 Seas Initiative Fund</li> </ul>	MINISTRY OF ENERGY	It will be ensured that within the 3 Seas Initiative (3SI) there will be a continuation of the dialogue with the beneficiaries of the projects and with EximBank [the representative of the Romanian state within the 13M fund] regarding the status and the updated list of projects in the energy field to be promoted and financed from the 3 Seas Initiative Fund. The completion of a first SMR project in one of the partner countries of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is essential to demonstrate the effectiveness of the strategy to replace coal-fired power plants with SMRS.

4 Romanian Government, *Governing Program 2021–2024*, [online], 2021, <https://sigg.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/PROGRAM-DE-GVERNARE-2021%E2%80%9A2024.pdf> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

5 Romanian Government, *Governing Program 2023–2024*, [online], 2023, [https://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini\\_fisiere/23-06-16-12-32-52Programul\\_de\\_Guvernare\\_2023-2024.pdf](https://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini_fisiere/23-06-16-12-32-52Programul_de_Guvernare_2023-2024.pdf) [accessed: October 29, 2023].

GOVERNMENT PROGRAM 2021–2024 Coalition for Resilience, Development and Prosperity		GOVERNMENT PROGRAM 2023–2024 Vision for the nation
MINISTRY OF ENERGY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The completion of a first SMR project in one of the partner countries of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is essential to demonstrate the effectiveness of the strategy to replace coal-fired power plants with SMRs. Romania has all the prerequisites for the first development of SMRs in the region on a 50 Hz system and can become a hub to produce SMRs in the region, as well as a base for preparing and supporting the operation of this new technology in other countries within the Three Seas Initiative.</li> </ul>	<p>Romania has all the prerequisites for the first development of SMRs in the region on a 50 Hz system and can become a hub to produce SMRs in the region, as well as a base for preparing and supporting the operation of this new technology in other countries within the Three Seas Initiative.</p>
MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE	<p>At the same time, regional cooperation in the field of defense will be developed by continuing active participation in initiatives from South-Eastern Europe and the Extended Black Sea Region, in other regional formats (Bucharest 9, the Three Seas Initiative), as well as in formats aimed at combating the phenomenon of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism.</p>	<p>At the same time, regional cooperation in the field of defense will be developed by continuing active participation in initiatives from South-Eastern Europe and the Extended Black Sea Region, in other regional formats (Bucharest 9, the Three Seas Initiative), as well as in formats aimed at combating the phenomenon of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism.</p>

GOVERNMENT PROGRAM 2021–2024 Coalition for Resilience, Development and Prosperity		GOVERNMENT PROGRAM 2023–2024 Vision for the nation	
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS	Increasing American investments in Romania will continue to be a priority objective, including in the field of infrastructure. Thus, the valorization of additional areas of common interest will be pursued, including the priority interconnection projects promoted by Romania and within the Three Seas Initiative, with an emphasis on the two major and strategic regional interconnection projects, Rail-2-Sea and Via Carpathia.		Increasing American investments in Romania will continue to be a priority objective, including in the field of infrastructure. Thus, the valorization of additional areas of common interest will be pursued, including the priority interconnection projects promoted by Romania and within the Three Seas Initiative, with an emphasis on major and strategic regional interconnection projects, such as Rail-2-Sea and Via Carpathia, as well as the projects in the energy field conducted under the auspices of the Initiative.
	It [the government] will maintain an active role in the development of the Three Seas Initiative/3SI and will consistently promote Romania's strategic interconnection projects, to fully capitalize on the potential presented by the 3SI in political, economic, and strategic terms.	MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS	The government will maintain an active role in the development of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) as a mature political platform, generating investments and strategic interconnection on the North-South axis, and will consistently promote Romania's strategic interconnection projects, in order to fully capitalize on the potential presented by this economic and strategic initiative, which could potentially be extremely important in the context of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, especially in the context of Bucharest's hosting the Summit of the Three Seas Initiative and the Business Forum, in September 2023.

Source: The Governing Programs, own translation and adaptation.

At the same time, we must not forget that the Three Seas Initiative is a presidential initiative—a fact that is more obvious in a country such as Romania, which has a semi-presidential regime, where the president has important powers in matters of foreign policy.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, before the Riga Summit of 2022, the Presidential Administration of Romania announced Romania's main expectations and key elements of the Romanian president's involvement in the Riga Summit:

- “reiteration of the support that Romania gives to Ukraine, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Romania will support all the ways in which the Initiative can help Ukraine, especially through inter-connection projects in which Ukraine could participate, as a partner of the Initiative”;
- “highlighting of the importance of the Initiative's granting similar support to the Republic of Moldova and to Georgia, as states that, like Ukraine, have the potential to become members of the European Union”;
- “Romania will continue to pursue the consolidation of the Initiative and the instruments at its disposal, such as the Business Forum and the I3M Investment Fund”;
- “Romania supports the development of the Initiative's activities in full synergy with the strategic agenda of the European Union, as well as in the direction of strengthening the transatlantic partnership”;
- “highlighting of the importance for Romania of the Rail2Sea and Via Carpathia initiatives, whose implementation will improve military mobility and resilience in the field of infrastructure in the region.”<sup>7</sup>

6 Chamber of Deputies, *Constitution of Romania*, [online], 2003, [https://cdep.ro/pls/dic/site2015.page?den=act2\\_2&par1=3&id1=2](https://cdep.ro/pls/dic/site2015.page?den=act2_2&par1=3&id1=2) [accessed: October 29, 2023].

7 Romanian Presidential Administration, *Press Statement concerning The participation of the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, at the Summit of the Three*

Some of these initial objectives have been reflected in the key results of the Riga Summit, as seen below.

- “The declaration of the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) on a capital commitment to the 3SI Fund in the amount of up to USD 300 million.
- Announcement on granting Ukraine the special status of a participating partner, and setting the objective of Ukraine’s closer involvement in the 3SI’s activities and infrastructure projects.
- Strong support from the strategic partners of the 3SI (the US, Germany and the European Commission); support for the 3SI expressed by Japan and the United Kingdom.
- Announcement on investments from the 3SI Investment Fund in the fourth and fifth 3SI project.
- Participation in the 3SI Business Forum by international institutions – the IMF, EC, OECD, EIB, EBRD, NIB, JBIC, development banks of 3SI countries and partners, and a broad audience of representatives from the business and investment sectors.”<sup>8</sup>

All these were in line with Romania’s initial objectives. Moreover, the Riga Summit had several key results that underlined Romania’s intentions in enhancing its regional role.

Above all, as a first in the Initiative, it was decided that Romania would host the Three Seas Initiative summit for a second time (the 8th summit) and also the 5th Business Forum, in September 2023. The intent was to bring the Black Sea area onto the regional agenda once more.

*Seas Initiative (3SI) and at the 3SI Business Forum (Riga, Republic of Latvia)* (in Romanian language, own translation), 18 June 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/participarea-presedintelui-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-la-summitul-si-forumul-de-afaceri-al-initiativei-celor-trei-mari-de-la-riga> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

8 Riga Summit 2022, *Results of the Riga 3SI Summit and Business Forum*, 2022, <https://3seas.eu/about/past-summits/riga-summit-2022> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

Immediately following the Riga Summit, the Romanian president set forth a series of objectives that Romania was going to pursue, in its mandate, up to the Bucharest Summit (from June 2022 till September 2023), as mentioned below:

- “Romania will analyze all the possible ways by which the Initiative can help Ukraine. It will focus on interconnection projects in which Ukraine could participate as a partner of the Initiative;
- Romania is firmly convinced that the Republic of Moldova and Georgia – which, like Ukraine, are on the same road to the European Union – must receive the same support from us;
- Romania will continue to support the strengthening of the Initiative by strengthening its instruments – the Business Forum, the Investment Fund and the other formats that have so far been successfully developed. In addition, new investments of the Fund will be encouraged;
- energy is essential in the Initiative and thus, on the sidelines of the Davos Economic Forum, an agreement was signed between the Romanian company Transgaz and the Initiative’s Investment Fund with the aim of developing natural gas infrastructure and connectivity, with the integration of hydrogen transport, from Romania; the value of the projects is estimated at 626 million euros;
- two other projects, which represent priorities for Romania, are the Rail2Sea and Via Carpathia initiatives, the implementation of which will improve our connections and also military mobility and resilience in the field of infrastructure in the region;
- a key element of success was provided – the success of the Initiative is measured by the success of our strategic interconnection projects;
- all actions should be guided by a clear principle: together we are stronger;
- the commitment of our partners was underlined – the United States of America, Germany, and the European Commission – as it will contribute to the achievement of the Initiative’s central objectives;



- Romania will act in full coordination with the strategic agenda of the European Union, as well as in the direction of strengthening the transatlantic partnership;
- all the necessary efforts to attract international financial organizations, as well as the international private environment, shall be done to achieve the goals of the Initiative;
- Romania intends to begin a dialogue with the United Kingdom and Japan to identify concrete possibilities for cooperation;
- the final goal of this one-year period is reducing development gaps and strengthening resilience in the Three Seas region.”<sup>9</sup>

As preparations for the Bucharest summit stepped up on the Romanian side, a series of official statements, for instance, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, underlined what was to be expected, and academic reports on the 3SI, a first for this topic, were also published.

Thus, a collective report,<sup>10</sup> dedicated to what to expect from the Bucharest Summit, was published in April 2023. The authors, which included the author of the present chapter, discussed what could be expected from the September summit. The main ideas

- 9 Romanian Presidential Administration, *Joint press statements with the President of the Republic of Latvia, Egils Levits, and the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda* (in Romanian language, own translation), [online], June 20, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/agenda-presedintelui/declaratii-de-presa-comune-alaturi-de-presedintele-republicii-letonia-egils-levits-si-presedintele-republicii-polone-andrzej-duda> [accessed: October 29, 2023].
- 10 M. SEBE, *The Three Seas Initiative – one year after the Riga Summit: full steam ahead?*, in: Mihai SEBE (coordinator), *Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit. Advancing the common agenda*, European Institute of Romania, Working Paper Series, no. 46, [online] April 2023, p. 59 – 60, <http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/WP-46-Anticipating-the-2023-3SI-Bucharest-Summit.pdf> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

regarding what Romania had done or should do, as synthesized in this author's contribution to the report, were as follows:

- “besides the current Rail2Sea and Via Carpathia projects, an agreement between Transgaz and the 3SI Investment Fund was also signed, aimed at developing Romania's natural gas infrastructure and connectivity, by integrating hydrogen transport as well, with a total estimated value of 626 million EUR.<sup>11</sup> This is in line with Romania's interest in projects such as Rail2Sea and Via Carpatia, and it is a relevant project in preparing the gas transportation infrastructure. Moreover, Romania allocated 20 million EUR to the 3SI Investment Fund;<sup>12</sup>

- “in view of the 2023 Summit, Romania intends to reconfirm the Initiative as a mature political platform, which generates investment and strategic interconnection on the North-South axis and connectivity with partners of the 3SI”;<sup>13</sup>

- “in an official response addressed to a Member of the Romanian Parliament, the Romanian minister of Foreign Affairs clearly stated that Romania would focus on bringing Ukraine, the Republic

11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Signing of an agreement for investments in natural gas infrastructure in Romania at the House of the Three Seas in Davos” (in Romanian, own translation), May 24, 2023, <https://www.mae.ro/node/58739> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

12 Romanian Chamber of Deputies, “Parliamentary question no. 5567A/06.07.2022 addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the title Clarifications regarding the support of the agreement between Transgaz S. A. and the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF)” <https://cdep.ro/pls/parlam/interpelari2015.detalii?idi=67733&idl=1> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

13 Romanian Presidential Administration, “Speech delivered on the occasion of the annual meeting with the heads of diplomatic missions accredited in Romania” (in Romanian, own translation), January 17, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/agenda-presedintelui/discursul-sustinut-cu-prilejul-intalnirii-anuale-cu-sefii-misiunilor-diplomatice-acreditati-la-bucuresti> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

of Moldova, and Georgia closer to the Initiative. Moreover, Romania continues to support inviting Germany to join the 3SI, while also taking into consideration the intentions of Greece and North Macedonia to become members.”

- “having in mind that the economy is a dominant sector for 3SI cooperation, Romania intends to encourage financial institutions to provide support to the 3SI Investment Fund, while also exploring the possibility of having a complementary Innovation Fund attached to it, on the basis of the purpose-driven innovation principle. Additionally, digital infrastructure and cybersecurity remain priorities.”

- “Romania also envisages the full reactivation of the Three Seas Initiative Commerce Chambers created during the 2018 Bucharest Summit as a support framework for the Business Forum, by organizing a new meeting of the format on September 7, 2023.”<sup>14</sup>

- “with regards to the participants, special attention is given to inviting relevant states (such as Japan,<sup>15</sup> the United Arab Emirates,<sup>16</sup> or Singapore<sup>17</sup>), and business companies to attend the Bucharest Summit.”

14 Romanian Chamber of Deputies, “Parliamentary question no. 8097A/25.01.2023 addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the title Hosting the Three Seas Initiative Forum in Bucharest” <https://cdep.ro/pls/parlam/interpelari2015.detalii?idi=70445&idl=1> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

15 Romanian Presidential Administration, “Joint press statements by the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, with the Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida” (in Romanian, own translation), March 7, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/declaratii-de-presa/declaratiile-de-presa-comune-sustinute-de-presedintele-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-cu-prim-ministrul-japoniei-fumio-kishida> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

16 Romanian Presidential Administration, “Meeting of the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, with His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates” (in Romanian, own translation), 20 March 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/intrevedere-presedintelui-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-cu-alteta-sa-seicul-mohamed-bin-zayed-al-nahyan-presedintele-emiratelor-arabe-unite> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

17 Romanian Presidential Administration, “The meeting of the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, with the President of the Republic of Singapore,

As for a centralized synthesis of all the contributions to this Report we can mention the following below<sup>18</sup>:

Promote regional security and stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“In the new geopolitical reality, the security-economy nexus should be strengthened. In this regard, ties with the United States should be consolidated and the United States should be brought closer to the 3SI’s European partners, such as Germany and France.”</li> </ul>
Consolidate engagement with the EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Develop the 3SI into a regional dimension of EU integration, supporting Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia on their accession paths, while also consolidating Black Sea security and assisting Ukraine in its post-conflict reconstruction process.”</li> </ul>
Take 3SI connectivity to the next stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Make full use of the 3SI Investment Fund for accelerating the development of North-South energy and transportation routes, with the possibility of further expanding them to the Mediterranean Sea. Additionally, the creation of an expert panel would provide support for evidence-based policy within the 3SI.”</li> </ul>
Increase the national commitment to the 3SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“With a series of elections in the upcoming period, the 3SI member states should strive for more institutionalization, increased financial contribution, and better communication .”</li> </ul>

Halimah Jacob” (in Romanian, own translation), March 10, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/intrevederea-presedintelui-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-cu-presedintele-republicii-singapore-halimah-yacob> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

18 M. Sebe, “The Three Seas Initiative—one year after the Riga Summit: full steam ahead?,” in: M. Sebe (coordinator), *Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit: Advancing the common agenda*, European Institute of Romania, Working Paper Series, no. 46, April 2023, pp. 59–60, <http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/WP-46-Anticipating-the-2023-3SI-Bucharest-Summit.pdf> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

As the September Bucharest Summit approached, the final list of objectives was published (as follows). They were ambitious and reflected the changing international landscape, in line with the goals already set forth in Riga in 2022 and the Romanian Government Program in place:

1. “Defining the relationship with a geopolitically reconfigured neighborhood under the impact of the Russian Federation’s illegal and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine.” [...]

2. “Advance the process of 3SI enlargement with the countries that have manifested interest in the Initiative’s activities and meet the criteria.” [...]

3. “Build on the increasing interest shown by different like-minded actors for 3SI activities by inviting high level representatives from Japan, the United Kingdom, and France, as well as from relevant international organizations such as the IMF, the EBRD, the EIB, the OECD, to the proceedings of the Summit.” [...]

4. “Continue developing critical infrastructure projects on the North-South axis in transport, energy and digital networks.” [...]

5. “Explore the possibilities for developing new instruments of the Initiative, such as the Innovation Fund.” [...]

6. “Attract private investments and developing public-private partnerships.” [...]

7. “Strengthen the region’s cyber resilience and cybersecurity by supporting the development of strategic infrastructure interconnections and digital networks and services amongst the 3SI participating states.”<sup>19</sup>

19 \*\*\* “Objectives of the Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit,” September 6, 2023, 2023, <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

## What Were the Results of the Bucharest Summit?<sup>20</sup>

First, the Bucharest Declaration<sup>21</sup> was in line with the above-mentioned Objectives and showed that the Three Seas Initiative had been able to redefine its relationship with its neighborhood, which had been geopolitically reconfigured after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the same time the 3SI was pursuing its goal of enlargement by including countries that are interested in its activities and meet the criteria for accession.

The Three Seas Initiative has begun to act geopolitically and welcomed Greece as its thirteenth participating state. The Initiative is all about increasing North-South interconnectivity and opening access to the Mediterranean. Moreover, the Greek city of Thessaloniki is to be connected to the Via Carpatia project, and there will be the possibility for energy interconnectivity through the TAP project and Greek LNG facilities.

At present, the Three Seas Initiative covers all the EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe, with only its northern section remaining uninvolved. Thus, Finland and Sweden might be countries of interest for the Initiative in its next enlargement stages.

From a Romanian perspective, the fact that the Republic of Moldova has become an associated, participating state in the 3SI was also seen as a success and a fulfilment of the objectives

20 A preliminary form of the Bucharest Summit analysis was published here: M. Sebe, "New dynamics' of the Three Seas Initiative Summit and Business Forum in Bucharest," Warsaw Institute, 2023, <https://threeseaspartnership.com/index.php/nowa-dynamika-szczytu-i-forum-biznesu-inicjatywy-trojmorza-w-bukareszcie/> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

21 Romanian Presidential Administration, "Joint Declaration of the Eighth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative (Bucharest, 6–7 September 2023)," 6 September 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/declaratia-comuna-a-celui-de-al-viii-lea-summit-al-initiativei-celor-trei-mari-bucuresti-6-7-septembrie-2023> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

established in 2022. At the same time, the 3SI was an excellent opportunity for supporting Moldova's European integration process. For example, a bilateral project between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, which was registered in 2023 and called Development of a Cloud for Artificial Intelligence Processing–AI CLOUD, was expected to cost 120 million EUR and to be financed by the 3SIIF.<sup>22</sup>

The Initiative also has the potential to supplement EU policies in regard to the Western Balkans, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia by creating a “laboratory,” where by interacting with EU member states, the candidate countries can better refine their policies, access EU funds, and enjoy key developments in essential areas such as interconnectivity and the energy sector.

Furthermore, the final Declaration mentions the positive evolution of the 3SI Investment Fund, which is implementing five projects with an approximate value of 6 billion EUR. In addition, it was announced that the 3SI would “launch a 3SI Innovation Fund that would address the rising need for investments in innovative cross-border projects, deploy more investments in technological advancements, and strengthen the innovation ecosystem of the whole 3SI region, in line with the European priorities for sustainable and technologically advanced economic transition.”

The Bucharest Summit was also about energy, as the Romanian authorities held a series of very interesting bilateral meetings in regard to the energy sector (as well as other meetings). For instance, on September 6, 2023, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu met with a delegation from NuScale Power company, led by John Hopkins, NuScale CEO.

The Romanian government supports implementation of a regulatory framework that will expedite the development of small modular reactors in our country: “Strategically managed, with all the availa-

22 “The Three Seas Initiative Project Platform,” 2023, <https://projects.3seas.eu/projects/development-of-a-cloud-for-artificial-intelligence-processing-ai-cloud> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

ble resources, the current context will bring Romania all the advantages of being a leader on the energy market. Increasing the energy production capacity in Romania, including by supporting the technology of small-sized modular reactors, will make energy more accessible for Romanians and for the Romanian economy.”<sup>23</sup>

In the same context, Romania’s prime minister, Marcel Ciolacu, met with the US president’s special representative for climate issues, John Kerry. Ciolacu emphasized the importance of conducting projects that increase the degree of interconnectivity in the Three Seas region, such as Via Carpatia and Rail-2-Sea. Romania also wants to promote, in the Three Seas Initiative, energy sources with low carbon emissions and renewable, nuclear, and hydrogen-based energies. “Romania is interested in the intensification of Romanian-American cooperation in order to consolidate the Three Seas Initiative, in regard to the United States as a strategic partner of this form of cooperation, and we want to promote common economic objectives and regional security.”<sup>24</sup>

The Business Forum also attracted the interest of officials, and Romania’s foreign minister underlined the need for concrete results from the Initiative’s strategic projects.<sup>25</sup>

23 Romanian Government, “The meeting between Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu and the CEO of NuScale Power, John Hopkins,” (in Romanian only, own translation), September 6, 2023, <https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/intrevederea-dintre-premierul-marcel-ciolacu-i-ceo-ul-companiei-nuscale-power-john-hopkins&page=9>, [accessed: October 29, 2023].

24 Romanian Government, “The meeting between Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu and the US President’s special climate representative, John Kerry,” (in Romanian only, own translation), September 6, 2023, <https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/intrevederea-premierului-marcel-ciolacu-cu-john-kerry-reprezentant-special-pentru-clima-al-pre-edintelui-sua&page=9>, [accessed: October 29, 2023].

25 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “*The participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luminița Odobescu, at the Business Forum of the Three Seas Initiative*,” (in Romanian only, own translation), September 7, 2023, <https://www.mae.ro/node/62775>, [accessed: October 29, 2023].



One final novelty may be that we have a clear agenda for the next summits, as Lithuania will host the 3SI Summit and Business Forum in 2024, and the opportunity will then go to Hungary in 2025.

## What's Next on the Agenda? Preliminary Conclusions

Another great advantage of hosting the summit in Bucharest for a second time was that it renewed interest in the Three Seas Initiative among Romanian scholars. For instance, one scholar speaks of the Three Seas Initiative as “a training ground as well as a playing field,” a place of “independence through interdependence,” while also identifying certain faults in the Three Seas Initiative: 1) the countries in the group are heterogeneous and have quite large differences in population, institutional capital, economic performance, macroeconomic characteristics, and so forth; 2) the countries in the region lack experience in regional cooperation outside of settings where an outside great power has provided leadership, as the US has done for NATO; and 3) the Three Seas Initiative is not entirely capable of ensuring the funding of strategic projects from its own resources.<sup>26</sup>

The Three Seas Initiative should also be able to go beyond the rhetoric of cooperation and develop strong multilateral relations between the participating states. We should be able to have common positions inside the European Union in order to bring policies favorable to our region onto the agenda. Deregulation should also be a priority, as we need to have a strong single market that will help our economies. The inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria in the Schengen

26 O.-D. Jora, A. Georgescu, “Azimuth, Romania. Towards global relevance through regional cooperation. And a follow-up to the 2023 Three Seas Initiative summit,” *The Market for Ideas*, No. 43, Sep.-Oct. 2023, <https://mail.themarketforideas.com/azimuth-romania-towards-global-relevance-through-regional-cooperation-and-a-follow-up-to-the-2023-three-seas-initiative-summit-a884/> [accessed: October 29, 2023].

Area would only increase the performance of our economies and therefore should be advocated.

The Three Seas Initiative should focus more on the economic cooperation. Our region is still underdeveloped and we have a lot of room to grow, including in areas such as agriculture (food security is of paramount importance, as is the need to develop proper infrastructure for the transport of agricultural products in the region and beyond).<sup>27</sup>

The Three Seas Initiative will now face some of its toughest challenges, as it must prove itself to be a self-reliant, mature structure, capable of attracting investments from the region and beyond. It must also withstand the electoral tests ahead of it. If these matters are managed carefully, at the end of the day this regional cooperation structure could become one of the most interesting formats at the global level.

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27 A. I. Chereji, I. A. Chiurciu, C. M. Maerescu, D. Țuțui, and I. Chereji, "Rural Development in the Three Seas Initiative: Can the Initiative Become an Agricultural Powerhouse? Case Study: Romania," *LUCRĂRI ȘTIINȚIFICE. Management Agricol*, Series I, Vol. XXV (2), <https://lsma.ro/index.php/lsma/article/view/2317> [accessed: November 20, 2023].

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**Tomáš Strážay**

Slovak Foreign Policy Association

Paneuropean University Bratislava (Faculty of law)

ORCID: 0009-0003-5107-0797

e-mail: strazay@sfpa.sk

## **Agenda Setter or Agenda Follower? Slovakia's Perception of the 3SI and Other Regional Formats**

**Abstract:** This chapter focuses on how key actors of Slovakia's foreign and European policy perceive the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and other Central European regional formats (Visegrád Four–V4, Slavkov Triangle–S3). Due among other reasons to Slovakia's central position in the region, regional cooperation has always played a crucial role in Slovak foreign policy. Traditionally the major role has been assigned to the Visegrád Four, but other regional initiatives have also been considered important. Although Slovakia has been participating in the 3SI since its very establishment, the country can be considered to be rather a "hesitating" member than an active agenda setter. By analyzing Slovakia's current position, the author tries to identify the main reasons for Slovakia's passive role. As the 3SI does not occupy a significant place in political discourse, the topic is unsurprisingly almost absent in public and academic discourse. At the end of the article the author therefore draws conclusions that might incline political leaders to change the status quo.

**Keywords:** Slovakia, Central Europe, regional cooperation, Three Seas Initiative, Visegrád Four

## Introduction

The September 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia and the October parliamentary elections in Poland have had implications for the major regional cooperation formats, in which Slovakia has been participating since their very establishment. Of the various regional initiatives in Central Europe, particular attention should be paid to the Visegrád Four, Three Seas Initiative, and Slavkov Triangle.

Prior to the last parliamentary elections in Slovakia, political cooperation among the V4 countries was put on hold. There were deep dividing lines between Hungary and the other three countries in regard to supporting Ukraine or cooperating with Russia. The creation of a new government under Robert Fico brought Slovakia symbolically closer to Hungary, while the new government in Poland is expected to deepen the distance from Viktor Orbán's government and intensify cooperation with the Czech Republic. Despite the declared will of the new Slovak government to intensify cooperation in the Visegrád format, in practice, there is rather going to be continuous division, if along different lines than previously. Practical and technical cooperation on the V4 level is going to continue on the lower levels of the state administration and through non-governmental organizations in different sectors, but political cooperation will most likely remain in hibernation mode.

Since the Slavkov Triangle, encompassing Slovakia, Austria, and the Czech Republic, was to a large extent aimed at ensuring cooperation and coordination in regard to EU policies, Slovakia's changed position on various important matters of joint interest makes cooperation in this format less interesting for both the Czech Republic and Austria. And, vice versa, Slovakia does not seem to be willing to invest intensively in the development of this format. On the other hand, issues such as illegal migration could still serve as a binding interest, but such a common denominator would reduce the Slavkov format, which is not yet well established, to a very limited sectoral agenda.

On the other hand, the new Slovak government might potentially be willing to increase its involvement in the Three Seas Initiative. One reason might be the lower efficiency of the above-mentioned formats (the V4 and S3); other reasons might include the topical orientation of the 3SI toward sectoral issues that are considered priorities for the new government (with particular attention paid to economic growth, the development of infrastructure, efficient energy policy, etc.). The establishment of the new government in Poland might also contribute to changing perceptions of the 3SI in its member countries. The Tusk government might be willing to strengthen a pro-EU orientation of the format.

These scenarios concern the future development of regional cooperation in Central Europe, from the Slovak point of view. Only time will tell whether they will materialize. For the purpose of this study, it is preferable to focus on past perceptions of the V4, 3SI, and S3.

### **Slovakia's Involvement in the 3SI**

Although Slovakia participated in the 3SI from the outset, thanks in part to friendly ties between the then president, Andrej Kiska, and his Polish counterpart, Andrzej Duda, it was considered to be just another platform for communicating joint regional priorities. Even today the 3SI is still perceived as a relatively new regional initiative, which is in the process of development and should exist in parallel with other Central European regional groupings.

After a summit, President Kiska placed the 3SI in the broader European context: "At the 3SI meeting we discussed the connectivity of the region, in order to make the European Union stronger. This is the main goal of the project. The more the countries are interconnected, the stronger is the EU."<sup>1</sup> Although the 3SI was perceived

1 Slovensko v rámci iniciatívy Trojmoria zohráva kľúčovú úlohu, Ministry of Investments, trigonal development and informatization of the Slovak



predominantly as a presidential initiative, the second summit, in Warsaw in 2017, was also attended by Peter Pellegrini, Slovakia's then deputy prime minister, who was responsible for informatization and investments (he was prime minister of Slovakia between 2018–2020 and is the current speaker of the national parliament).

Andrej Kiska also took part in the 2018 summit in Bucharest. Zuzana Čaputová, who replaced him as president of the Slovak Republic, participated in the virtual summit organized by Estonia in October 2020. She underlined the fact that 16 out of 20 of the least developed regions in the EU lie in 3SI countries. Similarly to her predecessor, Andrej Kiska, she ensured the participants that Slovakia would “support every initiative that will enhance connectivity within the European Union and will be governed by its principles and policies.”<sup>2</sup> The need to keep the 3SI within the EU framework and to maintain the overall European character of the Initiative was not only emphasized in the statements of the presidents, but it can also be considered to be the leitmotiv of Slovakia's position vis-à-vis the 3SI in general. At the same time, however, Slovak officials have also placed a high value on the involvement of the US in the Initiative.

The 2021 3SI summit was attended by Slovakia's deputy prime minister, Veronika Remišová, who was responsible for regional development and informatization. In her view, the particular value of the 3SI could come from sectoral projects aimed at the development of energy and transport infrastructure, as well as digitalization on the North-South axis. In this context, the 3SI complements other initiatives or projects on the regional level that are (co)financed from EU funds. Despite not having contributed to the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIF), Slovakia added new projects to the list seek-

Republic, July 6, 2017, <https://mirri.gov.sk/aktuality/informatizacia/slovensko-v-ramci-iniciativy-trojmoria-zohrava-klucovu-ulohu/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].

2 Three Seas Virtual Summit, the Presidents' virtual panel, October 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyINTOGBswk> [accessed: October 30, 2023].

ing financing from the Fund. The Slovak part of the R4/Via Carpatia highway, the Easting pipeline, the production of batteries, and support for a geothermal power plant in Central Slovakia were added to the priority projects list.<sup>3</sup>

At the 2023 3SI summit in Bucharest, President Zuzana Čaputová underlined the importance of Slovakia's participation in such events, saying that they "provide certain financial and investment opportunities for the country, especially when infrastructure projects are concerned. If we were not there, interconnectors might avoid us in the future."<sup>4</sup> President Čaputová also underlined the importance of the business summit after the 3SI summit, for which she had brought a group of Slovak businessmen.<sup>5</sup> The year 2023 might be considered to a certain extent a turning point when it comes to the intensification of Slovakia's presence in the 3SI, since the Prešov region—as the only one out of the eight self-governed regions of Slovakia—decided to join the 3SI's Forum of Regions.<sup>6</sup> The Forum can be considered

- 3 Vicepremiérka Remišová na summite lídrov Iniciatívy Trojmorie: Nadnárodná spolupráca otvára možnosti k veľkým inovačným projektom, Ministry of Investments, trigonal development and informatization of the Slovak Republic, July 8 2021, <https://mirri.gov.sk/aktuality/podpredsednicka-vlady/vicepremierka-remisova-na-summite-lidrov-iniciativy-trojmorie-nadnarodna-spolupraca-otvara-moznosti-k-velkym-inovacnym-projektom/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 4 Čaputová: Summit Trojmorie môže dať Slovensku investičné príležitosti, „teraz.sk“ [online], September 6, 2023, [https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/caputova-summit-trojmorie-moze-dat/739011-clanok.html?utm\\_source=teraz&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=click&utm\\_content=%0253BsNajnov%025c5%025Aie%0253Bimg](https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/caputova-summit-trojmorie-moze-dat/739011-clanok.html?utm_source=teraz&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=click&utm_content=%0253BsNajnov%025c5%025Aie%0253Bimg) [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 5 Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite lídrov Iniciatívy Trojmorie, Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, September 6, 2023, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-lidrov-iniciativy-trojmorie/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 6 "Keď môže Balaton, tak aj Domaša. Prešovská župa sa pridá k prímorským krajinám", *Korzář*, April 17, 2023, <https://presov.korzar.sme.sk/c/23158337/ked->

a useful tool for cooperation on the regional level; in Slovakia's case, this is especially true of its two easternmost self-governing regions, which share borders with Poland.<sup>7</sup>

In Slovakia, the 3SI remains a topic of discussion for a very limited number of stakeholders, who are directly connected to the initiative. The 3SI is present neither in the media nor in political discourse. One of the few exceptions might be the discussion on the 3SI that *.týždeň* weekly organized with the support of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Slovakia in December 2021.<sup>8</sup> An online discussion was followed by an article published in the *.týždeň* weekly. An article on the 3SI published in *Denník N* daily on June 2022 was written, however, by a Polish analyst, Wojciek Przybylski.<sup>9</sup> Foreign think tanks have published shorter analyses dedicated to Slovakia's role in the 3SI. An article on the perspectives of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative, authored by Vít Dostál, Tomáš Strážay and Zsuzsanna Végh, and published by the Prague-based Association for International Affairs (AMO), should be mentioned first.<sup>10</sup> Other contributions include, for example, Lucia Mokrá's article

balaton-tak-aj-domasa-presovska-zupa-sa-prida-k-primorskym-krajinam.html [accessed: October 30, 2023].

- 7 "Improving the European cooperation of local authorities in order to streamline territorial self-government", Slovak-Polish online roundtable, December 8, 2020, <https://archiv.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Slovensko-polsky-okruhly-stol-program.pdf> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 8 Inicjatywa Trojmorja – ako sme na tom?, Website of the Republic of Poland, December 2, 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/slovensko/inicjatywa-trojmorja-ako-sme-na-tom> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 9 "Inicjatywa Trojmorja môže byť úspešná, no potrebuje lepšiu stratégiu," *Denník N*, June 23, 2022, <https://dennikn.sk/2904699/inicjatywa-trojmorja-moze-byt-uspesna-no-potrebuje-lepsiu-strategiu/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 10 V. Dostál, T. Strážay, Z. Végh, "The perspective of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative," *AMO Policy Paper*, June 2021, [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO\\_The\\_Perspective\\_on\\_the\\_3SI.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO_The_Perspective_on_the_3SI.pdf) [accessed: October 30, 2023].

on the 3SI summit in Riga, for the Latvian Institute of International Affairs,<sup>11</sup> Matej Kandrik's opinion for the Warsaw Institute,<sup>12</sup> or Tomáš Strážay's interview for the Polish Institute of New Europe within its Three Seas Talks.<sup>13</sup> An article published in the *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy*, published by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, also had a part on the 3SI.<sup>14</sup> However, it is quite symptomatic that a call for an analysis of the 3SI, to be titled "Quo vadis 3SI—the Three Seas Initiative in the context of the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic" within the grant scheme of the Slovak MFEA in 2021, was not successful, as no one responded.<sup>15</sup>

Slovakia has not been interested in any "political emancipation" of the 3SI.<sup>16</sup> The attempts—open or latent—to transform the 3SI into

- 11 L. Mokrá, "Strengthening regional position and addressing new challenges," in: A. Spruds, M. Vangulis (eds.), *Three Seas Initiative – Mapping National Perspectives*, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2022.
- 12 M. Kandrik, "The Three Seas Initiative from the Slovak Perspective: A Story of Missed Opportunities," *Warsaw Institute Opinions*, September 26, 2022, <https://warsawinstitute.org/the-three-seas-initiative-from-the-slovak-perspective-a-story-of-missed-opportunities/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 13 Three Seas Talks—Tomáš Strážay, PhD, Instytut Nowej Europy, March 15, 2023, <https://ine.org.pl/threeseasinitiative/podcasts/three-seas-talks-11/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 14 T. Strážay, "Central European challenges in Slovak foreign policy," in: P. Brezáni (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2022*, Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2023.
- 15 For more details see official website of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, <https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/o-ministerstve/dotacie-zo-statneho-rozpoctu> [accessed: October 30, 2023].
- 16 Representative of the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic in discussion with the author, April 19, 2021. See also V. Dostál, T. Strážay, Z. Végh, "The perspective of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative," AMO Policy Paper, June 2021, [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO\\_The\\_Perspective\\_on\\_the\\_3SI.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO_The_Perspective_on_the_3SI.pdf) [accessed: October 30, 2023].

a political block have been strongly opposed. Bratislava has also preferred the existing model of a rotating quasi-presidency.<sup>17</sup> Ideas to establish a permanent secretariat of the 3SI were perceived as attempts to strengthen the institutional structure of the initiative and were therefore not supported.<sup>18</sup> The priority was given to the economic dimension of cooperation. Therefore, the Ministry of Finance played an important role, and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs also emphasized the economic orientation of the 3SI.

Several factors influenced Slovakia's hesitant position in regard to the 3SI. First, the unclear roadmap for financing priority projects should be mentioned. Another problem was that international financial institutions, such as the European Investment Bank or the EBRD, were not included in the 3SI Investment Fund. Slovakia perceived the involvement of these international institutions as a guarantee of professionalism, a balanced approach, and the independence of the 3SIIF. An argument in favor of the involvement of international financial institutions was also that they could provide the 3SIIF with project planning and development models. Yet another reason was the still missing presence of private investors in the 3SIIF. It remains the case that without the contribution of private investors the 3SIIF would just be composed of the—sometimes

17 Representative of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic in discussion with the author, April 14, 2021. See also V. Dostál, T. Strážay, Z. Végh, “*The perspective of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative*,” AMO Policy Paper, June 2021, [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO\\_The\\_Perspective\\_on\\_the\\_3SI.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO_The_Perspective_on_the_3SI.pdf) [accessed: October 30, 2023].

18 Representative of the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic in discussion with the author, April 19, 2021. See also V. Dostál, T. Strážay, Z. Végh, “*The perspective of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia on the Three Seas Initiative*,” AMO Policy Paper, June 2021, [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO\\_The\\_Perspective\\_on\\_the\\_3SI.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AMO_The_Perspective_on_the_3SI.pdf) [accessed: October 30, 2023].

quite modest—contributions of individual member countries' governments. All in all, Slovakia had certain doubts whether the Investment Fund would bring any added value, if only symbolic. In addition, the country was (and still is) in quite a comfortable situation when it comes to the funding of different kinds of projects, as massive funding from the EU was secured at least until the end of the current financial perspective.<sup>19</sup>

Even the recent progress made on energy infrastructure did not have an impact on Slovakia's position in regard to the 3SI. The opening of the gas interconnector between Slovakia and Poland can be considered an important milestone bilaterally and regionally, as well as for Europe. The interconnector has an annual capacity of 5bcm, and thus there is a strong security dimension as well: Central European countries can diversify gas suppliers and thereby reduce dependence on Russia. The official opening of the pipeline was attended by the prime ministers of Poland and Slovakia.<sup>20</sup>

Despite its current hesitancy in regard to the 3SIIF, Slovakia may reconsider its position relatively soon. Such optimism is related to the new Slovak government's declared openness to regional cooperation, as well as to the fact that, from the technical point of view, all requirements for paying a contribution to the 3SIIF have been met. However, this change will most probably be connected with the need to reprofile the character of the projects in order to involve private investors more intensively. Slovakia is also exploring possibilities of investing in the Initiative's new instrument—the 3SI Innovation Fund.

19 Ibidem.

20 "Premiéři Polska a Slovenska otvorili prepojuváci plynovod medzi krajinami," The Government of the Slovak Republic, August 26, 2022, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premieri-polska-a-slovenska-otvorili-prepojovaci-plynovod-medzi-krajinami/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].

The fact that Slovakia still ranks among the most hesitant participating countries of the 3SI means that the country has definitely performed as a policy taker rather than policy shaper in this initiative. However, a change in attitude of the other two “hesitant” 3SI members—the Czech Republic and Austria—might contribute to modifying Slovakia’s position as well. Another positive impulse might be related to the change of government in Slovakia. Although the new government led by Robert Fico seems to prefer the revitalization of the V4, increasing involvement in the 3SI could also be considered, especially if the benefits for individual members become more obvious.

## **Višeград Cooperation**

Thirty years of cooperation in the V4 format have resulted in the existence of several ties and contacts at various levels in both the governmental and non-governmental spheres. For Slovakia, as a relatively small country, the Višeград Group represents an important tool for promoting its own interests and agenda in selected areas, not only in the Central European region, but also at the EU level. It is therefore natural that the Slovak Republic considers cooperation within the V4 to be an important priority in foreign and European policy, even though the role of the V4 has varied in the periods under examination.

Membership in the V4 is not exclusive, which means that for each V4 country, a scenario of cooperation with partners in the V4 and parallel action in other regional initiatives (including EU macro-regional strategies) is feasible. Slovakia can thus proceed together with its partners from the V4 in areas of real common interest, but at the same time, without sentiment, it can create coalitions with other partners if the positions of the V4 states do not match. In recent years, Slovakia has been developing more intensive cooperation in parallel formats to the V4, primarily within the framework of the Slavkov Triangle, which links the country more intensively with the Czech Republic and

Austria. Cooperation within several groupings was also explicitly mentioned in the program manifesto of the previous Slovak government<sup>21</sup> and is also expected in the program declaration of the new government created after the snap elections in September 2023.<sup>22</sup>

The key to the effectiveness of the V4 and its positive contribution to Slovakia is the preservation of the model of “weak institutionalization.” This means greater flexibility as well as the non-binding nature of the received declarations. A shift to a higher degree of institutionalization would not strengthen the V4; on the contrary, it would limit its ability to bridge periods when the partners' positions on strategic issues differ (consider, for example, the attitude of the V4 countries toward the Russian Federation, the issue of compliance with rule-of-law principles, the future form of European integration, etc.). On the contrary, proven informal institutions deserve support in the form of regular meetings not solely of high representatives of the Visegrád countries but especially of representatives of individual departments, governmental and non-governmental experts, or working groups.

It is worth mentioning that public awareness of the V4 increased between 2016 and 2021 (when the Institute for Public Issues conducted opinion polls)<sup>23</sup> in all Visegrád countries. Slovak respondents

21 Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky na obdobie rokov 2021–2024, National Council of the Slovak Republic, April 28, 2021, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=494677> [accessed: October 30, 2023].

22 Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023–2027, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023, <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/19777627/programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-SR.pdf/7c47ab5b-7532-4d6b-7a81-3c67a802993e> [accessed: November 30, 2023].

23 O. Gyárfášová, G. Mesežnikov, *25 Years of the V4 as Seen by the Public*, Bratislava: Institute of Public Affairs, 2016 and O. Gyárfášová, G. Mesežnikov, *V4 v názoroch verejnosti – skúsenosti a nové výzvy*, Bratislava: Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2021.



were in second place in terms of awareness—right behind Hungarians—as up to 65 percent of Slovak research participants expressed knowledge of what the V4 represents.<sup>24</sup> When it comes to cooperation among non-governmental stakeholders, including think tanks and academia, the involvement of Slovak entities in the Visegrád grants and participation in mobilities has continued to be higher (per capita) than in the case of other V4 countries. The closeness of the IVF to Slovak citizens is likely to play an important role as well when it comes to recognition of this particular format of regional cooperation. Until the establishment of the European Labour Authority (ELA) in Bratislava, the IVF was the only international organization based in the city. For many researchers and academicians in Slovakia, partners from the V4 countries are still their first choice when the development of new projects is considered. The continuous existence of the Think Visegrád–V4 think-tank platform demonstrates well the continuity of cooperation in the think-tank sector. The number of academic publications on the V4 is several times higher than on any other regional format—as the V4 Bibliography, which contains several hundred references to publications in different languages, proves well.<sup>25</sup>

Factors that could negatively affect the functioning of Visegrád cooperation and thus further erode the position of the V4 as a tool of the Slovak Republic's foreign and European policies would include individual V4 members' preference for independent foreign policy priorities and interests at the expense of the group's policy and interests, problematic bilateral relations, or the influence of internal factors and the configuration of political elites in individual countries.

24 O. Gyárfášová, G. Mesežnikov, *V4 v názoroch verejnosti...*

25 Though the V4 Bibliography was published in 2011, the number of books and articles on the V4 is expected to have increased significantly since then. See *Two Decades of Visegrád Cooperation – Selected V4 Bibliography*, Bratislava: International Visegrád Fund, 2011.

The V4 countries have considerable experience promoting their own foreign policy and prioritizing an independent line of policy-making within the EU. The exclusivist attitude of the Czech Republic, from the beginning of the nineties, and the authoritarian tendencies of the Slovak government in the years 1994–98, led to the increasing isolation of Slovakia and thus to the weakening, and later even the de facto cessation, of Visegrád cooperation. Recently, diverse attitudes have been manifested, for example, toward Ukraine on the one hand and Russia on the other, as well as in regard to observance of principles of the rule of law or ideas about the future model of European integration. Prioritizing a country's own interests over the interests of the group or its other members cannot therefore be ruled out in the future either.

Troubled bilateral relations also have the potential to undermine regional cooperation. In the entire region, relatively widespread populist trends are noticeable in connection with several relevant political actors and often have a strong nationalist accent. In terms of the stability of the region, the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary seems the most sensitive, as it is burdened by several unresolved problems from the past. However, problematic aspects also appear in relations between Czechia and Poland, as evidenced by the dispute over the intensification of lignite mining in the Turów mine by the border.

Last but not least, the quality of regional cooperation could be influenced by internal factors in individual countries, with an emphasis on the configuration of political elites. Political elites with the ability to discuss issues and the will to cooperate and seek consensus with their partners are a necessary condition for the potential development of any regional cooperation. If the political leaders of individual countries have long-term divergent positions on issues of strategic importance for the entire region, the result could be the deactivation or destruction of the regional format. Although in the past it may have appeared that the V4 had managed to become autonomous in relation to political developments in those countries, current events

rather convince us of the opposite. At the same time, however, it can be stated that it is not in the interest of the Slovak Republic or any other V4 country to suspend cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

In the past, Slovakia certainly proved to be an agenda setter in Visegrád cooperation, but its approach started to change after the change of government in 2020. The emphasis was then put on pursuing an individual approach, through bilateral cooperation or ad hoc cooperation with different EU members, not necessarily from Central Europe. Among the formats of regional cooperation, preference was given to the S3. In this way, the government reacted to the different positions of other V4 countries on an issue of strategic importance, that is, the rule-of-law mechanism. The situation became even more complicated after the escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The deepening differences between Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia on the one side and Hungary on the other meant that the V4 was most affected by the war in Ukraine. After the creation of the new Slovak government in the aftermath of the September 2023 elections, various new divisions occurred. Despite more than 30 years together and robust sectoral cooperation, the V4 fell victim to divergences in political positions. The slowdown in cooperation was already in evidence during the Hungarian presidency of 2021–2022, with substantially fewer political meetings compared to previous presidencies. The Slovak V4 presidency in 2022–2023, as well as the ongoing 2023–2024 Czech V4 presidency, continued this tendency.

Disregarding the political issues overshadowing what was, in many ways, a well-functioning sectoral cooperation, the most active element of Visegrád cooperation was the International Visegrád Fund, whose

26 See also T. Strážay, "Vyšehradská štvorka ako nástroj zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky", *Paneurópske právnické listy*, no. 2/2021, [https://www.paneuropskepravnickelisty.sk/index.php/strazay-t/#\\_ftn17](https://www.paneuropskepravnickelisty.sk/index.php/strazay-t/#_ftn17) [accessed: October 30, 2023].

budget was increased to 10 million EUR. In short, civic Visegrád began to supersede political Visegrád. Revealingly, the V4 embassies in third countries also focused their joint activities on cultural events, avoiding regular political consultations.

### **The Slavkov Triangle (S3)**

Due to the deepening of dividing lines and the hibernating political cooperation in the V4 format, in recent years the preferred format of regional cooperation among Slovak political leaders has been the Slavkov Triangle (S3), which consists of Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. After the Czech Republic's change of government in 2021, Slovakia and the Czech Republic became even closer partners and both considered Austria a like-minded country.

The S3 can be considered a platform for the development of mutually beneficial relations among the three countries, including for sectoral cooperation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this format became important for coordinating the management of borders. Other issues of European importance that were discussed included, for instance, the EU budget, the rule of law, support for countries of the Western Balkans, and migration. Although attention is often drawn to the like-mindedness of the three participating countries on selected aspects of the EU-related agenda, different structural characteristics affect their positions on a number of sectoral policies. These include defense and security in the broad sense (Austrian neutrality vs. Slovak and Czech NATO membership) or energy policy (the importance of nuclear energy in the Slovak and Czech energy mixes vs. Austria's negative stance).<sup>27</sup> The main goals of Slovakia's presidency of the S3 (July 2022

27 See also T. Strážay, "The metamorphoses of Central Europe," in: P. Brežáni (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2021*, Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2022.

to July 2023) were supporting Ukraine and supporting the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU, where Austria and Slovakia were expected to help their Czech partner implement the agenda.<sup>28</sup>

Cooperation may move beyond the three countries of the format. The S3+ formula also opens possibilities for the involvement of other actors, not only in the Central European region (France could serve as an example). The S3 has also indicated its intent to find partners for cooperation outside Europe, as can be demonstrated by the meeting of foreign ministers in the S3+India format.<sup>29</sup>

Although the MFEA is the main coordinator for the S3 format, cooperation does not occur exclusively at the ministerial level; meetings are also held at higher levels (prime ministers, presidents of parliaments). The establishment of a regular platform for exchanging views with Czech and Austrian partners on issues related to foreign and especially European policy—which Ivan Korčok, the former minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, initiated—was indicative of the Slovak Republic's interest in systematizing and deepening cooperation in this format and in its replacing the V4 as far as concerned the EU agenda.<sup>30</sup>

28 Ivan Korčok: Počas nášho predsedníctva vo formáte Slavkovskej spolupráce budeme stavať na spoločných hodnotách, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, June 20, 2022, [https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=o&groupId=10182&articleId=12822955](https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=o&groupId=10182&articleId=12822955) [accessed: November 2, 2023].

29 *S3 countries and India want to end the war in Ukraine*, Radio Slovakia International [online], January 3, 2023, <https://enr.si.rtv.slovakia.sk/articles/news/313416/s3-countries-and-india-want-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine> [accessed: November 2, 2023].

30 *Korčok: SR, Česko a Rakúsko sa dohodli na intenzívnej spolupráci*, ORF.at [online], January 22, 2021, <https://volksgruppen.orf.at/slovaci/stories/3086346/> [accessed: October 30, 2023].

Given the nature and focus of the S3, Slovak governments did not consider it a competitor or even a replacement for the Visegrád Group until 2020. Prior to the September 2023 snap elections in Slovakia, a significant tendency to prefer the S3 format for discussing issues related to the EU could be observed, because both the Czech Republic and Austria were considered like-minded countries in the European context (in contrast to Hungary and Poland.) The continuation of this tendency will depend on the willingness of Austria and the Czech Republic to invest in this format, but also on the readiness of the new Slovak government to intensify trilateral cooperation at the expense of the V4 format. The new minister of foreign and European affairs, Juraj Blanár, who was appointed after the September parliamentary elections, seems to support continuing cooperation within the S3,<sup>31</sup> though fourth-time prime minister Robert Fico has rather put emphasis on “revitalization” of the V4.

In the past three years Slovakia has aimed to be more a policy shaper than a policy taker in the S3 format, though only with limited results when it comes to the implementation of particular policies and the sectoral agenda. The most visible stakeholders have been the ministers of foreign affairs, while the S3 has only had limited visibility in the press and almost none in the think-tank sphere and academia. The lack of tangible results might turn the attention of the new Slovak government back to the V4 or to the 3SI, but only

31 Besides other issues, such as migration, cooperation in the S3 format was discussed during the phone call of foreign minister Blanár with his Austrian counterpart Schallenberg just a few days after the creation of the new Slovak government. Minister Juraj Blanár: S Rakúskom nás spája množstvo spoločných záujmov i cieľov, máme záujem o posilnenie spolupráce v regióne aj v rámci EÚ, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, October 31, 2023, [https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19645063](https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19645063) [accessed: November 2, 2023].

time will tell whether this shift will really happen. All in all, Slovakia could continue maintaining its presence in all three formats and be more active when it comes to selected issues or parts of joint agendas.

## Concluding Remarks

Slovakia has a pragmatic interest in maintaining good relations with those of its neighbors with which it has the most in common, or with which it is most connected, that is, with the V4 countries. The V4 is the regional initiative with the longest track record, as well as with the longest list of achievements and benefits for Slovakia. In the past, Slovakia used its V4 presidencies to shape regional policy and to some extent also European policy, thus its role of policy shaper is certainly the most visible in the case of the V4. Despite the decline in political cooperation, which became particularly visible after the escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine beginning on February 24, 2022, the new Slovak government created after the September 2023 parliamentary elections has shown an interest in revitalizing Visegrád cooperation.<sup>32</sup>

32 See, for instance, the press conference of the Slovak minister of foreign and European affairs, Juraj Blanár, with his Czech counterpart, Jan Lipavský. Minister Juraj Blanár v Prahe: Naše výnimočné vzťahy s Českom nesmú zostať len tradíciou. Niet pre nás bližšieho partnera, preto chceme rozvíjať strategickú spoluprácu vo všetkých smeroch a v prospech našich občanov, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 6, 2023, [https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19710559](https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19710559) [accessed: November 2, 2023]. Slovakia's more active approach to the V4 was also stressed at the meeting of Minister Blanár with Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó. Minister Juraj Blanár: Nezabúdame na hodnotu dobrého susedstva s Maďarskom, preto sa usilujeme o korektné vzťahy a rozvoj spolupráce, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 8, 2023, <https://>

Although between 2020 and 2023, the governments in Slovakia considered the Slavkov Triangle to be a preferred format of regional cooperation, Slovakia could hardly be called a true agenda setter. Its position has varied between agenda setter and agenda taker. The format itself is still looking for areas of cooperation that would bring tangible results. Furthermore, differences in the policy preferences of individual S3 countries might negatively affect the S3 in the future.

The 3SI is the initiative where Slovakia has positioned itself clearly as an agenda taker. Together with Austria (and to certain extent the Czech Republic as well) Slovakia has been one of the most hesitant members of the 3SI. Due additionally to the lack of opportunities in both the V4 and S3 formats, the new Slovak government is nevertheless advised to explore possibilities for a more active involvement in the 3SI, as this initiative's potential is far from being exhausted. It cannot replace any of the above-mentioned regional formats but, on the condition that it pursues sectoral cooperation within the EU and does not become a political bloc, it could bring added value for Slovakia.

Generally, the growing influence of most of the Central European countries in shaping EU and NATO decision-making after the escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine has not translated into greater regional cooperation. With the exception of the Bucharest Nine (B9) platform, which encompasses the countries on NATO's eastern flank, other regional formats have either been hibernating (the Visegrád Group and Central Five) or making insignificant or limited progress (the Slavkov Triangle and Three Seas Initiative respectively). The weak performance of most regional initiatives can be explained by the divergences in their members' positions on the war in Ukraine, particularly in regard to providing assistance to Ukraine



or cooperating with Russia, but also by their lack of ability to deliver tangible results. Ad hoc coalitions with different countries are always an option, but they cannot replace regional platforms that include neighboring countries with shared interests. The future development of Slovakia and Central Europe in general is connected with all countries of the region being members of the EU (and NATO), but also with well-functioning regional cooperation based on the participating countries' realistic expectations.

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## Conclusions

The main research question in this monograph concerns the current state of the knowledge on the 3SI. The research results show that it is very limited and the 3SI is a niche academic subject except in Poland. However, it is garnering increasing attention. The 3SI, being a relatively new topic, is shrouded in some ambiguity about its origins, aims, and functioning. There are contradictory narratives on the 3SI. Even some basic terms are differently understood in particular states, and this may lead to confusion. While challenging, these contradictions about the 3SI present an opportunity for scholars to delve deeper and contribute to explaining the 3SI concept. The fact that the 3SI is not a popular topic does not mean it is not worthy of academic study. On the contrary, the essence of scholarly research is to fill gaps, and there are significant research gaps in the area related to the 3SI.

**Why is the 3SI a niche academic subject? The first reason** is that *the 3SI is a complicated and challenging research subject for scholars*. For example, in regard to methodology, official document-based research requires examining primary sources in thirteen different languages, plus English. In practice, even identifying the documents in thirteen states would be a task. In each state, different institutions deal with regional cooperation, and access to them is not easy. The 3SI is not an international organization. It has no permanent bureaucratic framework, and there is no 3SI institution that collects and shares official, reliable information about this cooperation format.

Primary and secondary sources on the 3SI are not easily accessible to researchers.

The limited popularity of the 3SI as a research topic also reflects the limited degree of academic cooperation in the region. The authors of the article on Croatia, Ivan Koprić and Iva Lopžić, state that “An empirical approach is needed to improve research results, while much stronger institutional and financial support is of critical importance for more abundant TSI-related research.” The lack of financial resources is one of the main obstacles that academics encounter.

The 3SI objective is to enhance north-south infrastructure in the EU. Communication on the north-south axis needs to be developed not only in terms of transport connectivity. Academic cooperation in the eastern part of the EU also needs strengthening.

**The second reason** is that the 3SI *does not occupy an important place in political discourse*. According to Tomáš Strážay, who wrote the chapter on Slovakia, “As the 3SI does not occupy an important place in political discourse, the topic is unsurprisingly almost absent in public and academic discourse.” Basically, the 3SI is unknown to the wider public in most of the participating states. Miklós Mitrovits, in the article on Hungary, writes that “The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which was launched in the summer of 2015 and inaugurated on August 25, 2016 in Dubrovnik, Croatia, received almost no coverage in the Hungarian press or among Hungarian experts. (...) However, a year later, when Donald Trump attended the Warsaw 3SI Summit on July 5-6, 2017, the Hungarian media discovered the fact of cooperation in this format, which had already existed for a year (...) The Warsaw Summit and Trump’s visit to Warsaw also attracted the attention of other researchers.” He concludes that “there are very few texts on the 3SI in the Hungarian press and academic publications.” Other contributors to the monograph present similar views regarding the volume of publications on the 3SI in their states.

**The third reason** concerns *the level of international politics, which has implications for domestic political scenes*. The approach to the 3SI

of the United States, Germany, the European Union, and other leading actors is an important factor influencing the popularity of certain research topics and shaping the academic agenda.

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has changed the security environment. According to Matthew Crandall, for Estonia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine ushered in a new era, changed perceptions of the region, and rearranged priorities. That concerns not only Central Europe, the EU, but has global implications. Vít Dostál claims that the "With Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the region is gaining security and political significance for the Czech Republic." He states that Czech Republic's interest in the 3SI stems mainly from the external environment. He explains that the "The positive factors include the desire to attract new investors to the region, to increase the interest of the United States in Central and Eastern Europe, to draw attention to infrastructure gaps in parts of the EU, and to strengthen support for war-torn Ukraine." He argues that various negative aspects have mainly concerned the original interests of the main initiator of the project—Poland. The decisions of the European Commission and Germany to join the 3SI as strategic partners, and their high-level representation in 3SI events, has brought about a positive change for the development of this form of cooperation.

Initially, there was some uncertainty as to the fundamental aims of the 3SI. Additionally, it has been a target of disinformation attacks from Russia.<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity concerning the 3SI was sometimes

1 This is an interesting, but a separate research subject. Julia Dobrowolska has conducted comprehensive research on the 3SI as a target of Russia's disinformation attacks. From the abstract of her article: "The article aimed to reconstruct the image of the Three Seas Initiative in cases of Russian disinformation identified by the European External Action Service within the EUvsDisinfo project. The article's methodology is based on a qualitative content analysis of disinformation cases identified by EUvsDisinfo, available in their database." The article is currently in the reviewing process at a scholarly journal.

reinforced, first, by inconsistent messages from the participants themselves, including Poland, aggravated by internal divisions, and second, by the activity of third states. For external actors, building a specific narrative, even detached from facts, seems to be relatively easy in Central Europe. The polarization of the political scene in Poland makes this even easier, as foreign policy is used in an internal political struggle. Deep political polarization has had an impact on academic society. This motivates some scholars to choose research subjects that are not as “controversial” and challenging as the 3SI.

\* \* \*

The 3SI has become an important element of regional intra-EU cooperation in Central Europe. The annual summits are the flagship 3SI events that show the current status of the 3SI and its prospects. During the 3SI Summit, which was held in Vilnius on April 11, 2024, a declaration was adopted by the presidents and high-level representatives of the 13 participating countries, all of which—as was emphasized—are EU member states. The declaration defined the 3SI’s fundamental goal as “strengthening regional cooperation for a resilient Europe and a stronger transatlantic partnership.”<sup>2</sup> It stated that the 3SI “serves as an important catalyst for the strategic presence of the US in the 3SI region, thus substantially contributing to Europe’s security and economic prosperity.”<sup>3</sup> The role of the 3SI was recognized

as part of wider European and global efforts of democratic countries to promote market-driven and values-based investments into trusted connectivity regionally and globally; we emphasize the impor-

2 Joint Declaration of the Ninth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative (Vilnius, 11 April 2024), <https://www.president.pl/news/joint-declaration-of-the-ninth-summit-of-the-three-seas-initiative,83857>

3 Ibidem.

tance of exploring synergies between the 3SI and such connectivity initiatives as the EU's Global Gateway, as well as those of the G7 and other like-minded partners. The 3SI offers natural links to the EU's neighborhood and serves as an extension of European connectivity to global transport routes, such as the Trans-Caspian Corridor and the IMEC (India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor).<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned, the 3SI is not an international organization, and its ontological status is the subject of academic debates. The above-mentioned declaration described it as “a beneficial coordination platform of strategic interests of the region.”<sup>5</sup>

Year by year, the 3SI has been attracting new partners. After the first enlargement in 2023, when Greece joined, the list of the 13 states participating in the 3SI includes Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Ukraine and Moldova have the status of associated participating states. In 2024 an important change concerned the category of strategic partners of the 3SI, as Japan joined. There are four strategic partners now: the European Commission, the USA, Germany, and Japan. In Vilnius a list of “like-minded guests” was included in the 3SI final declaration. The like-minded guests came to the summit from Georgia, Montenegro, Israel, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Spain.

One of the key aspects of the 3SI Vilnius Summit concerned support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia's unprovoked, unjustified, and illegal war against Ukraine and its people. In the declaration, the 3SI states reiterated that Russia must immediately and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders. They expressed determination to further increase pressure on Russia

4 Ibidem.

5 Ibidem.



to end its war of aggression, including by strengthening sanctions and their full and effective implementation. Security and resilience are elements strictly connected with infrastructure development, which is the 3SI priority. The 3SI Summit was accompanied by a 3SI Business Forum and more than twenty side events involving not only business but also “science communities and social organizations, giving rise to a rich and vibrant ecosystem development of the 3SI”.<sup>6</sup> Many ideas and new projects were discussed and some were initiated, such as a new fund, the successor to the existing 3SI Investment Fund. For us, the scientific and academic dimension was of particular importance and we appreciate that the international conference “The Three Seas Initiative: One Concept, Different Approaches?” was one of the side events of the summit, included to the official agenda. The conference was organized by the Lithuanian Academy of Science, the University of Łódź and the project team of the 3SI Research Center from the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Studies.<sup>7</sup> Poland is to host the 3SI Summit and Business Forum in 2025 and the Republic of Croatia will host it in 2026.

There is a need for productive academic exchange among researchers from different states in the EU, not only on the East-West axis but also from North to South. Strengthening scholarly cooperation is necessary in Central Europe to enhance mutual understanding and improve communication.

*Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek*

6 Ibidem.

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## Notes about the Authors

**Matthew Crandall** – Associate Professor of International Relations at Tallinn University where he also defended his PhD (2016). He completed a master's degree in EU-Russian Studies from the University of Tartu (2010) and a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University in Political Science (2007). He has published in *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Defence Studies*, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, and *East European Politics*. His major field of research is small state foreign and security policies. ORCID: 0009-0000-2588-009X

**Vít Dostál** – PhD, the Executive Director of Association for International Affairs. In his research, he focuses on Czech foreign and European policy, Central European cooperation, and Polish foreign and domestic policy. He has worked for AMO since 2006. During that time, he has authored or edited many publications dealing with Czech foreign policy and Central Europe. He completed a doctoral program in European Studies at Masaryk University in Brno in 2017, with a dissertation titled the *Paradiplomacy of Czech Regions—Regions as Actors of International Relations*.

**Robertas Eismontas** – Vytautas Magnus University PhD student in political science. Graduate of the MA program *Contemporary European Politics*. His research interests are related to Central and Eastern European politics, energy security, and Lithuanian foreign policy. ORCID: 0009-0001-0057-718X

**Marlena Gołębiowska** – Academic Lecturer at the Institute of Economics and Finance of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Senior analyst at the Institute of Central Europe. Research interests: economic development and economic ties in Central Europe, international economic relations, the impact of new technologies on the economy. ORCID: 0000-0002-6513-5841

**Ivan Koprić** – Tenured Professor at the University of Zagreb and Dean of the Faculty of Law (2021–2026). President of the Institute of Public Administration, Zagreb, since 2008. He led the UNIC (European University of Post-Industrial Cities) and UNIC4ER (UNIC for Engaged Research) teams of the University of Zagreb (2020–2023). Former editor-in-chief of the international scientific journal *Croatian and Comparative Public Administration* (2005–2021). Former president of the Scientific Board of the Academy of the Croatian Academy of Legal Sciences (2014–2021). Vice-president of the Croatian Council for the Open Government Partnership Initiative. Author and editor of more than 30 books and several hundred scientific and professional articles and papers. Leader or participant in over 60 scientific, research, political and professional projects. Foreign member of the Academy of Science and Arts of the Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2022. Winner of Alena Brunovska Award for Teaching Excellence in Public Administration by the Network of Schools and Institutes of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe in 2016. Author of four books of poetry. ORCID: 0000-0002-9086-6937

**Łukasz Lewkowicz** – PhD, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Political Science and Administration of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. Senior Analyst at the Institute of Central Europe. Research interests: international relations in Central Europe, cross-border cooperation, political communication, geopolitical thought. ORCID: 0000-0002-0129-785X

**Iva Lopžić** – PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department for Administrative Science, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Croatia. Author of more than 30 scientific and professional papers in decentralization and local self-government, inspection supervision, comparative public administration, and human resources management. Member of the Institute of Public Administration, Central Eastern European Society of Administrative Sciences, and the Croatian Academy of Legal Sciences. The winner of the Eugen Pusić Award for the scientific paper of the best young scientist in 2019. ORCID: 0000-0002-1157-0602

**Miklós Mitrovits** – historian. He received his PhD from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in 2009 as part of the doctoral programme in Eastern European history of the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He specialises in the history of Central Europe in the 20th century, the history of Polish–Hungarian relations and the history of the Visegrad Group countries. Research fellow at the Institute of History HUN–REN (Hungarian Research Network) and a senior research fellow at the Institute of Central European Studies of Ludovika University of Public Service in Budapest. ORCID: 0000-0002-4774-8046

**Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek** – Associate Professor at the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences (ISP PAN), leader of the “Three Seas Initiative Research Centre” project at the ISP PAN. Graduated from the University of Warsaw with a degree in International Relations and completed a Polish–French European Studies dual Masters programme at SGH Warsaw School of Economics and Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris. She has been working at the ISP PAN since 1999. In 2002 her doctoral thesis was awarded the Prime Minister’s Prize, she was also a Foundation for Polish Science scholar from 2004 to 2005. Awarded post-doctoral



degree in 2012 and has since been a professor at ISP PAN. From 2012 to 2018 she lectured at Lazarski University where she was awarded Chancellor's Prize for Excellence in Teaching. Member of the Scientific Ethics Council Commission ISP PAN since 2023. ORCID: 0000-0002-3070-563X

**Andrzej Puksztó** – PhD, worked at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas since 2005 as an Associate Professor and the Head of the Department of Political Science (2008–2020). His research and lectures relate to areas of the East and Central European politics, politics of the European Union, relations between the EU and Russia. Editor in chief of “Baltic Journal of Law and Politics”. As a visiting lecturer he taught in some universities – Reichman University in Herzliya, Catholic University of Vandee, University of the Basque Country in Bilbao, University of Sarajevo, Georgia Gwinnett College in Atlanta. ORCID: 0000-0001-7469-4824

**Mihai Sebe** – PhD, Head of the Training and Projects Unit at the European Institute of Romania and a lecturer at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest. He has a PhD in political science (in French) from the University of Bucharest. His research interests are European affairs and Romanian politics. He is preoccupied with the shape of things to come.

**Tomáš Strážay** – PhD, Director of the Research Center of the Slovak Society for Foreign Policy (RC SFPA) since September 2019. Previously, he served as deputy director and head of the Central and Southeastern Europe research program. He is a leading expert in projects focused on regional cooperation in Central Europe and EU enlargement and one of the founders of the Think Visegrád-V4 Think Tank Platform. He has also been teaching international relations and diplomacy at Pan-European University in Bratislava. ORCID: 0009-0003-5107-0797

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