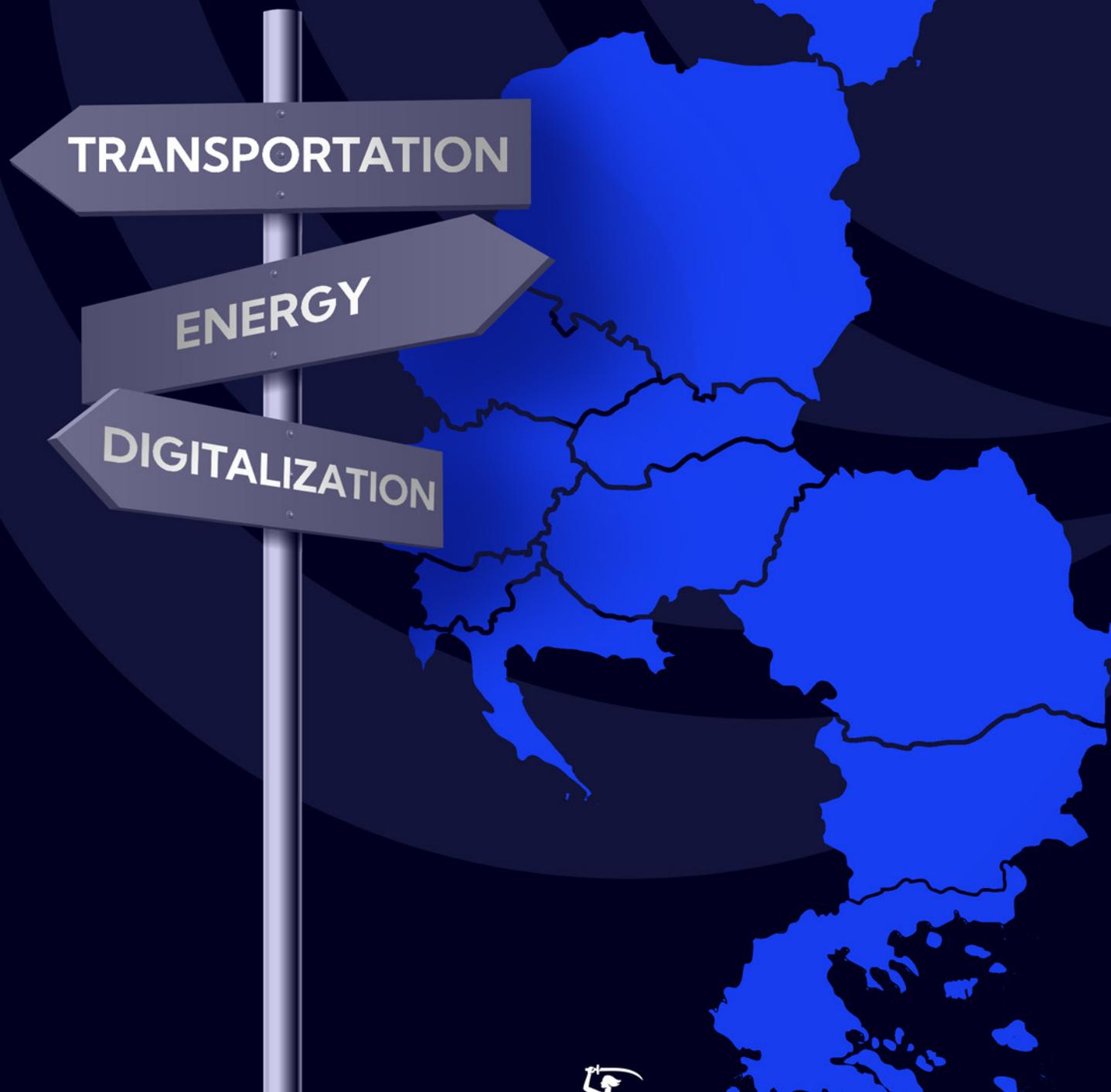


THREE SEAS INITIATIVE AT A CROSSROADS

GEOPOLITICS, INFRASTRUCTURE,
AND A DEFINING MOMENT



TRANSPORTATION

ENERGY

DIGITALIZATION

WELCOME
TO WARSAW



THREE
SEAS
ONE
OPPORTUNITY

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Foreword



Dr Małgorzata Samojedny

Co-founder and President of The Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs.
Assistant Professor at WSKZ.

On behalf of The Opportunity Institute of Foreign Affairs, I am proud to present our latest analysis focused on the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) – a cooperation format whose significance for Central Europe, and indeed the entire continent, cannot be overstated. At our Institute, we dedicate ourselves to understanding and shaping the dialogue around the key strategic developments impacting our region, and 3SI stands as a critical nexus of these developments.

The core ambition of the Three Seas Initiative remains fundamentally important: to bridge the development gap between Western Europe and the Central European region. This initiative, bringing together thirteen participating states stretching along the vital north-south axis from the Baltic Sea, through the Black Sea, towards the Eastern Mediterranean, presents a tangible opportunity to reduce existing disparities in economic development, infrastructure, as well as in energy security and cybersecurity.

The joint efforts of these nations—collectively home to over 120 million people and generating approximately 17% of the European Union’s GDP—are crucial for accelerating the process of equalizing the region’s potential with that of Western Europe, making this convergence increasingly palpable.

I am personally convinced, and our research within this report reinforces this view, that through effective cooperation, clear strategic direction, and a focus on the region’s most critical development areas, the Three Seas region can become not only a vital connector of the seas and a strategic link enhancing continental connectivity, but also a lasting keystone for European integration and stability.

Furthermore, as this report extensively explores, it is crucial to highlight that the role and potential of the Three Seas Initiative have significantly evolved in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this demanding new geopolitical reality, the Initiative’s three core pillars—cybersecurity, broad connectivity, and energy security—have taken on heightened strategic importance. These pillars now form the very foundation of the region’s ability to effectively build resilience and counter external pressures, particularly from Russia.

Each of these areas—whether it concerns infrastructure integration, digital fortitude, or achieving greater energy independence—directly contributes to building real deterrence capabilities. Viewed together, they offer a coherent and effective framework for strengthening the region’s security and enhancing its capacity to shape its own future independently.

It is our hope at The Opportunity Institute of Foreign Affairs that this report provides valuable insights into the current state and future trajectory of the Three Seas Initiative, contributing constructively to the strategic thinking and policy-making that will guide its success.

Dr Małgorzata Samojedny

Summary

The mission of The Opportunity Institute of Foreign Affairs is to identify hidden potential and point out non-obvious opportunities. We also analyze events and trends that can – directly or indirectly – influence the political and strategic choices of Poland and our region.

This report was prepared for the „THREE SEAS ONE OPPORTUNITY (3S1O) Welcome to Warsaw” conference – an official accompanying event to the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Warsaw. This conference, organized by The Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs, constitutes an annual opportunity for in-depth discussion on the importance of regional cooperation for the security and realization of strategic interests of the region’s states. Its aim is to initiate debate on dynamic international changes and resulting challenges (military, energy, economic) for 3SI states, and to create a platform for exchanging views among experts (from science, politics, military), intended to inspire visions for new areas of cooperation to enhance regional stability.

Moreover, we invited nine recognized scientists and experts to present their points of view. These are specialists possessing rich experience in analyzing the Three Seas Initiative and extensive knowledge of our region.

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), launched in 2015 by twelve EU participating countries situated between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, aims to bridge the historical North–South infrastructure divide. Focusing on the key sectors of energy, transport, and digital connectivity, its core objectives are to bolster economic convergence with Western Europe, enhance regional energy security (reducing dependence on single suppliers like Russia), and foster greater overall connectivity, operating within the EU framework.

Nearly a decade since its inception, the 3SI finds itself at a critical crossroads. Its strategic relevance has dramatically increased due to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This event has highlighted the urgent need for energy diversification, evidenced by projects like the Baltic Pipe and the Krk LNG terminal, as well as the necessity of building robust transport corridors (e.g., Via Carpathia, Rail Baltica), which are crucial for both economic and military mobility. However, the initiative faces significant hurdles, including challenges related to maintaining political cohesion and ensuring the full engagement of all participating states. A primary challenge remains securing adequate, long-term financing that extends beyond current funds. The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF) needs substantial private capital infusion to fully realize its potential for financing key private investments.

The 3SI operates in a complex environment: it enjoys strong US political support (aimed at countering Russian/Chinese influence and promoting energy security) but faces Russian hostility. Internally, maintaining cohesion and momentum is tested by changes of governments and presidents and the need for effective coordination. The transition from a high-level format to a sustainable engine for development requires overcoming financial constraints, managing geopolitical complexities, and potentially enhancing the institutional structure (e.g., through a permanent secretariat). The aim of these efforts is to strengthen Central Europe’s resilience and support its development.

We hope that this report will be a valuable source of information and knowledge about the Three Seas Initiative for you.

Streszczenie

Misją The Opportunity Institute of Foreign Affairs jest dostrzeżenie ukrytego potencjału i wskazywanie nieoczywistych możliwości. Analizujemy również wydarzenia i trendy, które – bezpośrednio lub pośrednio – mogą wpływać na polityczne oraz strategiczne wybory Polski i naszego regionu.

Niniejszy raport został przygotowany na konferencję „THREE SEAS ONE OPPORTUNITY (3S1O) Welcome to Warsaw” – która w tym roku została oficjalnym wydarzeniem towarzyszącym Szczytowi Inicjatywy Trójmorza w Warszawie.

Konferencja ta, organizowana przez The Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs od 2022 roku, stanowi coroczną okazję do pogłębionej dyskusji o znaczeniu współpracy regionalnej dla bezpieczeństwa i realizacji strategicznych interesów państw regionu. Jej celem jest podjęcie debaty na temat dynamicznych zmian międzynarodowych i wynikających z nich wyzwań (militarnych, energetycznych, gospodarczych) dla państw 3SI oraz stworzenie platformy wymiany poglądów między ekspertami (z dziedziny nauki, polityki, wojskowości), która ma inspirować wizje dla nowych obszarów współpracy na rzecz wzmocnienia stabilności regionu.

Ponadto, do przedstawienia swojego punktu widzenia zaprosiliśmy dziewięciu uznanych naukowców i ekspertów. Są to specjaliści posiadający już doświadczenie w analizie rozwoju Inicjatywy Trójmorza.

Inicjatywa Trójmorza (3SI), zainicjowana w 2015 roku przez dwanaście państw członkowskich UE położonych między Morzem Bałtyckim, Adriatyckim i Czarnym, ma na celu zniwelowanie historycznych zapóźnień infrastrukturalnych na osi Północ-Południe. Koncentruje się na kluczowych sektorach energetyki, transportu i łączności cyfrowej, a jej główne cele to: wspieranie konwergencji gospodarczej z Europą Zachodnią, wzmocnienie regionalnego bezpieczeństwa energetycznego (m.in. poprzez zmniejszenie zależności od pojedynczych dostawców, jak Rosja) oraz poprawa ogólnej łączności w ramach Unii Europejskiej.

Niemal dekadę od powstania, Inicjatywa Trójmorza (3SI) znajduje się na krytycznym rozdrożu. Jej strategiczne znaczenie radykalnie wzrosło wskutek pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę. Konflikt ten uwypuklił pilną potrzebę zarówno dywersyfikacji energetycznej (czego przykładem są Baltic Pipe czy terminal LNG na Krk), jak i budowy solidnych korytarzy transportowych (np. Via Carpathia, Rail Baltica), niezbędnych dla mobilności gospodarczej oraz wojskowej. Jednakże Inicjatywa napotyka znaczące przeszkody, w tym dotyczące utrzymania spójności politycznej oraz zapewnienia pełnego zaangażowania wszystkich państw uczestniczących. Kluczowym wyzwaniem pozostaje przy tym zapewnienie długoterminowego finansowania na odpowiednią skalę, wykraczającego poza obecne zaangażowanie. Fundusz Inwestycyjny Inicjatywy Trójmorza (3SIIF) potrzebuje znacznego napływu kapitału prywatnego, aby w pełni zrealizować swój potencjał finansowania kolejnych inwestycji w przedsiębiorstwa komercyjne w regionie.

Obecne poparcie aktorów zewnętrznych dla Inicjatywy Trójmorza jest złożone: cieszy się ona silnym poparciem politycznym USA (które dążą do przeciwdziałania wpływom Rosji i Chin oraz promowania bezpieczeństwa energetycznego), ale jednocześnie spotyka się z wrogością Moskwy. Wewnętrznie, utrzymanie spójności i dynamiki Inicjatywy jest wystawione na próbę przez zmiany rządów i prezydentów oraz potrzebę skuteczniejszej koordynacji całego formatu. Przejście od forum wysokiego szczebla do mechanizmu trwałego rozwoju wymaga przewyższenia ograniczeń finansowych, poradzenia sobie ze złożonością geopolityczną oraz potencjalnego stworzenia struktury instytucjonalnej (np. poprzez stały sekretariat). Celem tych działań jest wzmocnienie odporności regionu i wspieranie rozwoju państw Europy Środkowej.

Mamy nadzieję, że niniejszy raport będzie dla Państwa wartościowym źródłem informacji i wiedzy na temat Inicjatywy Trójmorza.

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1. Introduction: The Three Seas Initiative at a Crossroads

Launched in 2015, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) emerged with ambitious goals to bridge the historical infrastructure divide that has long characterized the thirteen European Union member states situated between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. This collaborative effort was conceived to bolster economic convergence, enhance energy security, and foster greater connectivity in critical sectors such as energy, transport, and digital infrastructure, ultimately aiming to unlock the significant potential of Central Europe and strengthen the overall cohesion of the European Union. The very location of these countries underscores a significant potential for interconnectedness that had been historically constrained. Furthermore, the initiative's exclusive focus on EU member states clearly indicates an intention to operate within the existing European framework, seeking to complement and enhance rather than compete with broader EU objectives.

However, nearly a decade since its inception, the 3SI finds itself navigating a complex landscape marked by geopolitical turbulence, persistent financial hurdles, and internal pressures. The strategic relevance of the initiative has been notably amplified by Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, which has starkly exposed

vulnerabilities in energy dependence and highlighted the crucial importance of resilient North-South infrastructure for the security of the region and the eastern flank of NATO. **Despite this heightened relevance, the transition of the 3SI from a high-level political forum to a sustainable engine for transformative infrastructure development remains critically uncertain.** The initiative grapples with the immense challenge of securing adequate and long-term funding that extends beyond foundational public contributions.³ It must also navigate the intricate geopolitical landscape involving the distinct and sometimes competing interests of major global actors such as the United States, the European Union itself, Russia, and China. Maintaining internal cohesion and political momentum among its thirteen participating countries is further complicated by leadership transitions, particularly in key driving nations like Poland. Compounding these issues are the pressing economic realities facing Central Europe, a region that must urgently adapt its growth model to ensure future prosperity. The success of the 3SI hinges on its capacity to effectively reconcile these diverse and often competing interests while securing substantial financial commitments from a wide array of stakeholders. Its ability to remain pertinent to the specific and evolving needs of its participating countries will also be a determining factor in its future trajectory. This report argues that while the Three Seas Initiative continues to hold undeniable strategic relevance, particularly in the context of the ongoing geopolitical shifts, its transformation into a self-sustaining and impactful driver of infrastructure development is far from guaranteed. This analysis will assess whether the 3SI can successfully navigate its current fragility and firmly establish its role as a pivotal force in shaping the resilience and long-term prosperity of Central Europe.



Tallinn, Estonia

2. Genesis and Foundational Objectives: Charting a Course for Connectivity

Prior to the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative, the states of Central Europe had a history of engaging in various forms of regional cooperation. One notable example is the Visegrád Group, formed by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Initially focused on coordinating their efforts to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, the Visegrád Group demonstrated the capacity of Central European states to collaborate effectively on shared political and economic objectives. This earlier experience of regional collaboration provided valuable lessons and established networks that likely facilitated the subsequent formation of the 3SI.

The formation of the Three Seas Initiative in 2015 was driven by a confluence of significant geopolitical factors. **A key motivation was the growing concern over Russia's increasing influence in the region, particularly its substantial leverage in the energy sector.** The imperative to enhance energy security through the diversification of energy supply sources and routes also played a pivotal role in the initiative's creation. Furthermore, the initiative aimed to address the considerable infrastructure deficits that had historically impeded economic growth and deeper regional integration across Central Europe. The Atlantic Council's 2014 report, "Completing Europe," which meticulously highlighted the significant investment gap in this part of the continent and advocated for enhanced North-South connectivity, significantly influenced the initiative's inception. This report provided a crucial intellectual and strategic foundation for the 3SI by identifying the infrastructure deficit as a key barrier to the region's full integration and prosperity.

Historically, the development of infrastructure in Central Europe during the Soviet era primarily focused on East-West connections, largely to facilitate resource extraction and military logistics for the Soviet Union, resulting in a comparatively underdeveloped North-South axis. **The initial vision of the 3SI, spearheaded by Polish President Andrzej Duda and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, centered on strengthening economic cohesion and significantly improving infrastructure connectivity along this historically neglected North-South axis.** This focus reflected a strategic ambition to reorient the region's infrastructure away from past dependencies and towards greater intra-regional integration and stronger links with Western Europe.



Dubrovnik, Croatia

Since its launch, the Three Seas Initiative has marked several key milestones. The inaugural summit held in Dubrovnik in 2016 laid the foundational framework for economic cooperation in the critical areas of energy, transport, and communications infrastructure. Subsequent summits witnessed the establishment of the Business Forum, intended to foster collaboration and partnership between the public and private sectors, thereby recognizing the vital role of commercial actors in achieving the initiative's economic objectives. Furthermore, the creation of the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF) provided a mechanism for making key investments in companies that foster cross-border cooperation in the region and are intended to generate returns for investors. The initiative has also expanded its reach, with Greece joining as the thirteenth participating state in 2023, and Ukraine and Moldova being granted associated participating states status. This expansion reflects the evolving geopolitical landscape and the 3SI's adaptability to the changing dynamics of the region.

3. Advancements Across Key Sectors: Tangible Achievements and Persistent Hurdles

The Three Seas Initiative is structured around three primary pillars: energy security, transportation infrastructure, and digital transformation. These pillars represent the core areas where the initiative aims to foster enhanced connectivity and drive regional development.

3.1 Energy Security

In the realm of energy security, a central focus of the Three Seas Initiative has been on actively diversifying energy sources to significantly reduce the region's dependence on single suppliers, with a particular emphasis on diminishing reliance on Russia. Efforts in this area include the strategic development of interconnectors and the creation of a more integrated regional energy market through the construction of essential cross-border infrastructure such as gas pipelines and electricity grids.

Key projects exemplify this progress. The Baltic Pipe, a natural gas pipeline connecting Norway and Poland through Denmark, became fully operational on November 30, 2022. With a substantial capacity to transport 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from the Norwegian Continental Shelf to Poland, the Baltic Pipe significantly enhances Poland's energy independence and reduces its reliance on Russian gas supplies. The Krk LNG terminal in Croatia, which began operating in 2021, provides a crucial alternative source of liquefied natural gas for Central Europe. The terminal's capacity is also being expanded to 6.1 billion cubic meters annually, further bolstering regional energy security and offering neighboring countries more supply options.

Despite these notable advancements, challenges to energy security within the 3SI region persist. Some participating countries, most notably Hungary, still maintain significant energy ties with Russia, presenting a hurdle to a fully unified regional energy security strategy. Moreover, securing sufficient infrastructure financing for future energy projects continues to be a paramount priority for the initiative. The future prospects for the energy security pillar of the 3SI involve further strategic development of energy infrastructure and a significant role for the initiative in the broader European energy transition towards cleaner and more sustainable energy sources.



LNG Terminal, Swinoujscie, Poland

3.2 Transportation Infrastructure

In the realm of transportation infrastructure, the Three Seas Initiative has strategically focused on developing critical North-South corridors to enhance connectivity across the region. **Two flagship projects in this area are the Via Carpathia and Rail Baltica.** The Via Carpathia is a planned highway network with the ambitious goal of linking Klaipėda in Lithuania with Thessaloniki in Greece. This project aims to facilitate trade, increase labor mobility, and

improve the overall quality of life for residents throughout the region. Significant progress has been made, with Hungary completing its section in 2021 and Poland expecting to finish its portion by 2025-2026. Rail Baltica is a high-speed railway project with the aim of connecting the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) with Poland and the wider European rail network. This project is currently in the construction phase across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithu-

ania, with 43% of the mainline expected to be construction-ready by the end of 2025. Rail Baltica aims to reduce travel times and significantly enhance cargo transport efficiency in the region.

Challenges in the transportation sector for the 3SI include securing the substantial funding required for these large-scale projects, ensuring effective cross-border coordination among the various participating states, and navigating often complex bureaucratic processes. The long-term impact of these improved transportation links is expected to be significant, fostering greater trade, attracting increased investment, promoting robust economic growth, and enhancing regional mobility for both people and goods.



Rail Baltica, Riga, Latvia

3.3 Digital Transformation

The third crucial pillar of the Three Seas Initiative is digital transformation, which encompasses the strategic development of advanced digital infrastructure, the active promotion of digital innovation, and the critical strengthening of cybersecurity capabilities and resilience across the region. **Recognizing that increased interconnectivity and large infrastructure projects present new risks in a challenging security environment, particularly from actors targeting critical infrastructure, enhancing cybersecurity is paramount.**

Efforts are currently underway to expand the deployment of 5G networks and significantly enhance collaborative cybersecurity capabilities across the participating countries. Reflecting analyses, such as the Atlantic Council report 'Collective cybersecurity for the Three Seas' by Safa Shahwan Edwards, Simon Handler, Trey Herr, Adam Marczyński, and Jakub Teska, there is a growing understanding of the need for mechanisms that foster collective security. This includes exploring avenues for improved cross-border threat intelligence sharing, coordinating incident response, particularly concerning threats to energy and transport infrastructure, and building shared operational security capacity. The development of a robust digital infrastructure, including fiber optics and advanced 5G technology, is considered crucial for enabling secure data transfer and effectively bridging communica-

tion gaps. Crucially, initiatives such as the 3 Seas Digital Highway aim to establish a cyber-resilient digital infrastructure backbone along the North-South axis, serving as a potential platform for secure data exchange and complementing the energy and transport corridors by protecting their digital components. The 3SI also seeks to actively foster digital innovation, potentially leveraging leading participating countries like Estonia and Poland to advance cybersecurity solutions, provide support for the growth of the digital economy, and facilitate seamless and secure cross-border digital services. The importance of strong public-private partnerships is also emphasized, involving collaboration with major technology providers (especially in cloud services) and specialized cybersecurity firms to leverage expertise and resources. Ensuring effective data governance, facilitating the smooth flow of data across borders, and working towards common standards and best practices are also key objectives within this pillar.

Challenges in this area include addressing the existing digital divide, effectively mitigating evolving cybersecurity threats from sophisticated state-sponsored actors and cybercriminals, developing a shared understanding and harmonized approach to cybersecurity across diverse national contexts, and cultivating a sufficiently skilled digital and cybersecurity workforce. Proposals, such as establishing a dedicated regional Three Seas Cyberse-

curity Center or Hub (as detailed in the aforementioned Atlantic Council report), aim to address these challenges by creating a focal point for cooperation, skills development, standardization, and public-private engagement. The future prospects for digital transformation within the 3SI region are promising, holding potential for greater digital integration, a thriving regional digital market, and enhanced digital competitiveness, but realizing this potential hinges on successfully embedding robust, collaborative cybersecurity measures into the fabric of these initiatives.



Business district, Tallinn, Estonia

4. Central Europe's Economic Context: Growth, Challenges, and Needs

Understanding the broader economic backdrop and the specific challenges facing Central Europe is fundamental, as it fundamentally shapes the environment in which the Three Seas Initiative operates. The OSW Report 'A Glass Half Full' by Konrad Popławski and Sandra Baniak provides a detailed analysis, explaining how Central European countries have experienced significant economic success during their two decades of EU membership. This period has been marked by a relatively high pace of economic growth, substantial progress in convergence with Western European economies, the development of robust foreign trade, consistent inflows of direct investment, unemployment falling to very low levels, and the maintenance of fiscal stability.

However, this positive picture now faces emerging headwinds. The convergence process has slowed noticeably in recent years, a trend that coincides with the EU itself experiencing a deceleration in its growth momentum. **The established development model in Central Europe, which has largely been based on acting as a subcontractor for companies in Western Europe, is showing signs of reaching its limits.** This model may prove insufficient for addressing future needs such as generating higher value-added, fostering innovation, or funding the increasing costs associated with defense and the energy transition.

The region confronts several critical challenges that necessitate a strategic shift to avoid the risk of structural problems and pro-

longed economic stagnation seen elsewhere in the EU. These include a profound demographic crisis, characterized by shrinking human capital due to rapidly aging societies, past emigration, and persistently low fertility rates. This demographic shift is accelerating the exhaustion of the current economic model and raises difficult questions regarding family and migration policies. **There is an urgent need for a new long-term growth model that is firmly focused on home-grown innovation and specialization, moving beyond the limitations of the subcontractor role which may fail to guarantee higher value-added, sufficiently innovative impulses, or increased industrial competitiveness and high wages.** Central Europe must also navigate a complex EU policy landscape, which includes potential friction between ambitious climate policy and industrial competitiveness (risking deindustrialization), competition distortions arising from the EU's increasing internal relaxation of state aid rules which undermines fair competition and strikes at the competitiveness of less affluent states, excessive bureaucracy hindering SME access to crucial EU funds, and an underperformance in securing Horizon Europe innovation funding where research teams from the region often do not play leading roles. Furthermore, the region needs to prepare for a future with significantly smaller inflows of Cohesion Fund resources as it grows more affluent, alongside the EU's need to repay the recovery fund. Finally, Central Europe must address serious external threats such as potential supply chain disruptions and Russia's aggressive foreign policy.

Overcoming these multifaceted challenges necessitates a focused approach on innovation, strategic infrastructure development, and proactive engagement with EU policies, all underpinned by strong regional cooperation. This includes a shift from intense competition for investment towards fostering economic specialization and the development of vibrant innovation ecosystems that create high-value jobs, requiring further reforms to strengthen the crucial links between science and business. Prioritizing key infrastructure investments is also essential, including enhancing rail freight capacity (consistent with the Green Deal objectives), completing critical cross-border investments in highways, rail lines, and border crossings, developing intermodal transport infrastructure and incentives, expanding high-speed rail networks, and strategically integrating Ukraine's transport network to significantly boost regional competitiveness. Finally, Central Europe needs to take a more active and coordinated role in shaping EU policies, including influencing the critical next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–34, advocating for a level playing field in industrial and trade policy (countering protectionism), reducing bureaucracy that impedes SMEs and new technology adoption, pushing for green technology competitiveness support that benefits the region, and coordinating more effectively to secure top EU positions where it has faced significant setbacks.

While Central Europe's progress within the EU framework is undeniable, mounting evidence suggests that a significant adjustment to the existing development model is necessary. To maintain dynamic growth, adequately fund security and energy needs, and build long-term resilience, the region must transition towards an innovation-driven economy, improve its strategic infrastructure, and assert its interests more effectively within the EU through enhanced regional collaboration. The beneficial integration of Ukraine presents both a significant challenge in ensuring fair competition and the rule of law, and a major opportunity to shift Central Europe from the periphery towards the EU's core. This broader economic context underscores the critical need for initiatives focused on fostering regional cooperation and strategic infrastructure development, such as the Three Seas Initiative.



University of Life Sciences SGGW campus, Warsaw, Poland

5. Geopolitical Implications: Navigating a Complex Arena

Beyond its core infrastructure goals, the Three Seas Initiative is deeply embedded in a complex web of international relations and great power interests, particularly significant given its location on NATO's eastern flank. Understanding these geopolitical dimensions is crucial, as the perspectives and actions of major players like the US, EU, Russia, and China, along with the ongoing war in Ukraine, profoundly influence the 3SI's challenges and opportunities

5.1 EU Stance Towards the Three Seas Initiative: Ambiguity and Pragmatic Convergence

The European Union's relationship with the Three Seas Initiative presents a complex picture, characterized by a degree of official partnership alongside underlying ambiguities. While the European Commission holds the formal status of a strategic partner, a clear and unified stance on the 3SI is often difficult to discern within Brussels institutions. There is often a perceived lack of detailed knowledge about the initiative, sometimes accompanied by misperceptions that view the 3SI as potentially competitive with the EU itself or primarily as a geopolitical project focused on security and transatlantic ties, echoing older concepts like the Intermarium (Polish word: Międzymorze). This ambiguity persists despite the formal partnership status, with officials reportedly sometimes struggling to articulate the Commission's precise position.

However, there is a growing convergence within the EU on the recognized need for significant infrastructure development in Central Europe, a core focus of the 3SI. Particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, awareness within the Commission has increased regarding the significant deficits in North-South connectivity (transport, energy, digital) compared to the historically dominant East-West links. The successful inclusion of the new Baltic-Black-Aegean Sea corridor in the revised TEN-T network reflects this heightened awareness and acknowledges the strategic importance of improving these connections for economic integration, enhanced resilience, and improved military mobility – goals that are also shared by the 3SI.

Despite this growing alignment on infrastructure needs, a significant gap remains between the recognized requirements and the available EU funding mechanisms. Instruments such as the Connecting Europe Facility for transport, while helpful, possess budgets that are considered vastly insufficient to bridge the infrastructure disparity between Central Europe and Western Europe, with estimated needs ranging from 3% to 8% of regional GDP annually. Furthermore, the designation as a "strategic part-

ner" has reportedly not yet translated into substantial, meaningful practical or financial support from the EU level, leaving uncertainty about future commitments, especially regarding cohesion funding in upcoming EU budgets. Some analyses also point to broader EU discourse, such as the Draghi report on European competitiveness, potentially overlooking the specific needs and contributions of Central Europe.

This complex landscape – characterized by ambiguous political status, insufficient EU resources relative to the identified needs, and potentially shifting EU priorities – leads some analyses to suggest that the future success of the 3SI may rely less on top-down political declarations or EU institutional backing, and more on pragmatic, business-driven cooperation and effective project implementation. The focus may increasingly shift towards leveraging the 3SI framework for specific ventures and actively seeking complementary funding and know-how from partners outside the direct EU structure, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, or Japan, while continuing to engage with relevant EU programs where feasible. This approach emphasizes flexibility and demonstrable economic benefits as potentially more stable drivers for the initiative than volatile political support.



Parliament Building, Budapest, Hungary

5.2 United States Involvement: Robust Political Backing and Strategic Objectives

The United States has demonstrated consistent and high-level political endorsement for the Three Seas Initiative, clearly signaling its strategic importance to Washington. This support has been highly visible, marked by presidential participation in key summits, such as President Trump's attendance in Warsaw in 2017, and sustained engagement from successive high level officials through official visits and strong diplomatic statements affirming the US partnership. Crucially, this backing extends across the political spectrum within the US, evidenced by bipartisan Congressional support. Measures such as House Resolution 672, which explicitly endorsed the goals of the 3SI, and the inclusion of supportive provisions in major legislation like the National Defense Authorization Act, highlight a durable consensus within the US on the initiative's value to American interests.

Strategically, this robust political support is underpinned by several core and interconnected US objectives. A primary aim is to significantly bolster the energy independence of Central European nations. The US actively promotes diversification away from the historical reliance on Russian energy supplies, often specifically championing American Liquefied Natural Gas as a key alternative and supporting the necessary development of import terminals and pipeline interconnectors. Simultaneously, the US views the 3SI as a vital instrument to counter the growing geopolitical influence of both Russia and China in this strategically critical region. It positions the initiative as a transparent, reliable, and Western-aligned framework for infrastructure development, offering a compelling alternative to potentially predatory or non-market-driven investments, such as those sometimes associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Closely linked with these energy and geopolitical goals, the US also seeks tangible economic benefits through the 3SI framework, particularly by fostering stable and long-term markets for its growing LNG exports, which in turn support American companies and jobs. Fundamentally, US involvement aims to reinforce relationships with key allies in Central

Europe, viewing their security and prosperity as integral to wider European stability and the overall strength of the transatlantic bond. Furthermore, the infrastructure developed through the 3SI, especially the improved North-South transport corridors, directly aligns with NATO objectives by significantly enhancing military mobility and logistical capabilities on the Alliance's eastern flank, thereby strengthening its overall defensive posture.



USA embassy, Warsaw, Poland

5.3 Russia's Perspective

Russia views the Three Seas Initiative with considerable suspicion and outright hostility. **Moscow fundamentally perceives the 3SI not merely as an economic project but as a significant geopolitical endeavor, strongly backed by the United States, aimed squarely at curtailing Russian influence in Central Europe.** The initiative's core goal of developing North-South energy, transport, and digital infrastructure directly challenges the historical East-West linkages, many dating back to the Soviet era, that traditionally oriented the region toward Russia. From Moscow's perspective, this deliberate reorientation is a clear attempt to draw Central European countries further into the Western orbit, thereby diminishing Russia's strategic leverage in the region. This view is often amplified by narratives portraying the 3SI as a modern anti-Russian „cordon sanitaire.“ The consistent high-level engagement and substantial financial pledges from the United States are seen by Russia as primary evidence confirming that the 3SI serves US foreign policy objectives aimed at containing Russian power, rather than being a purely regional initiative.

The energy sector is a particularly critical area of concern for Moscow. Russia interprets the 3SI's strong emphasis on energy security – specifically the diversification of suppliers and routes – as a direct assault on its long-standing dominance as a key energy provider to Europe. This dominance has historically afforded Russia considerable economic and political leverage, which it sees eroding due to 3SI-supported projects. Initiatives such as

the Baltic Pipe and the development of Liquefied Natural Gas terminals in countries like Poland and Croatia are viewed as concrete actions designed to bypass existing Russian infrastructure and significantly reduce dependence on its natural gas supplies. Moscow sees these efforts, often supported both politically and financially by the US and the EU, as a strategic campaign to undermine its market share and weaken its ability to use energy as a tool of political influence.

Consequently, Russia's deep-seated suspicion shapes its policies toward the region. Potential Russian responses include concerted efforts to undermine the 3SI through sophisticated disinformation campaigns, attempting to leverage remaining economic ties with individual participating states (though this has been significantly complicated by post-2022 European energy shifts), or potentially increasing geopolitical tensions in the region.



Kremlin, Moscow, Russia

5.4 China's Complex Role: Competition and Limited Cooperation

China's relationship with the Three Seas Initiative is characterized by a degree of ambiguity and underlying tension. While there were initial discussions about potential synergies between the 3SI and China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the 3SI is increasingly viewed as a Western-backed alternative, primarily driven by concerns about the growing Chinese economic and political influence in Central Europe.

Chinese companies have indeed invested in various infrastructure projects within several 3SI states, sometimes directly competing

with the stated objectives of the 3SI. For example, Chinese investments in the port of Piraeus in Greece could potentially divert trade away from 3SI-backed port projects in the Adriatic and Black Seas. Concerns also exist regarding the potential for Chinese investments to create unsustainable debt burdens for participating 3SI states and to grant China undue political leverage within the region. The example of Montenegro's highway project, largely financed by a Chinese loan, is often cited as a cautionary tale in this context.

Furthermore, the 3SI currently lacks a unified and clearly articulated stance on engagement with China. Some participating states, such as Lithuania, are notably skeptical of any significant Chinese involvement, while others, like Hungary, have been more

open to Chinese investment opportunities. This lack of internal cohesion weakens the 3SI's collective ability to negotiate with China from a position of strength and potentially undermines a unified strategic approach.

5.5 The War in Ukraine: A Catalyst for Change

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 acted as a profound catalyst for change within the Three Seas Initiative, dramatically elevating the urgency surrounding its core ambitions in energy security and infrastructure development. The conflict starkly exposed Europe's deep vulnerability stemming from its historical dependence on Russian energy supplies, critically underscoring the necessity to actively diversify energy sources and supply routes and lending renewed impetus to pivotal 3SI projects such as the Baltic Pipe and the Krk LNG terminal. While the war fostered stronger regional cohesion among many 3SI members, united by a shared perception of the acute threat from Russia, nuances and differences in approach persist, particularly concerning the levels of support provided to Ukraine and the extent of sanctions imposed on Russia. Furthermore, the conflict vividly highlighted the dual importance of robust transportation infrastructure –

essential not only for sustained economic development but also crucially for ensuring military mobility, thereby adding significant strategic weight to initiatives such as Rail Baltica and Via Carpathia. Simultaneously, however, this heightened strategic importance has coincided with a more uncertain investment climate in the region, as increased geopolitical risks may temper the appetite of some private investors. Lastly, the war decisively brought Ukraine into the 3SI's orbit as an associated country, significantly increasing the focus on and potential for future infrastructure development specifically geared towards the nation's eventual post-war reconstruction.

5.6 Germany: The Region's Economic Anchor and Complex Partner

Germany, while positioned outside the direct geographical scope of the Three Seas Initiative participating states, is inextricably linked to the region's economic fortunes and acts as a key partner in various respects. Its standing as the European Union's economic powerhouse translates into significant leverage, being a top investor and a crucial trading nation for all 3SI countries. This extensive economic integration forms a solid bedrock for regional prosperity but can also highlight differing national interests. A prime example lies in energy policy: Germany's long-term strategy, including its controversial nuclear

exit and previous significant dependence on Russian natural gas (highlighted by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project), created friction with many 3SI states that prioritized rapid diversification for enhanced energy security. While the changing geopolitical landscape is prompting shifts in German policy, particularly regarding its energy imports, navigating these complex economic and strategic relationships remains essential for both Germany and the 3SI participating states as they pursue shared and sometimes distinct goals within the European Union.

6. Financial Support for the Three Seas Initiative: Mobilizing Resources for Ambitious Goals

The long-term economic viability and ultimate success of the Three Seas Initiative are inextricably linked to its ability to secure substantial and sustained financial support for its ambitious portfolio of infrastructure projects. While the initiative has established the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF) and benefits from various European Union funding mechanisms, significant challenges remain in effectively mobilizing the necessary capital to realize its goals.

6.1 The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF): Performance and Limitations

The 3SIIF, established in 2019, represents a commercially managed fund specifically intended to attract private capital for investment in crucial energy, transport, and digital infrastructure projects within the Three Seas region. Operating on market principles, the fund aims to generate a commercial return on investment for its contributors. **While the 3SIIF represents a crucial step towards achieving greater financial self-sufficiency for the initiative, its performance to date has been mixed, and it remains heavily reliant on contributions from participating countries, particularly Poland.**

As of early 2025, the 3SIIF has successfully raised approximately €1.3 billion in capital. While this figure is significant, it still falls short of the initial target of €3–5 billion and represents a small fraction of the estimated hundreds of billions of euros needed to finance all the priority projects identified under the 3SI framework. Poland, through its state development bank Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK), stands as the largest contributor to the fund, underscoring the country's central role in driving the initiative. The majority of contributions to the fund have originated from 3SI participating countries themselves, primarily through public funds, while private sector participation, a key objective of the fund's design, has been slower to materialize. Amber Infrastructure Group currently serves as the investment advisor for the 3SIIF.

According to official sources, the 3SIIF has made several notable investments, including in Cargounit, a leading Polish locomotive leasing business; Greenergy Data Centers, the largest and most secure data center serving the Baltic region; Energy Development GmbH, a renewable energy platform with projects across Central Europe; BMF Port Burgas, a strategically important Bulgarian port on the Black Sea; and R.Power Renewables, a Polish renewable energy developer.

A precise breakdown of public versus private contributions to the fund itself is not always publicly available, raising some transparency concerns. However, the dominance of contributions from state-owned entities and development banks within 3SI participating countries, most notably Poland's BGK, indicates that the fund remains heavily reliant on public funding. This reliance raises questions about the fund's long-term sustainability and its ability to truly operate on commercial principles. The lack of detailed, publicly accessible information regarding the specific sources of funding for the 3SIIF and the precise terms of its investments hinders independent assessment and could potentially affect investor confidence.



Port Burgas, Bulgaria

6.2 US Financial Commitments

The United States has consistently been a strong political supporter of the 3SI, viewing it as a crucial way to strengthen transatlantic ties and effectively counter the growing influence of Russia and China in the region. However, the scale of US financial commitments to the initiative has been relatively modest when compared to the overall investment needs. The US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has pledged up to \$300

million to the 3SIF. While this contribution is certainly welcome, it represents a small fraction of the total investment required to meet the ambitious goals of the initiative. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of US financial support remains uncertain, particularly given potential future shifts in US foreign policy priorities.

7. 3SI and the EU: A Complementary Relationship

The notion that the Three Seas Initiative could somehow serve as an alternative or counterbalance to the European Union has occasionally surfaced since the 3SI's inception. However, this idea has always been based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the core nature and objectives of both entities. It is a comparison that lacks a solid foundation, akin to comparing fundamentally different categories, and thankfully, this misguided perspective has largely faded from serious discussion in the years following the 3SI's formal launch in 2015. It is crucial to understand why this "alternative EU" concept was fundamentally flawed from the very beginning.

The most glaring flaw in the "alternative" theory lies in the simple fact that all participating states of the Three Seas Initiative are, without exception, full members of the European Union. The 3SI operates firmly within the EU framework, not outside or against it. Its participants are bound by EU treaties, laws (the *acquis communautaire*), and institutional commitments. The Initiative was conceived by EU members, for EU members in a specific region, to address challenges within the context of their EU membership. Therefore, it cannot logically function as an alternative to something its own participants are fully integrated into and committed to.

Furthermore, the scope and nature of the EU and the 3SI are vastly different. The EU is a deep, treaty-based political and economic union with supranational institutions, extensive legislative powers, a common market, competition law, coordinated foreign policy aspects, justice cooperation, and a massive regulatory apparatus governing countless aspects of life. It represents decades of intricate integration and pooled sovereignty. In stark contrast,

the 3SI is a flexible, high-level forum primarily focused on promoting specific, cross-border infrastructure projects in three key areas: energy, transport, and digital connectivity. It lacks legislative power, binding treaties in the EU sense, supranational bodies, a common market of its own, or the vast regulatory scope of the EU. Its primary aim is practical project facilitation and enhanced regional cooperation in specific sectors, not comprehensive political and economic integration as an alternative to the EU.

Far from competing with the EU, the stated goals of the 3SI are explicitly complementary to overarching EU objectives. Enhancing North-South infrastructure connectivity directly helps strengthen the EU's internal market. Improving energy security and diversification aligns perfectly with EU energy policy, such as the REPowerEU plan. Boosting digital infrastructure supports the EU's Digital Single Market strategy. Reducing development gaps between Eastern and Western EU members strengthens EU cohesion – a core principle of the European Union. The 3SI ultimately aims to help its participating states better leverage their EU membership and integrate more effectively, not to chart a separate or opposing course.

Many significant 3SI projects rely heavily on EU funding mechanisms, such as the Cohesion Fund, Structural Funds, and the Connecting Europe Facility. The Initiative actively seeks synergy with existing EU programs. This fundamental financial and regulatory interdependence further undermines any notion of the 3SI acting as an independent alternative to the EU.

Over the past decade, several factors have contributed to the silencing of these misguided comparisons. As the 3SI evolved from

a conceptual idea to a practical implementation, its true nature as a project-focused, complementary forum became undeniable. Its actions in promoting specific infrastructure projects spoke far louder than speculative early interpretations. Geopolitical realities, particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have powerfully reinforced the indispensable roles of both NATO for security and the EU for political solidarity, economic support, sanctions, and long-term stability. The urgent need for stronger European unity became paramount, making any talk of internal alternatives seem counterproductive and out of touch. For countries like Poland, the value of deep integration within both the EU and NATO became even more evident. Furthermore, leaders from 3SI participating states and EU institutions have consistently framed the Initiative as pro-EU and complementary, aimed at strengthening the Union from within. Finally, the "alternative" narrative never gained significant political backing within the participating states themselves, whose strategic interests remain firmly anchored in robust EU and transatlantic membership.

In conclusion, the Three Seas Initiative is a valuable platform for fostering regional cooperation focused on tangible infrastructure goals that ultimately bolster economic growth and resilience within Central and Eastern Europe. It functions within and in support of the European Union, leveraging the strengths of its participating states' EU membership.



Presidential Palace, Warsaw, Poland

8. 3SI in Transition: Uncertainty and Resilience

The anticipated departure of President Andrzej Duda in August 2025 marks a significant moment of uncertainty for the Three Seas Initiative, a platform that he has actively championed since its inception. Adding to this complex picture, the recent departure of Romania's long-serving President Klaus Iohannis, another key proponent of the 3SI, also signifies a crucial transition, placing increased importance on the commitment of the new leadership in Bucharest. While any leadership transition inherently poses challenges for such initiatives, the situation regarding the 3SI is particularly complex due to recent and potentially concerning structural changes within the Polish coordination system. The decision to centralize all 3SI coordination within the President's Chancellery, while simultaneously eliminating the Government Plenipotentiary role that was previously situated within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, creates a potential bottleneck in the operational effectiveness of Poland's engagement.⁴ This move weakens crucial day-to-day inter-governmental links that are necessary for the effective implementation of complex cross-border infrastructure projects and risks making Poland's future engagement overly dependent on the personal commitment and priorities of the President, potentially sidelining the broader governmental apparatus that counterparts in other participating states rely upon. This revised setup raises serious questions about the continuity and overall operational effectiveness of Poland's historically driving role in the 3SI after President Duda's term comes to an end.

Compounding this structural vulnerability is the current political climate in Poland. As of late March 2025, accurately predicting the outcome of the upcoming presidential election remains highly speculative, meaning that the next Polish President's stance on the 3SI—made even more critical by the aforementioned structural issues—is currently unknown. However, the future of the initiative is not solely dependent on Warsaw's direction. Lithuania, together with the other Baltic states (Latvia and Estonia), has historically been actively involved in driving key 3SI priorities, demonstrating a solid and consistent commitment from the northern flank of the region. Furthermore, with the next 3SI summit scheduled to be hosted by Croatia, all eyes will naturally turn towards Zagreb to gauge the continued momentum of the initiative and potentially see Croatia step up its leadership role during this period of transition in Poland. While the initiative retains a strong strategic rationale and benefits from this broader base of support across

its participating countries, navigating the impending leadership change in Warsaw remains a key challenge, leaving the level of future Polish engagement, and thus the initiative's overall dynamism, facing significant uncertainty.

To effectively transition from a summit-driven forum to a body capable of generating sustained impact, the Three Seas Initiative requires dedicated and robust institutional capacity. Establishing a permanent 3SI secretariat, potentially based in a strategically located regional capital such as Warsaw or Bucharest, would provide essential continuity and operational support. Its primary mission should focus on actively marketing the region's significant investment potential to global audiences, consistently promoting the 3SI brand on the international stage, and acting as a central facilitator connecting potential investors with relevant opportunities and key stakeholders. This fundamental shift towards full-time, dedicated operations is crucial for attracting the vital infrastructure investment required to meet the initiative's ambitious goals. Complementing this structural enhancement, the 3SI framework could be effectively leveraged for the sectoral coordination of EU policy, an idea first articulated by Konrad Popławski when exploring the Three Seas Initiative as a tool for greater regional influence within the European Union. Given the increasing complexity and rapid pace of EU policy development, which can be particularly challenging for smaller participating countries to navigate effectively, establishing dedicated expert working groups under the 3SI umbrella would enable the formation of common regional positions on key policy issues, thereby strengthening the members' collective analytical capacity and amplifying their voice within the Union. Together, a permanent secretariat and well-structured policy coordination mechanisms would significantly bolster the 3SI's overall operational effectiveness and strategic influence within the broader European landscape.



Cotroceni Palace, Bucharest, Romania

9. Conclusion: Navigating the Defining Moment

The Three Seas Initiative stands at a critical juncture, its foundational goals of enhancing Central Europe’s infrastructure, energy security, and economic convergence more relevant than ever yet facing unprecedented tests. Launched nearly a decade ago with significant ambition, and amplified in strategic importance by Russia’s war against Ukraine, the 3SI has demonstrated tangible value – fostering key energy diversification projects like the Baltic Pipe and Krk LNG terminal, and advancing vital North–South transport corridors such as Via Carpathia and Rail Baltica. It has successfully debunked early misinterpretations, establishing itself not as an alternative to the EU or a nascent military alliance, but as a complementary framework operating firmly within the EU and transatlantic structures, focused primarily on economic and infrastructure resilience, particularly energy security.

However, as this report details, the initiative’s transition from a high-level political forum to a sustainable engine for transformative development is far from assured. The 3SI grapples with persistent and interconnected challenges that define its current precariousness. Securing adequate, long-term financing remains paramount, with the 3SIF yet to fully mobilize private capital and heavy reliance on public contributions and EU funds, which come with their own uncertainties and bureaucratic hurdles. The geopolitical landscape remains complex; while strong US political backing provides strategic weight, translating this into sufficient financial commitment and navigating the EU’s ambiguous support requires constant effort. Simultaneously, the initiative must contend with Russian hostility viewing it as a geopolitical threat, and manage the competitive and complex relationship with China.

Internally, the 3SI faces pressures that test its cohesion and dynamism. The departure of key political figures, notably in Poland and Romania, coupled with concerning structural changes in the Polish coordination mechanism, introduces significant uncertainty about future political momentum and operational effectiveness. Furthermore, the initiative’s long-term success hinges on its ability to align its infrastructure goals with the evolving economic needs of Central Europe, which must transition towards a more innovation-driven growth model to overcome demographic challenges and maintain competitiveness, while effectively coordinating its voice within the EU.

Ultimately, the Three Seas Initiative finds itself truly “at a crossroads” – poised between its undeniable potential and the considerable obstacles threatening its trajectory. Its future impact hinges on the collective ability of its members and partners to navigate this defining moment. Overcoming the financial constraints, managing geopolitical complexities, ensuring political continuity and effective coordination through potential institutional enhancements like a permanent secretariat and structured policy working groups, and adapting to the region’s economic imperatives will be crucial. Failure to address these challenges risks relegating the 3SI to a forum of missed potential. Conversely, decisive action and sustained commitment can solidify its role as a vital instrument for building a more resilient, interconnected, and prosperous Central Europe, capable of shaping its own future within a strong European Union and transatlantic alliance. The choices made now will determine whether the 3SI fulfills its promise or fades under the weight of its inherent fragilities.



Central Bank of Croatia, Zagreb

Strategic Insights from Regional Experts

This chapter presents a series of insightful analyses from various authors focusing on the Three Seas Initiative. Coinciding with the initiative's tenth anniversary in 2025, these texts offer timely reflections on its journey and future prospects. The contributors bring diverse backgrounds—spanning academia, policy analysis, law, history, and think tanks—providing a multifaceted view of the 3SI. They delve into the core objectives of the initiative, examining its progress in enhancing connectivity across energy, transport, and digital sectors within Central Europe. Crucially, the authors grapple with pressing questions about the 3SI's future direction and relevance in a complex geopolitical landscape. A recurring theme is the debate surrounding the potential institutionalization of the 3SI, exploring various models and their implications. The shifting dynamics of transatlantic relations, particularly the influence of United States policy under different administrations, are critically assessed. Furthermore, the growing importance of the security dimension, especially in light of regional conflicts and evolving threats, is a prominent consideration. Different national perspectives enrich the discussion, highlighting specific priorities and concerns. Together, these texts provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges, opportunities, and strategic considerations shaping the Three Seas Initiative as it enters its second decade.

Each of these authors brings recognized expertise from their respective professional domains, coupled with an extensive background and deep understanding of the Three Seas Initiative.





Małgorzata Samojedny

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Institutionalization of 3SI

In 2025, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) celebrates the 10th anniversary of its launch by the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, and the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. This milestone invites reflection, evaluation, and planning for the future.

After ten years of effective cooperation within the 3SI region, there is growing interest in the Initiative, reflected in the accession of new participating countries. Currently, the Initiative brings together 13 participating countries, with Greece joining most recently in 2023, along with 2 associated countries and 4 strategic partners — including the European Union. This expansive structure, covering a vast geographic area, a population of over 120 million, and accounting for more than 16% of the EU's GDP, calls for greater systematization.

It is worth noting that 3SI does not possess a legal entity, nor does it have an established organizational structure that could serve as a foundation for its institutionalization. As a result, the systematization of 3SI's functioning has become a topic of growing interest among analysts. Currently, three main concepts of institutionalization are under discussion: a political model, the creation of a

technical secretariat, and enhanced cooperation among think tanks.

The urgent need to establish an organizational framework and operational procedures for the Initiative is essential to increase its professionalism, effectiveness, and impact. Institutionalization should be viewed as a tool to ensure proper organization and systematic functioning of 3SI. Therefore, the first question that must be asked is: what is the purpose of institutionalizing the Three Seas Initiative? Is the goal to create an institution capable of fulfilling its objectives? If so, we must analyse whether this process should focus on effective operations or if it should adopt a political character, with the realization of strategic goals as its core function. However, some participating countries may oppose politically driven institutionalization of 3SI. This concept, based on politicization, could be flawed at its core. Still, a formal political structure could help develop operational procedures that ensure a balanced influence of all participating countries on the selection and implementation of priority projects—without dominance by the strongest 3SI countries.

Therefore, a more appropriate model may be the institutionalization of 3SI in an operational dimension—focused solely on the efficient and effective organization of its activities. This format could result in the creation of a technical Secretariat. Establishing such a Secretariat would enable the development of institutional memory, anchored by a central office. It would handle up-to-date information on ongoing projects and tasks, manage documentation, and maintain archives. This role was partially fulfilled by the Three Seas Initiative Research Centre, operated by the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. As a grant-based project, it completed its objectives and was subsequently closed. However, for the past four years, a Polish think tank — the Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs, based in Warsaw — has been consistently engaged in this role, organizing the annual international conference Three Seas One Opportunity. The Secretariat should be located in Brussels, as 3SI is a cooperation platform for EU member states. Situating it at the heart of the EU's organizational and decision-making hub would help promote the Three Seas concept among Members of the European Parliament and strengthen the Initiative's role within the Union.

A third concept involves think tank cooperation, aiming to create a multidimensional strategy for the development and collaboration of 3SI for at least the next decade. Under political patronage and support from the states involved, this vision could be effectively implemented. The goal is

to create clear and transparent project proposals for the region, define their implementation stages in detail, and outline their anticipated outcomes. The preparation of such analyses would significantly facilitate the global promotion of the Initiative across both the public and private sectors. Creating a network of analytical and expert centres, presenting both current status and development potential—along with investment plans along the North–South axis through Central and Eastern Europe—would send a strong signal of a cohesive vision for the region's future.

All participants in the institutionalization process must understand that it is a necessary condition for the continued development of the Three Seas Initiative. Without a technical infrastructure to support 3SI operations, its effectiveness will be limited, and the Initiative may risk marginalization.





Matthew Crandall

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The Geopolitics of Connectivity will Determine the Fate of the Three Seas Initiative

It has been ten years since the Three Seas Initiative was launched, and the 3SI is at a crossroads. The importance of infrastructure investment and enhanced North-South connectivity has never been greater. In that light, the 3SI's future should be as bright as ever. Turmoil in Transatlantic relations means a reckoning for the 3SI as well. The Trump administration is pursuing a pathway of protectionism and tariffs. This will likely accelerate the path towards strategic autonomy for the EU. What will this mean for the 3SI and Estonia's role in the 3SI?

Donald Trump's return to the White House has changed United States foreign policy. There is some uncertainty about what it will mean for the 3SI. For the 3SI to be successful, it will need more investment capital. The United States was thought to be a key source of funding, given the United States' financial commitment during Donald Trump's first presidency. Under Trump's second term, it is clear that the United States no longer believes in a liberal paradigm of complex interdependence and a win-win mindset. The United States should not be counted on as a source of goodwill capital for the 3SI. United

States policy towards Ukraine was a wake-up call when the administration demanded rare earth minerals and briefly stopped sharing intelligence. Taking advantage of Ukraine's vulnerabilities has caused every ally of the United States to question the reliability of its relationship with the United States. What should be done regarding the role of the United States and the 3SI?

The EU is moving at a blistering pace to invest in its own defense capabilities and questions are being asked about whether European countries should purchase US weapon systems. In this environment, the likely outcome will be a Europeanization of the 3SI. This is problematic because North-South relations in Europe were underdeveloped in the Europeanization process, hence the need for the 3SI in the first place. What should the 3SI's approach be towards the United States?

Estonia has been dubbed a "Super Atlanticist" for its unusually high level of support for the United States and for Transatlantic relations. Senior members of the Trump administration seem not only disinterested in

Europe but also disdainful of the current relationship in which they perceive Europe as benefiting unfairly. For Estonia, there are no easy solutions to this development. European security without the United States or with a disinterested United States is a problem. Eastern European countries may need to take a closer look at the minerals deal in Ukraine to find a blueprint for how to get Trump's attention. For Trump to sign off on investment capital, he will want something in return. This is also risky, as the United States may not be willing to offer fair terms.

For Estonia, Poland's chairmanship of the 3SI could not have come at a better time. Poland seems to be the rare European country that the Trump administration is fond of. Polish President Duda is also one of the few European leaders who can personally connect with Donald Trump. Though the likely future of the 3SI will end up within the framework of European strategic autonomy, Estonia and other Eastern European countries should do their best to keep the United States's interest in the region. If they succeed, it will be one of the greatest success stories not only for the 3SI, but for all of Europe.





Rainhard Kloucek

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Three Seas Initiative in a Stronger Europe

Regional cooperation can play an important role in the reforms of the EU.

The Three Seas Initiative is one of several regional cooperation formats in Europe. Other examples are the Baltic cooperation established in 1994, the Nordic–Baltic cooperation in 1992, the Visegrad Group (which is arguably dead, because of Hungary’s pro–Putin position) in 1991, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in 1992, the South–East European Cooperation Process in 1996, and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region in 2010. In this framework of regional cooperation, the Three Seas Initiative has undergone remarkable reforms in recent years. Originally created in 2016 by EU member states only and the USA, with the goal of developing the infrastructure in and between the new European member countries, the initiative integrated new members (Greece) and partners (Ukraine and Moldova as participating states, and Japan as a strategic partner), and questions of security politics became more important for the cooperation format.

This security topic became part of the 3SI even before Russia’s war of annihilation against Ukraine began. It was already stated in 2019 that the Initiative wanted

to reduce dependence on Russian oil and natural gas in order to increase energy security in the region. Not all countries in the Three Seas Initiative—Austria is an example—wanted to recognize the importance of this goal at that time. It was probably the experience of Moscow’s rule that led to the realization in the Central European countries that were able to join the European Union in 2004 that infrastructure means not just the construction of roads and railways, but also energy infrastructure and security structures.

One of the major questions for the 3SI will be the future policy of the next US administration. Predicting this is difficult, but potential policies of a second Trump administration suggest several possible scenarios. Donald Trump’s announcement that he could end the war against Ukraine in 24 hours has led to speculation that his administration might discuss Ukraine with Russia, excluding Europe, although Ukraine might at least be involved. This is reminiscent of the great power politics of the past. Washington and Moscow would (try to) decide what happens in Europe.

The US President shows little sympathy for the EU. This gives rise to at least two possible scenarios. First,

the US might attempt to instrumentalize the Three Seas Initiative countries “against Brussels.” Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has already pursued such a strategy with Visegrad. This failed partly because of his proximity to the government in Moscow, but also because being anti-Brussels is not in itself a political strategy. There is more money for infrastructure in the EU than in the 3SI.

Second, the US could attempt to divide the EU through privileged partnerships with individual countries. A strategy that, given the threat situation in Europe, would not bring any long-term benefit to any country. This opens up at least a third scenario: a gradual US withdrawal from the 3SI, but in which individual projects could still be supported.

But whatever the US decision on future cooperation with or participation in the 3SI will be, it will depend on the strategy of the European countries regarding which direction the initiative will go.

The “Joint Declaration at the Ninth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative” (2024 in Vilnius) made some clear statements affirming commitment to: regional cooperation right up to the important security policy challenges, but definitely within the European Union. The “geo-strategic importance” of the 3SI for the development of strategic interests is already addressed in the Joint Declaration. This strategic interest is complemented by a clear commitment to the enlargement policy of the European Union. The countries of the Western Balkans are addressed just as directly as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

With the statements on geostrategy, the Three Seas Initiative is providing impetus for the development of a foreign and security policy dimension for the European Union.





Mihai Sebe

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Three Seas Initiative Tenth Anniversary. Views from Romania*

“Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.” (Japanese Proverb)

The Why

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, Central and Eastern European countries began a convergence process with Western Europe. This enabled the former Communist countries to join the European Union after fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, in a series of enlargement waves in 2004, 2007 and 2013. Apparently, the region was developing at an exponential rate but the truth is that Western and Eastern Europe have a significant development gap (IMF, 2020 et varia), and Eastern countries are also operating with a significant infrastructure deficit.

Given the context, following a 2014 Atlantic Council report dedicated to “Completing Europe – From the North–South Corridor to Energy, Transportation, and Telecommunications Union”, the countries in the region decided to come together, and in 2016, the first Summit of the Initiative was held in Dubrovnik, Croatia, where “the Three Seas Initiative was endorsed as an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross–border and macro–regional7 projects of strategic importance to the States involved in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors.”

The First

Romania has had a vested interest in being an active participant in the 3SI from the very beginning, as it recognized early on that it was an opportunity to better connect the region to the wider world. It was and still is an opportunity to promote common interests and to increase the role and the visibility of Central and Eastern Europe.

In that context, Romania was the first country to host a 3SI Summit twice, in 2018 and 2023. It was a time of construction when a series of priority interconnection projects in the three fields – energy, digital, and transportation – were shortlisted, the Letter of Intent regarding the establishment of the Three Seas Investment Fund was signed, and the Three Seas Initiative Network of Chambers of Commerce from the participating states was created (2018). In 2023, the Hellenic Republic became the 13th participating state in the 3SI, and the Republic of Moldova became an associated participating state in the 3SI.

The Present and a possible Future.

Romania is an active country within the 3SI with a series of 9 important projects which are either underway or completed. Since there is always room for improvement, a set of rec-

ommendations have been made in a series of official documents and policy analyses. One example is US involvement, as Romania hopes to bridge additional areas of common interest, including its projects developed within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative that focus on the two major and strategic regional interconnectivity projects: Rail2Sea and Via Carpatia (Romanian Government Programme 2024 – 2028).

Yet there is more than meets the eye as regards the future of the 3SI, as a series of studies have shown in the last couple of years. The 3SI is perceived to be at its apex from a political point of view, as the Summits are held at the presidential level, yet the economic aspects and the nitty-gritty technical and administrative details make it rather challenging to operate fully.

This comes up as the specialty literature identifies a series of limitations of 3SI such as: limited homogeneity (despite geographic and historical common denominator); limited experience (in regional cooperation without an external catalyst); limited resources (for self-financing projects) and limited options (in terms of topping up the financing gap) (Jora et al., 2024).

A series of regional brainstorming concluded that the 3SI should do more to: promote regional security and stability (the security-economy nexus should be strengthened); consolidate the engagement with the EU (develop the 3SI into a regional dimension of EU integration); take the 3SI

connectivity to the next stage; and, perhaps most importantly, increase the national commitment to the 3SI (3SI participating states should strive for more institutionalisation, increased financial contribution, and better communication) (Sebe et al., 2023).

At the end of the day, it is about creating clear whole-of-society strategies of engagement towards the 3SI, more resources, and administrative capacity. We need to have more robust cooperation at governmental, parliamentary, academic, and civil society levels in order to bring the 3SI priorities onto the EU and global agenda and also to have an integrated project-based approach that would eliminate any superposition and prioritise the much-needed common infrastructure projects. Bringing the Western Balkans on board should be on the agenda while also increasing the cooperation with the United States and other strategic partners. At the end of the day is about increasing the cooperation inside the EU, enhance the transatlantic relationship and help the EU candidate states to better prepare. We need to harmonize economic investments with other existing regional mechanisms and formats such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Black Sea Synergy, Central European Initiative, Black Sea Economic Cooperation etc. and promote our common values, the well-being of its peoples and peace, as enshrined, for instance, in the Treaty on European Union.

“Nothing is possible without people; nothing is lasting without institutions.” (Jean Monnet)

*The opinions expressed are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the organisations he is affiliated to.





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Trump's Return and the Three Seas Initiative: Europe's Geopolitical Lifeline

With Donald Trump back in the Oval Office, the geopolitical chessboard has shifted—again. His re-election has accelerated the U.S. pivot away from Europe and toward the Indo-Pacific, making clear what many already suspected: the transatlantic relationship is no longer driven by sentiment or shared values, but by raw interests. Still, this new reality presents Europe with a narrow but potent window to secure U.S. engagement—particularly through the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). Now, more than ever, the 3SI has emerged as the most viable instrument for aligning American strategic priorities with Europe's urgent needs. Spanning 13 EU member states between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, the initiative is transforming from a regional connectivity project into a geopolitical pillar of stability and deterrence in an era of renewed great-power rivalry.

The recent meeting between President Trump and Finnish President Alexander Stubb—now a pivotal figure within the EU—offered a roadmap for how to keep America meaningfully engaged in Europe. The optics were clear: bilateral pragmatism, transactional alignment, and a common front on critical infrastructure, digital sovereignty, and hard security. While Trump may remain skeptical of multilateralism, he understands the strategic logic of investing in a region that buffers the West from a revanchist Russia and rising Chinese influence. Indeed, Central and Eastern Europe—once dismissed as Europe's periphery—is now at the center of the continent's future. The Three Seas Initia-

tive has reached 143 projects with an estimated value of €111 billion, addressing critical gaps in energy, transport, digital, and military infrastructure. LNG terminals, broadband corridors, rail and road networks, AI development hubs, and cyber defense systems are just a few of the tangible investments reshaping the North-South axis of the EU.

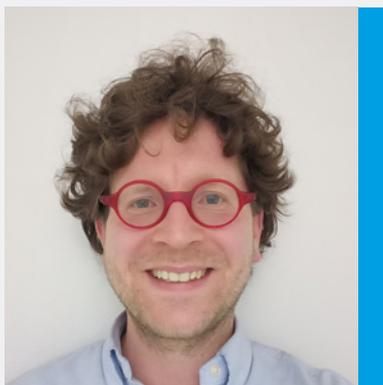
For the Trump administration, the 3SI countries are natural partners: fiercely pro-American, defense-oriented, and increasingly relevant to U.S. energy, digital, and military supply chains. From Finland and the Baltics in the north, through Poland and Romania in the center, to Bulgaria, Croatia, and Greece in the south, these nations offer strategic depth and access for U.S. military presence, particularly along NATO's Eastern Flank—now reinforced under the shadow of a second Iron Curtain. This renewed U.S. presence is not just symbolic. Behind closed doors, defense ministers and security chiefs across 3SI countries must work with Washington to boost dual-use infrastructure, AI-driven battlefield logistics, cyber capabilities, and the interoperability of NATO's eastern flank forces. LNG deals are being renegotiated with American companies, while digital infrastructure contracts are increasingly favoring U.S. firms over Chinese ones. There is talk of deepened cooperation on drone technologies, hypersonic defense systems, and next-generation surveillance tools—all tied into 3SI corridors.

Yet Europe must not fall into complacency. Trump's America is not returning as a benevolent protector. It is a calcu-

lating actor that expects returns on engagement. The EU, especially its Western core, must recognize that its old institutional privileges are no longer sacrosanct. Instead, the new power axis within the EU is shifting toward its North, Central, and Southeastern members—those same countries leading the charge on 3SI implementation and defense build-up. To stay relevant, the EU must double down on its own strategic autonomy by aligning the Global Gateway with 3SI priorities, fast-tracking accession talks with the Balkans, and concluding trade deals with key partners in the Global South. Simultaneously, it must engage Washington in shaping the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), countering the influence of China’s BRI and Russia’s INSTC, and connecting it with the 3SI amid a new scramble of geoeconomic corridors around the globe.

In a world where connectivity equals power, the Three Seas Initiative is no longer just a European infrastructure project—it is Europe’s geopolitical lifeline. Trump’s return does not spell doom for Europe; rather, it demands a sharper, more pragmatic strategy. Through the 3SI, the continent can keep the U.S. in, the DragonBear axis out, and ensure that Europe’s center of gravity shifts toward the dynamic, resilient states of its northern, central, and southeastern frontiers. This is the time to build—fast, strategic, and with a clear purpose. Europe cannot afford to be the geopolitical backyard of the 21st century. The Three Seas is its highway forward.





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How and Why (not) to Institutionalise the Three Seas Initiative?

After the end of the First World War, the empires that had ruled East-Central and Southeastern Europe were dissolved. This led to the short-term independence of new states but, in the long run, created a geopolitical vacuum between the German and Russian spheres of influence. Although the idea after World War I was national self-determination, most states in this region remained characterised by ethnic, national, and religious heterogeneity. However, instead of being united within an imperial-supranational framework, this diversity was now confronted with nationalist conflicts.

The Second World War and the subsequent division of Central Europe into “East” and “West” demonstrated that the states and nations of this region could not survive and assert themselves on their own. As a result of the Cold War, Central Europe disappeared as an independent political space: some parts became part of the “West,” others of the “East.” Only in intellectual

debates did the idea of “Central Europe” continue to exist—primarily as a cultural distinction from the Soviet-Russian East. However, the social and economic consequences of communism remain so profound that Central Europe is still not perceived as an independent region: in Europe’s “mental map,” Prague or Ljubljana are still considered “Eastern Europe,” even though they lie further west than Vienna. There are, however, different cooperation formats in this space, such as the Visegrád Group or the Slavkov/Austerlitz meetings.

The idea of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) — primarily supported by Polish foreign policy — of conceptualising the greater space of Central Europe as a new geopolitical power, stretching from the Baltic to the Black and Adriatic Seas, is certainly an interesting attempt to represent shared interests collectively.

Benefits of Institutionalisation

The Three Seas Initiative does not have a formal international legal status in the sense of a legally binding treaty or agreement. Instead, it serves as a platform for cooperation and dialogue among the participating countries to address common challenges and promote regional development. However, there are several key benefits to transforming TSI into an international organisation. A formal governance structure would enhance coordination among member states, making decision-making more efficient. Institutionalisation would strengthen TSI's political and economic influence within Europe as well.

How to be or not to be?

As mentioned above, Central Europe is still a blank spot on Europe's "mental map." However, the countries in this region often have different foreign policy positions and objectives, just as their domestic policies develop differently. Are the commonalities between Estonia and Hungary, between Lithuania and Greece, between Poland and Austria strong enough to hold the TSI together? The question of institutionalisation arises only in this case; otherwise, the initiative would remain one of the many informal meeting formats in the region.

This question cannot be answered without considering the domestic politics of the individual countries. In the Baltic states, Poland, and Croatia, politics is clearly pro-Atlantic and pro-European, whereas in Hungary and Slovakia, this is currently not the case. In Romania, this direction is being challenged by new and dangerous forces, and in Austria, foreign policy questions are shaped differently due to the country's (often merely emphasised in a folkloristic way but nonetheless maintained) neutrality.

Politics precedes law—even in international affairs. This means that the question of international legal institutionalisation of TSI first requires a political clarification of the initiative's objectives, taking into account the differing political landscapes of the participating states. Alternatively, the goals for institutionalisation must be defined in a way that allows for and emphasises commonalities despite the different domestic political situations and foreign policy orientations—such as common interests in energy or transport policy.





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Croatian Perspective on The Three Seas Initiative: Supporting Growth and Investment

Bringing together 13 EU member states, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) continues to grow in relevance, demonstrated by Greece joining in 2023 and associate status granted to Ukraine and Moldova. With a focus on integrating the Western Balkans and backed by strategic partners like the USA, Germany, Japan, and the EC, along with major international financial institutions, the 3SI's international significance is amplified.

Following the 2024 Vilnius Summit, discussions highlight the 3SI's evolution since its 2015 launch. The initiative has proven valuable for regional interconnectivity, aligning with key EU strategies while maintaining its core goal of fostering US presence. Upcoming Summits in Poland (2025) and Croatia (2026) offer opportunities for reflection and improvement as the 3SI approaches its tenth anniversary.

The North-South axis has gained critical strategic importance due to geopolitical shifts, especially tensions in the Baltic and Black Seas. The Adriatic Sea, particularly ports like Rijeka with significant investment, now plays a more vital role. Developing this corridor en-

hances EU convergence, potentially redirects supply chains, and bolsters regional security, aligning with the EU's Military Mobility goals and strategically reinforcing NATO's Eastern flank.

Expansion remains a key topic, with potential interest from Italy, Finland, and Türkiye, alongside the clear paths for Ukraine, Moldova, and Western Balkan nations. Operationally, there's a growing consensus on the need for a permanent Secretariat to improve coordination and institutional coherence beyond the current technical support for summits. Furthermore, wider involvement from the executive branches of participating governments, rather than solely Heads of State, is suggested to boost efficiency and visibility.

The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF), operational since 2021, has already committed nearly \$1 billion, catalyzing roughly \$6 billion in economic activity across five projects. It aims to bridge funding gaps, particularly for infrastructure and innovation. Untapping the potential of regional pension funds is seen as a crucial, mutually beneficial step to secure the vast financial

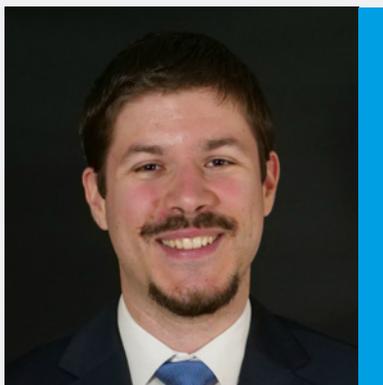
resources needed. The role of 3SI and 3SIIF in Ukraine's future reconstruction is also a key consideration, emphasizing the need for robust transport and logistics infrastructure.

Conclusion: Key Imperatives for the 3SI's Future

As the Three Seas Initiative nears its tenth anniversary, it stands at a critical juncture. It faces a choice: either leverage the current complex geopolitical and economic challenges to significantly enhance its strategic importance and prove its unique value, or risk declining into a routine regional forum with unrealized potential.

- **Strategic and Geopolitical Value:** Beyond its clear economic advantages in transport, energy, and digitalization, the 3SI's crucial role lies in strengthening the transatlantic partnership. It can serve as a vital catalyst for strategic US engagement in the region and significantly bolster the security and resilience of NATO's Eastern flank. Developing the North-South connectivity axis is thus an investment yielding both economic prosperity and enhanced security.
- **Expansion:** The potential to grow the initiative's footprint should be actively pursued. Integrating Ukraine as a full participating country, given its associate status and strategic importance, should be a priority, alongside progressing the inclusion of Moldova and the Western Balkan states.
- **Investment Fund Enhancement:** For the 3SIIF to reach its full potential, a concerted effort is required in its next phase to attract substantial private and commercial capital. Successfully engaging institutional investors, particularly pension funds within the region, represents a significant opportunity to unlock vital resources for large-scale infrastructure projects.
- **Institutionalization:** An elaborate concept for a permanent Secretariat needs to be developed, outlining its operational framework, staffing, and procedures. A decision on its establishment should be targeted for the next 3SI summit, with participating states invited to propose hosting candidacies. This structure is vital for sustained momentum and efficient operation.
- **Visibility and Understanding:** Significantly raising the public profile of the 3SI is essential. Clearly articulating its potential benefits, strategic significance, and concrete achievements to citizens, businesses, and international partners would be highly beneficial for garnering support and achieving its ambitious goals.





Zsombor Zeöld

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The Three Seas Initiative: Resurrection is Possible?

Ten years have passed since the idea for Central European cooperation was established as the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)—a framework aimed at adding another layer to Transatlantic cooperation.

I strongly believe that the cooperation format has outlived its initial usefulness and that, mainly due to external factors, it cannot serve the purposes for which it was created—unless meaningful recalibration takes place.

Looking back at the past of the 3SI, I must mention that its treatment differed on each side of the Atlantic. I treat the success of the framework as inseparable from the first Trump administration's national security strategy, often summarized as "great power competition"—reflecting the American ability to simultaneously counter malign Russian and Chinese influences worldwide.

This policy, and the realization of 3SI, also had a strong military component: it is no accident that Washington aimed to sign Defence Cooperation Agreements with seven 3SI member states^[2] between 2017 and 2023 to enhance inter- and intra-military mobility in Central Europe. In the eyes of the USA, the three main pillars of the Initiative (enhancing cooperation in infrastructure development, energy, and digital) could be easily fitted into the overall US long-term

strategy—but this approach didn't extend to unconditional backing, particularly regarding prospects of financial support.

Inherent problems with the 3SI appeared first and foremost on the European side. These included the slow development of the political side of the cooperation, limited success in attaching a supporting financial framework, and differences in how member states approached the threat posed by Russia. This latter difference extended to a reluctance to discuss 3SI's military aspects.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine created a reality that affects 3SI to its core. Military mobility is an openly discussed and key goal for most 3SI members. Poland—and to a lesser extent Romania—aim to retain a heightened influence over regional security issues stemming from their geographical position. Moreover, the US grand strategy is changing—envisioning a different role for Europe and a diminishing US presence on the continent. The emergence of the "coalition of the willing" in 2025 signposts a multi-speed EU that is financially backed. If they want to retain their relevance, 3SI members also need to allocate more for defense.

Bluntly, the main questions concerning the future of 3SI, a regional initiative, are the following:

- Can it operate if some of its declared goals are at least partially fulfilled?
- Can it achieve its goals if it isn't linked to a dedicated financial framework?
- How well can it be fitted into a changing, China-centered US grand strategy?
- Is geography still the dominant factor in regional cooperation, especially that the 2024 creation of the Ukraine Communications Group (UCG) might suggest a diminishing role for this factor?

Amidst these threats and vulnerabilities, there are possibilities to recalibrate 3SI. Following the logic of the UCG that is centered on fighting information manipulation, a possible approach could be to revamp the framework to focus on countering threats below the threshold of war (e.g., sabotage and covert operations). Another option would be to present a coordinated, non-competitive approach regarding the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Paradoxically, the future of the Initiative is more in the hands of Washington than in those of its members. If President Trump pays a visit to the 3SI summit in April 2025, 3SI will likely retain at least some of its relevance. If not, members would need to adapt in one way (i.e., radical reformulation) or another—the latter path potentially leading to a (slow) hollowing out.





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Lithuania and the Three Seas Initiative: Bridging History and Strategic Necessities

Legend has it that in the late 14th century, during the height of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania’s expansion—when its borders stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea—Grand Duke Vytautas’ horses drank from the waters of the Black Sea. The phrase symbolizes the vast reach of Lithuania, a state that once spanned “from sea to sea.” Of course, there’s a small flaw in the imagery—horses don’t typically drink salty seawater. But the grandeur of the vision remains.

In 2025, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) places Lithuania at a juncture, drawing on deep historical ties and contemporary strategic necessities. Historically, Lithuania has a profound familiarity with Central and Eastern Europe’s complexities, which underpins its commitment to regional cooperation.

In the interwar years, regional leaders considered forming a “cordon sanitaire” against Bolshevik expansion. Yet, simultaneous threats from rising Nazi Germany, and the complexities of domestic politics in each country complicated these efforts. Today, Lithuania—along with all the nations of the 3SI—once again stands against a historic, strategic, and even existential adversary. Russia remains a deeply hostile

force, waging a war of aggression against Ukraine while conducting hybrid warfare against Europe. This reality underscores the importance of active engagement in the 3SI to safeguard regional stability and security.

Geography, history, and current realities position Lithuania as a infrastructural chokepoint within the 3SI. Transportation infrastructure projects, notably Rail Baltica and Via Baltica, are nearing completion, and will reshape regional connectivity. These corridors will integrate the Baltic states with the broader European network, crucial not only economically but also strategically. Nonetheless, the legacy of broad-gauge Russian railway tracks in Lithuania continues to pose challenges. Lithuania addresses this through targeted modernization, underscoring its determination to secure swift mobility if needed in the crisis situation.

In the energy domain, Lithuania’s significance is pronounced. The Klaipėda LNG terminal has transformed Lithuania into an energy provider, drastically reducing regional reliance on Russian gas supplies. Paired with Latvia’s Inčukalns underground storage facility, these assets create

essential points of regional energy resilience. Strategically located as the closest (!) Western European port to Kyiv, Klaipėda significantly enhances regional logistical capabilities within the 3SI framework.

The Mažeikiai refinery, owned by Polish giant Orlen, further bolsters Lithuania's energy role. Undergoing significant modernization efforts to improve efficiency and environmental compliance, Mažeikiai refinery underscores Lithuania's strategic preparedness. Crucially, it offered immediate support to Ukraine in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion by directly supplying diesel and petroleum to Ukrainian army tanks, highlighting Lithuania's logistical capabilities and its ability to respond rapidly in times of crisis.

Lithuania's electricity sector is witnessing a transition to renewable energy, driven by substantial investments from the national energy champion Ignitis Group and a dynamic domestic market. Lithuania aspires to transition from an electricity importer to an exporter by 2030, significantly contributing to regional energy independence. Central to this vision are key infrastructure initiatives, such as two offshore wind farms in the Lithuanian exclusive economic zone, set to greatly enhance electricity production.

Beyond infrastructure, Lithuania is an advocate for deepening military and logistical cooperation within the 3SI. Recognizing the persistent threat from Russia, Lithuania emphasizes enhanced coordination in logistics to improve regional preparedness and operational effectiveness, ensuring that the Eastern Flank remains resilient and secure.

Ultimately, Lithuania's commitment to the Three Seas Initiative is steadfast and proactive. Its sense of historical affinity with the region, as well as strategic geographic location, robust and evolving infrastructure, and dynamic economic growth collectively underscore its integral role in advancing regional objectives. Lithuania is well-positioned not just to contribute but also to shape the future of Central and Eastern Europe's collective security and prosperity.



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