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### The Three Seas Initiative in the Context of International Challenges

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## The Three Seas Initiative in the Context of International Challenges

**Summary:** The aim of the article is to introduce and explain the concept of the Three Seas Initiative, to show the external perspective of this new regional cooperation format, and to briefly discuss the articles and reviews found in the journal's volume.

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative, Central and Eastern Europe, geopolitics

*We want to measure the effects of the Three Seas Initiative not by the number of meetings or signed declarations, but by kilometers of roads built, modernized gas pipelines or amounts spent on urgent investments*

Andrzej Duda, the President of the Republic of Poland,  
at the TSI Summit in Ljubljana

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a flexible political platform, at Presidential level, launched in 2016 in Dubrovnik (Croatia). The Initiative includes the 12 EU Member States located between the Adriatic, the Baltic and the Black Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Countries that have decided to join the Three Seas project have a common geographical, historical and political identity. The pil-

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lar of the TSI are countries belonging to the Visegrad Group. Presidents of TSI member countries meet at annual summits. The summits so far have taken place in Dubrovnik (2016) Warsaw (2017), Bucharest (2018) and Ljubljana (2019). The next summit will be held in Tallinn.

The TSI is currently a non-institutionalized project. After the Bucharest summit, the TSI went from the conceptual phase, the development of goals, to the practical phase – the implementation of projects. Parallel to the meeting of state leaders, the first edition of the TSI Business Forum was organized, with the participation of over 600 participants. On this occasion, a letter of intent was signed regarding the establishment of the Three Seas Fund, a joint statement was adopted on the establishment of the network of chambers of industry and commerce of the Three Seas countries (*Joint Statement for the creation of the TSI Network of Chambers of Commerce*), and the Business Council of the Three Seas was established. The official website of the Three Seas was launched ([www.three-seas.eu](http://www.three-seas.eu)), which, as stated in the Bucharest declaration, is to be managed by the country organizing the TSI summit in a given year. The site is to serve to build the image of this forum, functioning, as mentioned, without a permanent institutional background<sup>1</sup>. The creation of the TSI Investment Fund was a success of the last summit in Ljubljana. His appointment was announced by the presidents of the Polish Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK) and the Romanian EximBank. However, this fund is open to all TSI Member States. The fund will operate on a commercial basis. The funds collected in it are to come from various sources. The founders set themselves the goal of raising approximately 5 billion EUR. The fund is to be a tool for financing joint initiatives of member states in the Central Europe region<sup>2</sup>.

According to the founders, the TSI aims at stimulating more rapid development of the region stretching between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas. This is to be achieved through both high level and multi-stakeholder commitment to boosting connectivity among Member

1 For more, see: P. Kowal, A. Orzelska-Stączek, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie*, Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2019.

2 For more, see: A. Domachowska, 'Szczyt państw Inicjatywy Trójmorza: dalsze wzmocnienie współpracy', *Komentarze IEŚ*, no. 36, 2019, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/szczyt-panstw-inicjatywy-trojmorza-dalsze-wzmacnianie-wspolpracy-36-36-2019> [2019-12-01].

States, with special focus on infrastructure, energy and digital interconnectivity. A catalog of investment priorities – *The Three Seas Initiative – Priority Interconnection Projects* was adopted in Bucharest. The document, which has about 150 pages, among the projects submitted by Poland includes, among others: Poland-Lithuania gas connection, The 3 Seas Digital Highway, Via Carpatia, Rail Baltica, the Danube-Odra-Elba river corridor. A mechanism to control the implementation of projects was introduced in Ljubljana. There is no mention of security (except for energy security) or military cooperation in individual declarations. These declarations do not prejudge the final goals of the TSI, because in the case of an informal grouping this can be easily changed<sup>3</sup>.

The 'Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe' devoted to the Three Seas Initiative rise the question about this project in the international perspective (U.S., Western Europe, China). The Three Seas Initiative are assessed in international discourse in a very diverse way. Some politicians and commentators assess TSI negatively as an unrealistic project aimed at the EU and Germany, which serves to strengthen Poland's position and serve as the leader of Central Europe. There are references to the geopolitical idea of Intermarium from the interwar period. On the other hand, positive assessments emphasize that the goals of the TSI are lofty and serve to strengthen not only the EU itself, but the entire Euro-Atlantic community.

In the U.S., the initiative had a positive response from the beginning. Its goals were seen to be in line with American interests, especially in the energy sphere. Thanks to the participation of the President of the United States, Donald Trump, at the Warsaw Summit in 2017, it became the center of interest of the global media. As a forum with high potential significance, it stood out positively from other regional formats, such as the Visegrad Group. In a letter to the participants of the Bucharest Summit, Trump maintained strong support for TSI and for common goals, which he described as developing infrastructure, business ties, strengthening energy security and reducing barriers to free trade.

3 The Official Website of the Three Seas Initiative, <http://three-seas.eu/> [2019-12-01].

The negative perception of the Three Seas Initiative and its goals was influenced by the fact that this project was put forward after the change of government in Poland, in the period of deteriorating Polish-German relations and tensions in Poland's relations with EU institutions. In these circumstances, achieving the declared goal of building European unity and cohesion with Poland as a leader seemed to be a challenge. Initially, Germany assessed the TSI as an attempt to create a block of competition against 'old Europe' in order to destroy the current balance of power in the EU. The authorities of Poland and Hungary, having tense relations with EU institutions, were accused of seeking to build a Central European grouping under the auspices of the U.S. as a counterweight to Germany's influence in this region. The image of the TSI in German policy changed only in 2018. Until 2018, high-level representatives of the EU did not participate in TSI summits. The European Commission did not have an open criticism of the Three Seas Initiative, but unofficially it was considered an attempt by Poland to unite the region and create a counterweight to the German-French force in the EU. From the beginning, TSI remains in the interest of other international actors, primarily Russia and China. Russia sees TSI primarily as a geopolitical project of the U.S. China draws attention to the economic dimension of cooperation under the TSI.

The discussion in this volume opens with a paper by George Soroka and Tomasz Stępniewski, titled *The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests*. This interesting text begins by outlining the prospective geopolitical determinants that will determine the success or failure of the TSI, with particular attention paid to issues of regional security. It concludes by analysing how the TSI may become a new model for regional cooperation. Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann, in paper titled *The Three Seas Initiative, a new project at the heart of European and global geopolitical rivalries*, offers analysis of the geopolitical dimension of the TSI from a French point of view. The author presents the TSI implementation process, characterizes Poland's rivalry with Germany and Russia in a historical context, emphasizes the important role of Germany in the entire project, Russia's attitude towards the region. Martin Dahl, in paper titled *Evolution of Germany's Stance Regarding the Three Seas Initiative*, present the genesis of the TSI, and the definition of goals set by the states participating in this initiative, as well as analysis of the German stance towards

the initiative since its development in 2015. He used theories of geopolitics and neorealism as the theoretical basis for the analysis. In the following paper, Adrian Chojan examine the U.S. stance under the administration of President Donald Trump with regard to the TSI is analysed. It shows the importance of Central and Eastern Europe in U.S. foreign and security policy, concluding that the Americans treat the TSI as an instrument for achieving their own goals, especially in energy level. The author also writes about the role of Poland in relations with the U.S. Bartosz Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt, in the paper titled *One Belt, One Road between Three Seas: China's soft-power policy towards 'new' EU members* present connection between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and TSI. In addition, the author analyzes bilateral relations between China and 'new' EU members, shows the differences and similarities between the TSI and the '17+1' format. He mentions China's 'soft power' addressed to the countries of the region. Last but not least, Dominik Héjji in paper titled *The Three Seas Initiative in the foreign affairs policy of Hungary* offer answers to questions concerning the significance of the TSI in Hungary's foreign affairs policies and the country's perception of such a form of cooperation in Europe. The author indicates the Hungarian government's ambivalent attitude to the TSI. According to him, the Hungarian authorities base their search for partners in foreign policy on a principle that we could call 'diversification.' Hungarians often rely on mutually exclusive alliances to free Hungary from pro-European 'mainstream policy.' This volume includes numerous maps inserted or made by the authors of the texts.

The discussion in this volume concludes with two book reviews. *The Intermarium as the Polish-Ukrainian Linchpin of Baltic-Black Sea Cooperation* have been reviewed by Denys Davydenko<sup>4</sup>. First review presents an ambitious attempt to provide comprehensive research on the Intermarium concept. The book consists of six chapters, each written by an individual scholar. The chapters aim to outline the Intermarium concept from multidimensional perspectives. This book holds exceptional academic value since very few similar substantial works have been completed. *Slovaks. A Century Longer than a Hun-*

4 O. Kushnir (ed.), *The Intermarium as the Polish-Ukrainian Linchpin of Baltic-Black Sea Cooperation*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, pp. 210. ISBN: 978-1-5275-2712-6.

*dred Years* reviewed by Łukasz Lewkowicz, offer historical essays published in 2019 by the International Cultural Centre by a Slovak historian, Lubomír Lipták<sup>5</sup>. The book consists of six parts devoted, among other things, to the European and peripheral nature of Slovakia, authoritarian regimes and the fight against their influence, the modernisation of the country and the lack of continuity in the Slovak elite environment, issues of individual and collective memory, Czech-Slovak relations and the specificity of Slovak historiography.

That being said, it is necessary to say ‘thank you’ to all reviewers for their hard and speedy work, and to authors who followed the reviewers’ suggestions and recommendations. ‘Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe’ follows very strict editing and publishing standards consistent with double-blind review and – the resulting – several rounds of the revision process.

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