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The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests

George Soroka^a, Tomasz Stępniewski^{bc}

^a Harvard University

^b Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II

^c Instytut Europy Środkowej

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George Soroka*

Harvard University (United States of America)

Tomasz Stepniewski**

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and Institute of Central Europe (Poland)

The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests

Summary: Since 2015, Polish foreign policy has witnessed a gradual rise in the significance of regional cooperation, as reflected in its enthusiasm for the Three Seas Initiative (TSI)¹. The Initiative constitutes an *in statu nascendi* under-

* George Soroka received his PhD in Political Science from Harvard University in 2014. His dissertation focused on the uses to which contentious history was put in defining contemporary foreign-policy objectives between Poland, Ukraine and Russia. Dr. Soroka has lived throughout the post-Soviet region, most recently in Kyiv. His research interests include the post-communist politics of history, the rise of right-wing politics in Europe, Russian foreign policy and comparative democratization. Currently, he is Lecturer on Government at Harvard University. ORCID: 0000-0003-2796-315X. E-mail: soroka@fas.harvard.edu.

** Tomasz Stepniewski is Doctor Habilitatus (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland) – associate professor at the Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Deputy director at the Institute of Central Europe. Dr hab. Stepniewski has been involved in a number of research-projects dealing with developments in the post-Soviet space while at the same time engaged (by invitation) in expert-level discussions and negotiations on related issues. He was formerly a research fellow at both the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and the Carnegie Moscow Center. His main research interests include: the EU's policy towards its eastern neighbourhood, the international relations of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Russia's policy towards Eastern Europe. ORCID: 0000-0002-4581-5145. E-mail: tomasz.stepniewski5@gmail.com.

1 On the subject of the Three Seas Initiative, see: P. Kowal, A. Orzelska-Stączek, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie*, Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2019; P. Ukielski, 'Mapa Trójmorza. Przegląd punktów wspólnych i rozbieżności w polityce 12 państw regionu', *Raport Centrum Analiz Klubu Jagiellońskiego*, no. 3, 2016, <http://cakj.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Raport-3-2016.pdf> [2018-05-20]; M. Gniazdowski, 'Trójmorze – nowy instrument w polskiej polityce zagranicznej', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, no. 4 (71), 2017, pp. 79-82; *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, no. 2, 2017 (several papers in the Three Seas Initiative section); Ankieta Arkanów, 'Ekonomiczne i kulturowe podstawy Trójmorza', *Arcana. Kultura, Historia, Polityka*, no. 5 (137), Cracow 2017, pp. 19-39; M. Sienkiewicz, 'Koncepcja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski po 2015 r.', *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, no. 1, 2016, pp. 139-151; K. Szczerski, *Utopia europejska: kryzys integracji i polska inicjatywa naprawy*, Cracow: Biały Kruk, 2017 (chapter 8: The Three Seas Initiative: a new role and place of Central Europe).

taking, one which aims to consolidate cooperation among states located in the region between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas. (In Poland, a popular acronym to denote the project is the 'ABC initiative,' which reflects the Polish names of these bodies of water [i.e., *Adriatyk, Bałtyk, Czarne*]). However, it must be emphasized that the member states of the TSI do not operate in a vacuum, but rather within a broader institutional framework that includes the European Union, the Central European Initiative, and the Visegrad Group. This paper 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 Initiative may become a new model for regional cooperation.

Keywords: Three Seas Initiative, Polish Foreign Policy, CEE

1. Central European States in an Evolving International Order

The Central European Initiative

The TSI is not the first project that has aimed to integrate the countries of East-Central Europe. As the Soviet Union's grip over its European satellites lessened and the strictures of global bipolarity diminished, the idea emerged to create an organization that would bond Central European states with the structures of Western Europe². Initially named the Fourlateral Initiative (reflecting the participation of Italy, Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia), it was first launched in November 1989. However, due to the rapid geopolitical changes brought about by the collapse of communism, this body was soon enlarged. Renamed the Central European Initiative (CEI) in 1992, by 1996 it encompassed 16 members, the majority of them post-communist states. As of 2019, eighteen countries, ten of which are also EU members, belong to this body: Albania; Austria; Belarus; Bosnia and Hercegovina; Bulgaria; Montenegro; Croatia; the Czech Republic; Macedonia; Moldova; Poland; Romania; Serbia; Slovakia; Slovenia; Ukraine; Hungary; and Italy. It should be emphasised that the geographic remit of the CEI, which covers most of East-Central and Southeast Europe, differs from that of the TSI, which focuses solely on the EU member states of Central Europe.

2 For a discussion of the factors determining the establishment of the Central European Initiative and its comparison to the Three Seas Initiative, see: A. Orzelska-Stączek, 'Inicjatywa Środkowoeuropejska a Trójmorze – odmienne koncepcje współpracy w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej', *Studia Polityczne*, no. 1 (46), 2018, pp. 149-169.

The Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group (V4), a quasi-institutionalized mechanism of European cross-border and cross-regional cooperation, constitutes another initiative that impacts geopolitical relations in Central Europe³. This body – initially called the Visegrad Triangle before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, but referred to by its present name since 1993 – was established pursuant to the Visegrad Declaration signed in February 1991 by the President of Poland (Lech Wałęsa), the President of Czechoslovakia (Václav Havel), and the Prime Minister of Hungary (József Antall). The V4 is an organization whose mission is to tackle regional challenges requiring the cooperation of its four constituent states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). However, the semi-formal character of this group, along with the fact that it possesses insufficient coordinating mechanisms, has resulted in the V4 thus far not having succeeded in generating a coherent and distinctive identity for itself in the international arena. Consequently, the positions adopted by the V4 often reflect the underlying foreign policy interests of members' governments and their mutable political constellations⁴. In addition, the states comprising the V4 have exhibited a chronic reluctance to create a clear institutional profile for this group relative to the multi-faceted projects it is tasked with addressing, resulting in its marginalization in wider political discourses.

Consequently, the oftentimes competing objectives and interests of the V4's members, coupled with its equivocal development, renders the Group problematic when it comes to advocating consistent political positions. Moreover, there exist several additional factors that cripple the V4's operational potential and relegate it to a position of relative impotence: the absence of any long-term vision regarding its international role and position (independent from the respective governments of its constituent states); an inability to legislate at a re-

3 More on the subject in: T. Olejarsz, T. Stępniewski, 'Grupa Wyszehradzka: status polityczny i specyfika działań międzynarodowych na przykładzie inicjatywy Partnerstwa Wschodniego Unii Europejskiej', *Rocznik IEŚW*, no. 11 (1), 2013, pp. 107-125; A. Chojan, 'Grupa Wyszehradzka w polityce zagranicznej Polski – między współpracą a rywalizacją', *Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii ZE ISPPAN*, no. 4, 2016.

4 J. Kobzová, 'The Visegrad Group in Eastern Europe: an actor, not a leader yet', *Visegrad Insight*, no. 2, 2012, p. 62, <http://visegradrevue.eu/the-visegrad-group-in-eastern-europe-an-actor-not-a-leader-yet/> [2019-01-06].

gional level; and a lack of consultative mechanisms that would allow for the implementation of cross-border regulatory policies. This conceptual and institutional deficit, coupled with the lack of coherence in the V4's approach to international relations due to its frequent internal disagreements, ensure that it will remain a subordinate actor in the realm of regional and global politics, at least until these issues are adequately dealt with.

The persistence of the above-noted pathologies raises the question of whether the V4 states are capable of generating the cross-border synergies needed to enable this body to emerge as a vital actor in the international arena, one capable of playing a leading role in the political game rather than being restricted to an ancillary capacity⁵. At the same time, elevating the V4's political profile is a pressing concern, as the manner in which it is currently operating is highly anachronistic. Moreover, the fact that its constituent states are all part of the EU, a supranational project of much higher institutional status, puts additional pressure on the V4 to espouse an unambiguous identity. In light of this, whether or not the states comprising the V4 prove to possess the political will and wherewithal necessary to remake it into an internationally relevant entity holds valuable clues regarding the ultimate fate of the Three Seas concept.

2. The Three Seas Initiative: A New Model of Regional Cooperation?

The Goals of the Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative was formally launched in August 2016, with its inaugural summit meeting taking place in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The following states are currently members of this body: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary. As previously noted, all the TSI countries are also members of the EU, and – with the sole exception of Austria – NATO. Nonetheless, in aggregate economic terms

5 See e.g.: W. Przybylski, 'V4 Upgrade: Polish presidency in the Visegrad Group', *New Eastern Europe*, no. 3 (VIII), July–September 2013, pp. 68–74.

they are relative economic laggards, constituting 28 per cent of the EU's territory and 22 per cent of its population, but only producing 10 per cent of its GDP⁶.

Table 1: Demographic and Economic Potential of the TSI countries

Country	Area in thousand km ²	Population in million	Gross national income	
			in billion USD	per capita
Poland	321,6	36,5 (according to GUS* 38,4)	469,5	12863
Romania	238,4	21,5	186,7	7620
Bulgaria	111,0	7,2	52,4	7277
Hungary	93,0	9,6	124,3	12948
Austria	83,9	8,4	386,4	45999
Czech Republic	78,9	10,5	192,5	18333
Lithuania	65,2	2,9	42,7	17211
Latvia	64,9	2,1	27,4	13047
Croatia	56,5	4,2	50,4	12000
Slovakia	49	5,2	89,5	17212
Estonia	45,2	1,2	23,1	19249
Slovenia	20,3	1,8	44,0	24443
Total	1218,8	111,1	1688,9	15201

* Główny Urząd Statystyczny

Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2017, World GDP ranking 2016, World Bank 2017.

Source: Original calculations on the basis of P. Eberhardt, 'Ekonomiczne i kulturowe podstawy Trójmorza', *Arcana. Culture, History, Politics*, no. 5 (137), 2017, pp. 20-21.

Subsequent TSI summits have taken place annually in member-state capitals (Warsaw, Poland [2017]; Bucharest, Romania [2018]; and Ljubljana, Slovenia [2019]). Attesting to the geopolitical potential of this organization, high-ranking officials from the EU, the US, and even China have routinely attended these gatherings, lending the nascent TSI an air of global significance. For example, U.S. President Donald Trump showed up at the 2017 summit in Warsaw, where he averred that the United States 'will be your strongest ally and steadfast part-

⁶ Atlantic Council, 'The Road Ahead – CEE Transport Infrastructure Dynamics', *Joint Atlantic Council – PwC Report*, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/industries/capital-projects-infrastructure/publications/the-road-ahead.html> [2019-11-04].

ner in this truly historic initiative⁷. Likewise, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, and U.S. Secretary of Energy Rick Perry were all present at the 2019 Ljubljana summit. Reflecting its openness to linkages that transcend its immediate regional competencies, the Initiative expressly includes consideration of the so-called ‘transatlantic perspective’ in its mandate.

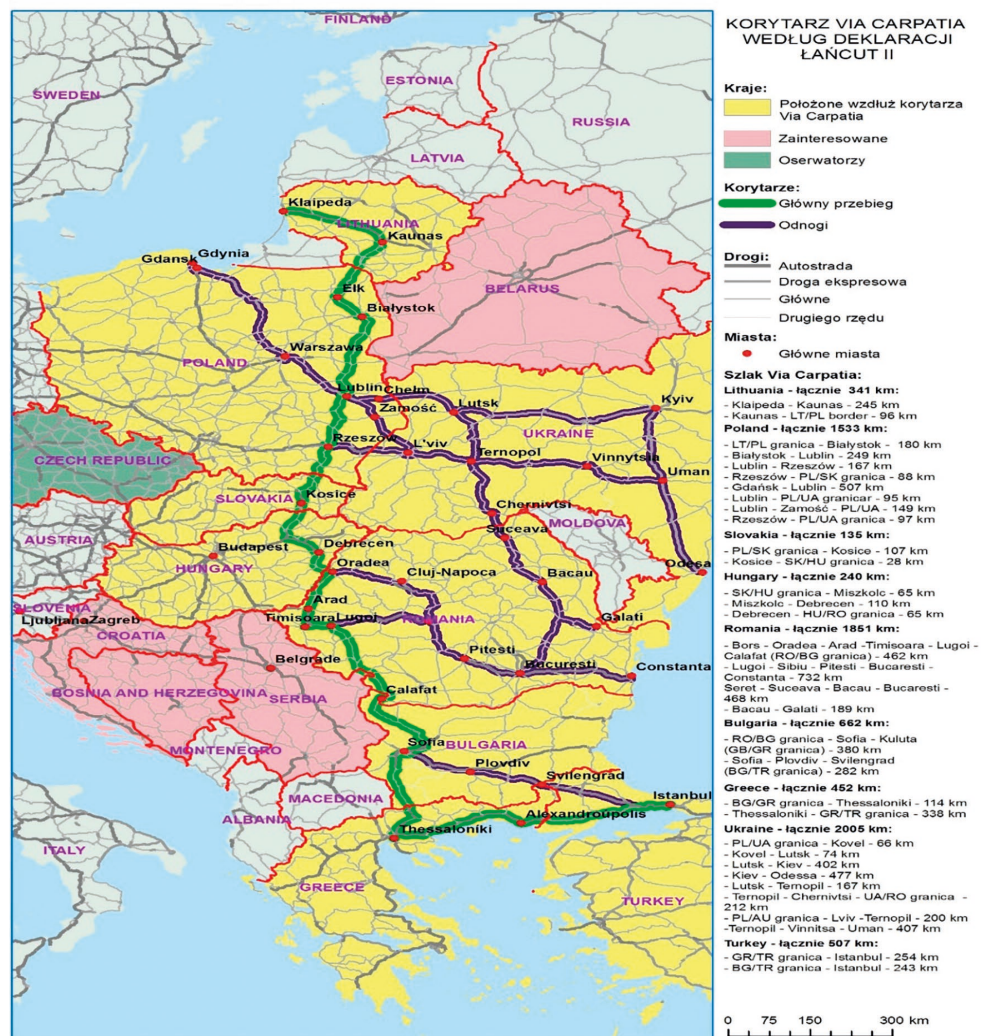
Specifically, the 2016 Dubrovnik Statement establishing the TSI stresses ‘the importance of connecting Central and Eastern European economies and infrastructure from North to South, in order to complete the single European market’⁸. In other words, the Initiative is tasked with integrating its member states along a north-south axis by enhancing regional infrastructure in the areas of transportation, energy and telecommunications.

Encompassing both roads and railways, planned transportation projects include the ambitious ‘Via Carpatia’ (the proposed route, which would link the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda to the Greek city of Thessaloniki, is depicted below), along with smaller-scale undertakings such as the ‘Via Baltica’, the ‘amber highway’ (A1), expressway S3, and the Odessa – Gdańsk highway. Increasing the reliability and availability of such transportation corridors, it is believed, will foster regional investment and help develop the framework of the TSI. The build-out of the TSI’s energy infrastructure, meanwhile, includes marine LNG terminals (one such terminal was recently completed in Świnoujście, Poland, and another is being built on the island of Krk in Croatia), as well as gas and oil pipelines, interconnectors, storage facilities, and so on (table 2 outlines the chief gas-related projects of the EU as they pertain to the TSI’s members). The majority of TSI states are, to varying extents, dependent on energy supplies from a single supplier: Russia. Consequently, the objective is to reduce reliance on hydrocarbon imports from the Russian Federation and bolster the energy security of members by diversifying the regional market’s en-

7 D. Trump, ‘Remarks by President Trump at the Three Seas Initiative Summit’, *The White House* 6 July, 2017, <https://translations.state.gov/2017/07/06/remarks-by-president-trump-at-the-three-seas-initiative-summit-july-6-2017/> [2019-11-14].

8 ‘The Joint Statement on the Three Seas Initiative (The Dubrovnik Statement)’, 25 August 2016, [http://predsjednica.hr/files/The%20Joint%20Statement%20on%20The%20Three%20Seas%20Initiative\(1\).pdf](http://predsjednica.hr/files/The%20Joint%20Statement%20on%20The%20Three%20Seas%20Initiative(1).pdf) [2019-11-25].

Map 1: The Via Carpatia Route under Łańcut II Declaration



Source: Ministry of Infrastructure of Poland, 'Via Carpatia wpisana do projektu rozporządzenia CEF', News, 6 June 2018, <https://www.gov.pl/web/infrastruktura/via-carpattia-wpisana-do-projektu-rozporzadzenia-cef> [2018-06-25].

ergy supply and facilitating new gas-related initiatives. Finally, the development of a more integrated and expansive telecommunications infrastructure is viewed as a means through which to overcome the 'artificial' division of Europe into Eastern and Western halves. The TSI, however, does not aim to become an alternative to, or competi-

tor of, the EU. Instead, its chief objective is to consolidate economic cooperation between states that already are, and will simultaneously remain, members of the European Union.

Table 2: Initiatives and Gas-Related Projects of the EU Pertaining to TSI Countries

	North-South Gas Corridor	CESEC	BEMIP	Number of projects with PCI status	Number of projects financed in the framework of the CEF	SSE regional initiative
Austria			—	6	1	
Bulgaria			—	10	5	
Croatia			—	5	3	—
Czech Republic		—	—	3	2	
Estonia	—	—		3	2	—
Lithuania	—	—		3	2	—
Latvia	—	—		3	2	—
Poland		—		8	4	
Romania	—		—	10	2	
Slovakia			—	2	2	
Slovenia			—	5	2	
Hungary			—	8	3	

CESEC – Central and South Eastern Europe Gas Connectivity.

BEMIP – Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan.

PCI – Projects of Common Interest (projects with the significance for the Community, approx. 50 projects pertaining to the TSI countries).

CEF – Connecting Europe Facility.

SSE – South South-East.

Source: Developed on the basis of the following: B. Bielszczuk, 'Trójmorze: współpraca na rzecz unijnego i regionalnego rynku gazu', *PISM Bulletin*, no. 63 (1505), 30 June 2017, www.pism.pl.

Internal and External Perceptions of the Three Seas Initiative

The two politicians most closely associated with the founding of the TSI, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Polish President Andrzej Duda, are members of conservative-nationalist parties inclined towards Euroscepticism. Consequently, some observers worry that TSI will hinder prospects for the deepening of European integration, especially given that a number of TSI member states have been caught up in the illiberal wave of populist politics that has recently engulfed the post-communist space.

Relatedly, there are fears that the TSI may permit outsider actors like the U.S. and China to influence regional affairs to a degree surpassing the comfort level of many Europeans. Such geopolitical anxieties, however, are largely misplaced. Far more relevant is the fact that the idea for the TSI emerged soon after Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014. This suggests the constituent states of the TSI not only want to overcome communist-era legacies and 'catch up' to the rest of Europe economically, but also that a good number of them are motivated by the desire to create an alternate trading block that would mitigate reliance on Russia. However, it must be noted – as this has potentially far-reaching implications for the TSI's future – that individual member-state governments have vastly different relations with the Russian Federation. Hungary under Viktor Orbán, for example, is far less hostile to Moscow than is Poland under Andrzej Duda. Similarly, while in theory the TSI seeks the development of the entire geographic area occupied by its member states, key players such as Poland have conspicuously prioritized more local projects, as illustrated by Warsaw's efforts to tie the Baltics into Poland's electrical grid so that their power supply will no longer depend on Russia.

This diversity of perspectives and approaches to the TSI, both internal as well as external, is unsurprising. Since its establishment, the TSI has served to reflect the disparate visions of its members states and their respective political elites. Adding to this indeterminacy is the fact that the TSI somewhat confusingly depicts itself as 'a flexible political platform'⁹. As a result, its implicit mandate ranges from bolstering relations between its members, to reflecting their collective commitment to the EU, to ensuring the continuity of the transatlantic partnership.

Consequently, the TSI is regarded in myriad ways. Some consider it to be primarily interested in weaning the region off of its dependence on Russian energy imports and forestalling growing Russian-German cooperation in this arena (e.g., the Nord Stream 2 pipeline). For others, it represents an attempt to counter Western European anti-Americanism and strengthen ties between the countries of Central Europe and Washington, seen as necessary to contain a Russian Fed-

9 TSI, *The Three Seas Initiative: About*, <http://three-seas.eu/about/> [2019-10-23].

eration increasingly perceived to be acting in a neo-imperialist manner. Meanwhile, still others view it as an attempt by Poland, which represents the largest regional actor, to assert *de facto* hegemony over its neighbours. These latter observers frequently underscore the TSI's more-than-passing resemblance to the earlier Intermarium project championed by Poland's interwar leader, Józef Piłsudski, which was meant to stretch from the Baltic to the Black Seas¹⁰.

3. Security as a Missing Component of the Three Seas Initiative

According to many analysts, geopolitical security is a 'missing aspect' of the TSI. However, these considerations are not entirely absent among its constituent states. Poland, in particular, has taken steps to enhance cooperation between TSI members in this realm. Illustrating this, Polish officials, supported by their Romanian counterparts, pushed for a mini-summit of NATO members representing the eastern flank of the alliance to be held in Bucharest on 4-5 November 2015. During this meeting, the so-called 'Bucharest Nine' (B9), a sub-set of the TSI that includes Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary, was established. The summit aimed to draw NATO's attention to the security challenges facing those states that neighbour Russia (especially Poland and the Baltics) and the necessity of reinforcing NATO's vulnerable land borders. It is worth noting that certain of the B9's proposed provisions were accepted during the NATO Warsaw Summit held on 8-9 July 2016¹¹. Especially salient with respect to the TSI was NATO's decision concerning the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) and its definition of cyberwarfare as an issue within its purview of action.

In reality, if TSI member states prove able to cooperate on security issues, especially if they are joined in this endeavour by the affluent and technologically advanced Scandinavian states (and possibly those

¹⁰ On the Intermarium, see M.J. Chodakiewicz, *Intermarium: The Land Between the Black and Baltic Seas*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

¹¹ More on the provisions of the NATO summit in 2016 and its significance for the security of Poland and Central Europe in: A. Visvizi, T. Stępniewski (eds), 'Poland, the Czech Republic and NATO in Fragile Security Contexts', *IESW Reports*, December 2016.

of the Western Balkans), it would constitute a strong counterbalance to Russia's increasingly aggressive actions in Europe. It is the Russian Federation, after all, which currently poses the greatest threat to the national security and territorial integrity of the B9 states. Moreover, despite the shift of the B9's security calculus away from explicitly military threats to hybrid ones, its members are well aware that real challenges to their territorial integrity and political stability still remain. As a result, there exists a wide-spread perception among the B9 that NATO ought to reinforce its eastern presence.

This subject overtly resurfaced during the third B9 summit held on 8 June 2018 in Warsaw. The timing of this meeting was not accidental, as it aimed to highlight not only the B9's existence, but also NATO's frontline problems, prior to the subsequent NATO summit in Brussels in July 2018. However, whether the B9, which encompasses most TSI member states, will prove an effective advocate for the latter's interests remains to be seen. On the one hand, a weakness of the B9 format is that it lacks the participation of major NATO players like Germany¹² and France. On the other hand, the B9 states (especially if they are supported by Scandinavia) may provide an 'anchor' for the European security policy of the US.

4. Poland between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas

The question inevitably arises: how does the TSI fit into Poland's foreign policy objectives, and to what degree do these coincide with those of its other members? For his part, one of the TSI's main architects, Krzysztof Szczerski (presently Poland's Secretary of State and Chief of the President's Cabinet), has stressed that the Initiative in no way seeks to supplant the EU, emphasising that it is not primarily a political project, but one intended to promote regional investment and business¹³. However, if the TSI succeeds in meaningfully reorienting

12 See S. Kawczynski, 'Why Germany should care about B9?', *New Eastern Europe*, 29 June 2018, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/06/29/germany-care-b9/> [2018-07-04].

13 Heritage Foundation, 'Advancing Liberty and Economic Freedom Through the Three Seas Initiative', 8 March 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/europe/event/advancing-liberty-and-economic-freedom-through-the-three-seas-initiative> [2019-11-20].

trade networks and energy flows in a north-south direction, this will inevitably have significant geopolitical consequences not just for its members, but also for Europe as a whole. Primary among these would be a lessening of Russia's control over the region's economies.

Yet Polish politicians do not regard the TSI as a simulacrum of Piłsudski's Intermarium (itself predicated on the model of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). This is the case for two reasons. First, the current project does not include Belarus, Finland, or Ukraine, states pivotal to the earlier concept. Second, the TSI states depend on NATO for their security, whereas the Intermarium was explicitly conceived as a strategic bulwark against both Soviet and German expansionism¹⁴. Still, many outside observers – including officials from other TSI states – remain sceptical about Poland's strategic motives, both for historical reasons and because energy resources can be readily securitised¹⁵. Moreover, as has already been mentioned, not all the TSI members share Poland's abiding mistrust of the Kremlin. In fact, countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria have fairly good relations with Moscow, which limits the TSI's latitude in dealing with Russia.

5. The Three Seas Initiative in a Volatile International Environment

What does the future hold for the TSI? Although it is composed of countries that belong to the EU, the EU itself faces significant problems of both an internal (e.g., out-migration, difficult budget negotiations, Brexit) and external nature (e.g., immigration from the MENA region, growing Russian aggression, a trade war with the U.S., China's rising influence, etc.). It is in this context that the prospect of enlarging the Initiative to encompass additional states must be considered. Ukraine, in particular, is strongly invested in becoming a member. Ukraine's eventual inclusion would be a natural fit for the TSI, as it

¹⁴ See, for example, P. Kurecic, 'Can the Three Seas Bring a New Balance to European Politics', *New Eastern Europe*, no. 2, 2019, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/03/05/can-the-three-seas-bring-a-new-balance-to-european-politics/> [2019-10-15].

¹⁵ M. Kokot, 'Wylom w Trójmorzu. Czesi nie chcą być częścią antyniemieckiego paktu', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19 June 2017, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,21976040,wylom-w-trojmorzu-czesi-nie-chca-by-czescia-antyniemieckiego.html> [2018-12-15].

would broaden its geographic span into the Black Sea region. A similar argument could be made for including the countries of the Western Balkans. As such, the TSI needs to carefully consider what form its relations with its neighbours will take. Concomitantly, one cannot forget that – pursuant to the intention of its initiators – participation in the TSI is limited to EU member states, in order to highlight the project's significance as a pro-European endeavour designed to benefit the Community and its interests.

Other issues which will affect the development of the TSI include the political heterogeneity of its members, fears of intra-Initiative domination by larger states such as Poland, disproportionality in the individual states' relative economic and demographic standings (Poland and Romania dominate the TSI in these regards), and the lack of affluent, mainstream EU countries among its membership (apart from Austria, all the other TSI countries are post-communist states).

The matter of the TSI's institutions is also relevant. Notably, the Initiative constitutes a primarily presidential project, with these heads of state playing a leading role in it. However, the delivery of provisions largely depends upon domestic legislatures. How effectively this dichotomy can be negotiated, and how effectively this arrangement can be made to function, may ultimately determine the success or failure of the TSI.

In conclusion, concerns over the TSI's forward-looking trajectory all revolve around what specific solutions the Initiative will propose for dealing with regional challenges and how it will go about implementing them. Undoubtedly, it is in the best interests of Poland (and the other countries of the TSI) to deliver solid economic projects and infrastructural development, which will further the fiscal growth and political cohesion of Central Europe. In this respect, one should hope that the Three Seas Initiative will not fall hostage to geopolitical machinations, whether these emanate from among its members or outside forces.

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