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Evolution of Germany's Stance Regarding the Three Seas Initiative

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Evolution of Germany's Stance Regarding the Three Seas Initiative

Summary: When the political camp centred on the Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power in 2015, it led to a change in priorities in Polish foreign policy. The Three Seas Initiative (TSI), understood as closer cooperation between eastern states of the European Union in the area between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black seas, has become a new instrument of foreign policy. The initiative demonstrates the growing importance of Central and Eastern Europe in the global game of great powers. The region has become a subject of rivalry, not only between the United States and Russia but also China. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to try to describe the importance of the region to Germany and how Germany's stance on the TSI has evolved.

The article consists of three parts, an introduction to the issues, 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. The theories of geopolitics and neorealism are used as the theoretical basis for the analysis.

Keywords: Three Seas Initiative, Polish Foreign Policy, German Foreign Policy, geopolitics

Introduction

The rise to power by the political camp centred on Law and Justice in 2015 led to some changes in Polish foreign policy. One of the first initiatives that the new president of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, took to the international forum was to start talks with Central European countries regarding the creation of the so-called Three Seas Initiative (TSI). Understood as an instrument of Polish foreign policy

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aimed at extending the links to the ‘new’ EU Member States located between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas and strengthening cooperation in Central Europe in politics, business, infrastructure, energy policy, and security. The agreement includes 12 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries – Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Importantly, all of these states are also members of the EU and, with the exception of Austria, post-communist states that are also members of NATO. Except for Austria, these countries are still catching up with the development level of Western EU countries. Although they account for 28 percent of the territory and 22 percent of the EU’s population, they only produce 10 percent of the EU’s gross domestic product (including Austria)¹.

Historically, the idea of closer cooperation between the countries of Central Europe was largely a response to the concept of *Mittleuropa*², defined in 1915 by Friedrich Naumann as the German sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. In the first half of the 20th century, German foreign policy was based on the quite popular idea of geopolitics, which dealt with the analysis of the impact of geographical factors on relations between states. In light of this theory, geographical space is perceived as an object of desire and area of expansion³. At that time, the factor that determined largely the international policy pursued by Germany was the desire to subordinate the Central European countries to each other primarily from an economic point of view. However, the German expansion to the east collided with Russia coming out of the Heartland. On the one hand, it generated conflict and, on the other hand, it created the possibility of cooperation between Moscow and

- 1 ‘The Road Ahead – CEE Transport Infrastructure Dynamics’, *Joint Atlantic Council – PwC Report*, 2017, p. 2.
- 2 For more, see: F. Naumann, *Mittleuropa*, Berlin: Reimer, 1915. Compare with: S. Verosta, *The German Concept of Mittleuropa, 1914-1918 and its Contemporary Critics*, in: R.A. Kann, B.A. Király, P.S. Fichtner (eds), *The Habsburg Empire in World War I. Essays on the Intellectual, Military, Political and Economic Aspects of the Habsburg War Effort*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, pp. 203-220.
- 3 J. Czaputowicz, *Teorie stosunków międzynarodowych. Krytyka i systematyzacja*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008, p. 86.

Berlin over the concept of Eurasianism, understood as an attempt to create a form of power of global significance⁴.

Nowadays, in the 21st century, one can question whether the interpretations of relations between states and attempts to shape international relations in Europe based on theories and doctrines with sources from the beginning of the 20th century are adequate; however, this does not change the fact that 20th-century concepts of international relations are still present in the political space and scientific discourse. Similarly, as with the theory of geopolitics itself, which, it seems will lose importance with technical progress and the development of international law and mutual interdependencies, this case instead went in a quite opposite way⁵. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict⁶, the theory was again being used by numerous analysts and researchers to explain and interpret phenomena occurring in the contemporary international environment. Similar to the theory of neorealism, which, as Jacek Więclawski argues, largely determines the shape of the contemporary foreign policy of the Russian Federation⁷, in fact, the area covered by the TSI and analysed in this article is becoming an arena for the rivalry of world powers. Not only are the U.S. and Russia competing for influence in this territory between the three seas, but also China is also increasingly joining this rivalry. To some extent, this may explain why German and even EU policy expresses increased interest in the Three Seas Initiative.

We are observing a change of the existing paradigms in political science, as well as a renaissance of some doctrines and theories popular in international relations while also attempting to define new approaches. The main goal of this study has been to answer the question of to how Poland's pursuit of the TSI is perceived and to what extent it

4 R. Kopeć, P. Mazur, *Odstraszanie militarne w XXI wieku. Polska – NATO – Rosja*, Cracow: Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny im. KEN, 2017, p. 81.

5 J. Czaputowicz, op. cit., p. 90.

6 J. Grzymyski, 'Granice Europy w wyobrażeniach i praktykach Europejskiej Polityki Sąsiedztwa i Partnerstwa Wschodniego', *Przegląd Europejski*, no. 3, 2017, p. 59.

7 J. Więclawski, 'Contemporary Realism and the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, vol. 2, 2011, pp. 171-173. Compare with: J. Więclawski, 'Hans Morgenthau, realizm klasyczny i jego rekomendacje dla polskiej polityki zagranicznej', *Mysł Ekonomiczna i Polityczna*, vol. 3, 2011, p. 123.

is taken into account in the German public debate and foreign policy pursued by Germany. Particular emphasis was placed on the process of the evolution of the German stance, based on the growing interest in this initiative introduced by Poland. Verification of the research question is based on two elements. The first is the analysis of the cooperation between the countries of Central Europe in relation to the TSI, and the second, on an assessment of the German stance towards closer regional cooperation in the eastern part of the European Union. The findings of the research are the culmination of the study.

1 The TSI: the Genesis of Its Establishment and Its Goals

After the collapse of the socialist bloc, the concept of Poland as the leader of the CEE region revived. To some extent, agreements such as the Central European Initiative and CEFTA, and cooperation within the Visegrad Group can be regarded as a sign of closer cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, although as Adrian Chojan rightly notes, cooperation in the latter organisation over the last 25 years has been dominated by numerous crises and conflicting goals⁸.

The collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc gave Poland's authorities the possibility to make fully sovereign decisions on the shape of Polish foreign policy. After 1989, all governments of the Third Polish Republic consistently strived to root Poland in the European and transatlantic structures. The culmination of this process was Poland's accession to NATO in 1999 and then in 2004, membership in the European Union. The Pro-Western orientation of the next cabinets did not mean, however, that Polish political thought did not formulate alternative concepts of Polish foreign policy.

The TSI as a new instrument in Polish foreign policy and it appeared after the political camp centred on PiS won parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015. The newly elected president, Andrzej Duda, in his proclamation delivered to the National Assembly on August 6, 2015, pointed to the need for correction in Polish foreign policy con-

8 A. Chojan, 'Grupa Wyszehradzka w polityce zagranicznej Polski – między współpracą a rywalizacją', *Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii ZE ISPPAN*, no. 4, 2016, p. 1.

sisting, among others, of renewal of the Visegrad Group and closer cooperation between the countries of the CEE within the EU⁹.

The first summit initiating cooperation within the framework of the TSI took place on August 25-26, 2016, in Dubrovnik. The next meeting took place on July 6-7, 2017, in Warsaw, in which U.S. President Donald Trump also participated. The assumption of the initiative is to serve European integration by strengthening sectoral cooperation between the states that later joined the European Union and located between the Baltic, Adriatic, and the Black seas. However, in the opinion of Mateusz Gniazdowski, most of the time, both in the preparation stage and at the summit itself, the meetings were devoted to explaining what the initiative is not¹⁰. The concerns that arose stemmed from the fact that the new Polish initiative can be seen as an alternative to the European Union and competitive with Germany. The emerging doubts were justified because neither representatives of EU institutions nor representatives of Germany were invited to the summit. The association and comparison to the historical Intermarium proved to be important, although, it should be noted that the TSI, at least in principle, is a concept related to European integration, covering only countries belonging to the European Union. It is also underlined by Krzysztof Szczerski, chief of the Presidential Office of the Republic of Poland, who claims that 'The Three Seas Initiative is primarily an initiative for regional cooperation within the European Union, within the EU Member States, together with the EU, using the EU, its funds and development to strengthen regional cooperation, connect the countries of our region with each other, and simultaneously connect our region with all other European countries¹¹.

The Dubrovnik Declaration explicitly states that within the framework of the TSI there will be no parallel structures to existing cooper-

9 President of Poland, 'Orędzie Prezydenta RP Andrzeja Dudy przed Zgromadzeniem Narodowym z dnia 6 sierpnia 2015 roku', *News*, 6 August 2015, <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/art,1,oredzie-prezydenta-rp-andrzeja-dudy-przed-zgromadzeniem-narodowym.html> [2019-07-17].

10 M. Gniazdowski, 'Trójmorze – nowy instrument w polskiej polityce zagranicznej', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, no. 4, 2017, p. 79.

11 President of Poland, 'Minister Szczerski: Inicjatywa Trójmorza to nowy pomysł na zwiększanie jedności europejskiej', *Chancellery*, 4 May 2017, <http://www.prezydent.pl/kancelaria/aktywnosc-ministrow/art,683,minister-szczerski-inicjatywa-trojmorza-to-nowy-pomysl-na-zwiekszenie-jednosci-europejskiej-.html> [2019-07-17].

ation mechanisms. In another part of the declaration, it is stated that the TSI is an informal platform for 'gaining political support and organising decisive actions on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance for countries involved in the energy, transport, digital communication and economy sectors in Central and Eastern Europe'¹². It is true that the TSI comprises countries that cooperate with Germany and their allies. It should be noted, however, that they often have different aims, often conflicting with Polish interests and the Polish perception of challenges and threats in the region. The division axis, analogical to the 1920s and 1930s, is the attitude towards Germany and the Russian Federation¹³. Many countries, such as Hungary or the Czech Republic, do not share the Polish concerns related to Russia's revisionist policy under Vladimir Putin. On the contrary, they support the abolition of EU sanctions and closer cooperation with Russia¹⁴. They are also far from conducting a confrontational policy towards Berlin.

Therefore, it was welcomed that during the next TSI summit, held on September 17-18, 2018, in Bucharest, in addition to the representatives of the countries participating in the initiative, there were also representatives of the European Commission, the US, and, for the first time, Germany. The political success of the Bucharest summit was to break the European Commission's scepticism of the initiative. It was also important to confirm the support of the United States. The issue of a Three Seas Fund went forward, with financial institutions from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia expressing intent to join. Ultimately, the fund will be €5 billion.

The evaluation of the TSI is still debatable. Some consider it to be an opportunity to overcome the energy dependence of CEE states on Russia and stop German-Russian cooperation in this area, especially by blocking the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. For others, the initiative is an attempt to circumvent Western European

12 President of Poland, *Wspólna deklaracja w sprawie Inicjatywy Trójmorza*, 25.08.2016, *News*, 25 August 2016, <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wizyty-zagraniczne/art,105,wspolna-deklaracja-w-sprawie-inicjatywy-trojmorza.html> [2019-07-18].

13 J. Andrychowicz-Skrzeba, R. Reicht, 'Goodbye Europe? Die Außenpolitik der polnischen PiS-Regierung', *Internationale Politikanalyse*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2016, p. 6.

14 T. Stępniewski, 'Partnerstwo Wschodnie Unii Europejskiej w dobie wstrząsów i przemian Europy Wschodniej', *Studia Europejskie*, no. 3, 2017, p. 188.

scepticism towards the US and re-join the Central European countries to the West in cooperation with Washington. It should be noted that the idea of cooperation within the framework of the TSI was introduced by Polish President Andrzej Duda and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, politicians of the national-conservative party who are sceptical about the idea of European federalism. Therefore, many fears seem to be justified that the TSI may contribute to the weakening of integration processes in Europe, and may even lead to the creation of the EU of two or more speeds. In addition, there are fears that the initiative will enable the US and, more often, China to intervene in European issues¹⁵.

2. Germany and the Three Seas Initiative

The countries that are part of the TSI are primarily a very important economic area for Germany. In 2016, the value of trade between Germany and Poland exceeded €100 billion, with the entire Visegrad Group, €256 billion, and with all the countries of the TSI (excluding Austria), €313 billion¹⁶. Thus, the value of trade between Germany and the countries of the region in a given year surpassed the trade of Germany with France (€167 billion), China (€170 billion)¹⁷ or Russia (€49 billion)¹⁸. Germany is also a leading investor in Central and Eastern Europe, and the value of German direct investments at the end of 2016 in this region amounted to almost €60 billion.

Germany is also a leading investor in the CEE, and the value of German direct investments at the end of 2016 in this region amounted to almost €60 billion. Employees from Visegrad Group countries,

15 G. Soroka, 'Was Polen in der Drei-Meere-Initiative sieht', *ZOIS Spotlight*, no. 28, 2019, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-spotlight/was-polen-in-der-drei-meere-initiative-sieht/> [2019-07-21].

16 M. Kędzierski, 'Śpieszmy się kochać Niemców. W przededniu europejskiego kryzysu', *Klub Jagielloński*, 14 January 2018, <http://jagiellonski24.pl/2018/01/14/spieszmy-sie-kochac-niemcow-w-przededniu-europejskiego-kryzysu/> [2019-07-21].

17 J. Lepiarz, 'Grupa Wyszehradzka największym partnerem handlowym Niemiec', *Gazeta Prawna*, 24 October 2017, <http://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1080413,faz-grupa-wyszehradzka-najwiekszym-partnerem-handlowym-niemiec.html> [2019-07-21].

18 Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 'Russische Föderation – Wirtschaftliche Beziehungen', *Artikel*, <https://www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/DE/Artikel/Aussenwirtschaft/laendervermerk-russische-foederation.html> [2019-07-21].

especially from Poland, are of great importance to the German economy¹⁹. For Germany, the geographic proximity of the region and its stability also mean that there is no risk of interrupting the continuity of German companies' supply chains. In addition, the transfer of part of the German production to Central European countries, combined with the high efficiency of plants located in the region, has helped the German economy to remain competitive on the global market, especially during the global economic slowdown²⁰. In this context, it can be seen that for almost 30 years of closer cooperation, German companies have become dependent on subcontractors from the region. At the same time, companies from Central Europe have become part of the German economic ecosystem and equally dependent on their German partners²¹.

Despite the vital interests of Germany in Central Europe, there have not been many discussions about the TSI until recently. Paweł Ukielski noted that officially Germany does not take a negative position in relation to the TSI, but undoubtedly the implementation of infrastructure projects on the north-south axis east of the German border, which would strengthen the capacity of non-German Baltic ports and move some road transport to the CEE, would increase competition and may reduce the profits of German businesses. Also in the field of energy, the TSI's plans conflict with German interests in the Nord Stream gas pipeline²².

Germany has consistently taken the position that the best answer to uncertainty and new challenges and threats, both in Europe and globally, is a unified Europe. Among German politicians, it is quite common to realise that in the face of the growing strength and power of other global powers, no European country in the long term will be able to face the global challenges. This was aptly noticed by Joschka Fischer, who stated that we live in a time of the breakdown of the current international order, a time when Western domination is coming to an

19 K. Popławski, 'Rola Europy Środkowej w gospodarce Niemiec. Konsekwencje polityczne', *Raport OSW*, no. 5, 2016, p. 5.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

21 M. Kędzierski, *op. cit.*

22 P. Ukielski, 'Inicjatywa Trójmorza w polskiej polityce zagranicznej', *Studia Europejskie*, no. 2, 2018, p. 54.

end. In the opinion of the former German foreign minister, in the near future it should be expected that the US will no longer be a state shaping the global order and thus will cease to be a guarantor of European security²³. In practice, this means either the need for closer cooperation between European countries, especially in the sphere of common security, or drifting towards the periphery in the emerging new global order. For this reason, the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has advocated the development of specific instruments of European foreign policy to increase the EU's effectiveness in the international arena. Germany strives to ensure that the EU has effective tools for resolving conflicts in its immediate neighbourhood, can limit the negative effects of migration or climate change, and effectively counteract the undesirable actions of large international corporations²⁴.

According to an analysis presented by The Polish Institute of International Affairs, the German perception of the TSI has changed with the evolution of the concept itself:

The Warsaw summit declaration explicitly indicated that one of the initiative's goals was to strengthen and consolidate EU unity. In addition, the Three Seas Initiative contributing countries not only raised the priority of transport connections but also highlighted the projects' synergy with EU activities and – particularly important from the German perspective – the promotion of the business nature of joint economic projects. The change in approach to the TSI was ultimately determined by the reconstruction of the German government after the parliamentary elections in September 2017. The new Social Democratic Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in June 2018 presented the concept of 'a new European Eastern policy'. Among other things, it assumes an increasing German diplomatic commitment in Central Europe²⁵.

- 23 For more, see: J. Fischer, *Der Abstieg des Westens*, Köln: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2018. Compare with: J.M. Fiszer, 'System euroatlantycki i bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe w multipolarnym świecie', *Mysł Ekonomiczna i Polityczna*, no. 2, 2013, pp. 130-156; J.M. Fiszer, 'Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe w multipolarnym ładzie globalnym ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli Rosji', *Mysł Ekonomiczna i Polityczna*, no. 4, 2013, pp. 247-273.
- 24 F.-W. Steinmeier, *Europa ist die Lösung. Churchills Vermächtnis*, Wals bei Salzburg: Ecowin Verlag, 2016, pp. 34-35.
- 25 Ł. Janulewicz, T. Żornaczuk, 'Germany and the Three Seas Initiative', *Bulletin of The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 120 (1366), 22 August 2019, [http://www.pism.pl/upload/files/Bulletin%20PISM%20no%20120%20\(1366\)%2022%20August%202019\(1\).pdf](http://www.pism.pl/upload/files/Bulletin%20PISM%20no%20120%20(1366)%2022%20August%202019(1).pdf) [2019-10-11].

Conclusions

Assuming there would be an initiative in Central Europe in the form of the TSI but understood as an alternative to the European Union, it would have far-reaching consequences for both Europe and Germany. This TSI would then create a buffer zone between Russia and Western Europe. It would very likely jeopardise German economic interests in the region, thus contributing to a reduction in economic activity between Germany and Central Europe. The potential negative economic effects in the form of an outflow of German investment and the decline in trade would affect both Germany and the countries of Central Europe. The process of erosion would gradually reduce the economic and commercial links formed over the past three decades and the economic cooperation beneficial to all parties. As a consequence, it would also threaten the security of the Central European countries by gradually moving the region to the east, into the zone of Russian influence, which would inevitably lead to increased tensions and conflicts in the region.

The change in German foreign policy and increased interest in the TSI should be seen, on the one hand, as a desire to defend German interests in Central Europe and, on the other, as an attempt to counteract disintegration across the European Union. Initially, Berlin viewed the initiative with great suspicion. After the refugee crisis, there has been a fear that another axis of division will arise within the integration group. That the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will continue to increase tensions between Germany and the countries of the initiatives is also unfavourable, ultimately because it enables gas supplies to Germany by bypassing CEE countries. In this situation, US support from President Trump, who criticized Germany for being too dependent on Russian gas, was valuable for the countries that were members of the TSI. However, the criticism of Germany by the US has an economic dimension because the CEE is a huge potential market for American liquefied natural gas (LNG).

It seems that there has been a change in thinking in Germany itself, both in the context of the TSI and its understanding of the CEE. German CDU politician Roderich Kiesewetter rightly pointed out that the dispute over Nord Stream 2 'was a clear signal that national projects should consult with EU partners in advance. The Nord Stream 2 dis-

pute clearly showed how important energy policy is to EU cohesion and how sensitive this issue is to the inhabitants of Eastern Europe²⁶.

In Berlin, it was noticed that not only had the Americans become more and more interested in the region for geostrategic reasons but also that China is increasing its presence in the CEE through investment, and Russia is pursuing strategic interests in the region as well. Given its close economic ties with TSI countries, Germany can no longer remain at a distance. Increasingly in Germany, discussions of a new German policy towards the East are appearing, evidenced by the presence of German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the TSI's third summit, in Bucharest. Germany has also expressed interest in full membership in TSI, which has been backed by President of Romania Klaus Iohannis. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki appears to be sceptical of this idea.

In the opinion of Marcin Sienkiewicz, 'the Three Seas Initiative, currently implemented by the Polish authorities, undoubtedly fits in with the political traditions of Polish activity in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. It can be treated as an attempt to increase the level of diversification of Poland's international relations. Given the context of the internal political situation in Poland in recent years, it can be considered a competitive concept to the political line of the previous government, which focused on developing relations on the Berlin-Moscow axis. However, this is not a policy that faithfully reproduces the patterns of conduct developed in the past. A manifestation of the policy's innovative approach is its focus on a group of countries that have the same formal and political status in the EU and NATO²⁷. This fact is also noticed by the authorities in Berlin, which affects Germany's growing interest in the TSI.

Paradoxically, the establishment of the TSI may lead to a better understanding of the CEE in Germany. This is supported by the growing interest of world powers in the region, where not only the U.S. and

26 Ch. Hasselbach, R. Romaniec, 'Drei-Meere-Initiative Putin, Trump und Xi mischen mit: Der Osten der EU wird zum Brennpunkt der Großmächte', *Focus online*, 5 June 2019, https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/drei-meere-initiative-berlin-wertet-drei-meere-initiative-auf_id_10795403.html [2019-07-22].

27 M. Sienkiewicz, 'Koncepcja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski po 2015 r.', *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, 2016, no. 1 (4), p. 150.

Russia have vital interests but also increasingly China. The awareness of the importance of the region both for the economic stability of Germany and in the context of guaranteeing European security seems to be growing, not only in Berlin but also in Brussels.

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