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# New wave of regional cooperation in Central Europe as a response to new threats

**Nowa fala współpracy regionalnej w Europie Środkowej jako odpowiedź na nowe zagrożenia**

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to examine the revival of regional cooperation in 2015 in Central Europe in the context of new challenges and threats emerging from the international environment for the security of Poland and other Central and Eastern European states. I focus on the Bucharest Nine (Bucharest format, B9), the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), and the reactivation of the Visegrad Group. The most significant research question concerns correlations between the new wave of regionalism in Central Europe and new threats. The results of the research confirm the main thesis that new threats became the primary impulse for the new wave of regional cooperation, initiated in 2015. Among the new threats, the article points out to the policy of the Russian Federation, perceived after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 as the primary source of military threat for Central Europe. In terms of non-military threats, strengthening German-Russian energy cooperation was considered as a significant challenge for the energy security of Central European states. In a broader sense, the source of most serious threats for Central Europe came from the erosion of the Euro-Atlantic system. The theoretical and methodological framework is based on realist assumptions and qualitative research methods.

**Keywords:** regional cooperation, Central Europe, threats for Central Europe, Three Seas Initiative, TSI, 3SI, Bucharest Nine, Bucharest Format, B9, Visegrad Group

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest analiza ożywienia współpracy środkowo-europejskiej w 2015 r. w kontekście nowych wyzwań i zagrożeń międzynarodowych dla bezpieczeństwa Polski i innych państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Skupia się on na Bukaresztańskiej Dziewiątce (Format Bukareszteński, B9), Inicjatywie Trójmorza i reaktywacji Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Główne pytanie badawcze dotyczy korelacji między nową falą regionalizmu w Europie Środkowej a nowymi niebezpieczeństwami płynącymi ze środowiska

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miedzynarodowego. W myśl głównej tezy, te nowe zagrożenia stały się głównym impulsem dla fali współpracy regionalnej zainicjowanej w 2015 r. Zwrócono uwagę na politykę Federacji Rosyjskiej, postrzeganej po aneksji Krymu w 2014 r. jako główne źródło ryzyka militarnego dla Europy Środkowej. W kwestii zagrożeń pozamilitarnych, wzmocnienie niemiecko-rosyjskiej współpracy energetycznej stanowiło wyzwanie dla bezpieczeństwa energetycznego państw Europy Środkowej. W szerszym znaczeniu źródło najpoważniejszych zagrożeń dla Europy Środkowej tkwi w osłabieniu systemu euroatlantyckiego. Ramy teoretyczne i metodologiczne opierają się na teorii realizmu i jakościowych metodach badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** współpraca regionalna, Europa Środkowa, zagrożenia dla Europy Środkowej, Inicjatywa Trójmorza, Trójmorze, TSI, 3SI, Bukaresztańska Dziewiątka, Format Bukaresztański, B9, Grupa Wyszehradzka

Regional cooperation is a relatively new phenomenon in Central Europe. The first wave of the so-called new regionalism emerged after the Cold War, when new groupings were created, such as the Central European Initiative, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Visegrad Triangle, and Central European Free Trade Agreement – CEFTA.<sup>1</sup> They were mainly treated in an instrumental way to step towards the rapprochement with the European Union and NATO. The accession into the two organizations was a pillar of security for Central European states. After the enlargement of the EU and NATO, regional cooperation lost its dynamic as its *raison d'être* was called into question. New opportunities opened for Central European states as full members of the Euro-Atlantic community. Their security environment's diagnosis was optimistic, and the sense of security as high as ever. For example, the 2007 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland stated explicitly that in the first decade of the new millennium Poland was a safe country.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 A. Orzelska, 'Współpraca regionalna w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej (1990-2000)', *Studia Polityczne*, no. 13, 2002, pp. 281-294; R. Zięba, 'Rola ugrupowań subregionalnych w nowym systemie bezpieczeństwa europejskiego', *Studia Europejskie*, no. 1, 2000, pp. 27-51; *Organizacje i ugrupowania międzynarodowe wobec wyzwań XXI wieku: multilateralna współpraca państw w świecie postzimnowojennym*, ed. I. Wróbel, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2006; A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2018; P. Bajda, 'The Visegrad Group between the Trade-mark and the Political Organization of the Peripheral Countries', in: *Is Visegrad Still a Central European "Trade Mark"?*, eds. J. Maruśiak, P. Bajda, Bratislava: Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2013, pp. 28-41.
- 2 *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*, Warsaw 2007, p. 3. See also: The National Security Bureau, *White Book on National Security of the Republic of Poland*, 2013, [https://koziej.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/WhiteBook\\_NationalSecurity\\_PL\\_2013.pdf](https://koziej.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/WhiteBook_NationalSecurity_PL_2013.pdf) [2020-03-19]. More about the subject: A. Orzelska, 'Bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w perspektywie

A revival of regional cooperation took place a few years later when new challenges and threats emerged from the international environment for the security of Poland and other Central and Eastern European states. The new threats were primarily related to Russia's aggressive policy (including military threats, hybrid warfare, and energy security risks) and the erosion of the Euro-Atlantic system. With the new wave of regional cooperation, in January 2015, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia adopted the Slavkov declaration, giving rise to the Slavkov Triangle (Austerlitz format). After that, the Bucharest Nine (Bucharest format, B9) was established, the Visegrad Group increased its activity, and finally, most importantly, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was created.<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to provide an empirical study of the revival of regional cooperation, which accompanied the emergence of new threats in the region. The study is based on qualitative research methods. After a thorough literature review, I used content analysis of document and media sources as qualitative research methods. I also refer to preliminary results of a project based on data collection techniques through interviews with diplomats from ten 3SI states.<sup>4</sup>

The main research question in this article focuses on correlations between the new wave of regionalism in Central Europe and new threats emerging from the international environment for its security. Were the new threats the main impulse for the new wave of regional cooperation? I decided to focus on the Bucharest Nine, the Three

ładu globalnego ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli Polski', in: *System euroatlantycki w wielobiegowym ładzie międzynarodowym*, eds. J. Fiszer, P. Olszewski, Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2013, pp. 113-138, [http://isppan.waw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/agnieszka\\_orzelska\\_art1.pdf](http://isppan.waw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/agnieszka_orzelska_art1.pdf) [2020-03-19].

- 3 About other forms of regional cooperation: K. Kik, 'Regionalne aspekty polityki zagranicznej Polski', *Mysl Ekonomiczna i Polityczna*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2019, pp. 220-242, DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(65).2019.22/k.kik, [https://mysl.lazarski.pl/fileadmin/user\\_upload/oficyna/Mysl\\_Ekonomiczna\\_i\\_Polityczna/meip-64/MEIP\\_2-19\\_13Kik.pdf](https://mysl.lazarski.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/oficyna/Mysl_Ekonomiczna_i_Polityczna/meip-64/MEIP_2-19_13Kik.pdf) [2020-03-19].
- 4 The project was directed by A. Orzelska-Stączek and carried out at the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences in 2019-2020. The monograph presenting the results of the research and including interviews with ambassadors from 3SI states and the head of the Polish President's Office: A. Orzelska-Stączek, P. Ukielski, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza z perspektywy jej uczestników*, Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2020. About qualitative methods: Ch. Lamont, *Research methods in international relations*, Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd. 2015; F. Devine, 'Metody jakościowe', in: *Teorie i metody w naukach politycznych*, eds. D. Marsh, G. Stoker, Kraków: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2006, pp. 199-200; R. Backer et al., *Metodologia badań politologicznych*, Warszawa: Polskie Towarzystwo Nauk Politycznych, 2016, pp. 78-96.

Seas Initiative, and the Visegrad Group, as they are most relevant to the research problem. The theoretical framework is based on the theory of realism. In realism, competition between the major powers in the international system is the normal state of affairs. The conflicting nature of international relations and the threat of war are of crucial importance. States live in a self-help world, in which international anarchy makes cooperation limited. Priority is given to state security. In a rigid hierarchy of states' goals, their survival and security hold the primary place. Strengthening of security is always assessed in relation to the capabilities of other states.

In the realist theory, the establishment of the B9, 3SI, and the revival of the V4 may be presented as a cooperation of rival states, which share a common goal, but focus on pursuing their individual national interests. The primacy of the political sphere over the economic sphere should be emphasized. In practice, it means that, for political reasons, states may withdraw even from very favorable economic projects; such a possibility is facilitated by the lack of institutionalization of the discussed forms of cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Bucharest Nine

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, followed by the escalation of the war in Ukraine, marked a turning point for security in Central Europe. It destroyed the European security ar-

5 More on the subject: A. Orzelska-Stąpczek, 'Inicjatywa Trójmorza w świetle teorii realizmu. Polityczne aspekty nowej formy współpracy dwunastu państw', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2019, pp. 131-156; J. Czuputowicz, *Teorie stosunków międzynarodowych*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008; J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?', *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1999, pp. 5-55, <https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/anybody.pdf> [2020-03-19]; *Teoria realizmu w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych*, eds. J. Czuputowicz, E. Haliżak, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Rambler, 2014; S. Guzzini, *Realizm w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2017; J. Więclawski, *Teoria realizmu Hansa J. Morgenthaua: koncepcje, krytyka i znaczenie dla współczesnych stosunków międzynarodowych*, Olsztyn: Instytut Nauk Politycznych Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie, 2014; M. Filary-Szczepanik, *Anarchia i dyscyplina. Rzecz o realistycznych teoriach stosunków międzynarodowych Hansa Morgenthaua i Kennetha Waltza*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Ignatianum, 2019; M. Kozub-Karkut, 'Neoclassical Realism and Foreign Policy Analysis – A Possible Way of Integration?', *Teoria Polityki*, no. 3, 2019, pp. 201-227, [www.ejournals.eu/pliki/art/14198/](http://www.ejournals.eu/pliki/art/14198/) [2020-03-19]; Ch.L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help', *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994-1995, pp. 50-90.

chitecture, increasing the role of military threats. It was accompanied by global order changes with prevailing unfavorable trends, indicating gradual degradation of the existing security system.

The aggressive policy of the Russian Federation became the primary source of military threat for Central European states. Among non-military threats, German-Russian energy cooperation resulting in the Nordstream project was considered a significant challenge for energy security. In a broader sense, the most serious threats for Central Europe were posed by the erosion of the Euro-Atlantic system, which resulted in loosening political, economic, and military ties between allies.

In response to the threat posed by the aggressive Russian policies, the so-called Bucharest Nine (Bucharest format, B9) was inaugurated at the initiative of the presidents of Poland and Romania in 2014. In November 2015, a joint declaration on “Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility” was signed at the so-called mini NATO summit in Bucharest, by representatives of nine countries of its eastern flank: Poland, Romania, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Bulgaria. On the three-page-long document, the word “threat” was mentioned seven times, with a focus on Russia’s policies. The nine states’ representatives emphasized that “the aggressive Russian actions in Ukraine, including the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea, the support to separatists in Ukraine, as well as Russia’s military activities in our neighborhood are undermining European security architecture.”<sup>6</sup> They underlined their commitment to a strong North-Atlantic Alliance, capable of responding effectively to the security threats. The USA expressed their support for this initiative.

Regarding the institutional format, the Bucharest Nine remains a group of nine states, an open platform of consultations and dialogue without permanent structures or institutional background. Such

6 Joint Declaration on “Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility” by the Presidents of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Republic of Estonia, Hungary, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Poland, Romania and the Slovak Republic and the President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, <http://nato.mae.ro/en/local-news/904> [2020-03-19]. See also: A. Rogozińska, ‘Dziewiątka Bukaresztańska i Idea Trójmorza jako inicjatywy wzmacniające bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej’, in: *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej i jej konsekwencje dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego*, ed. M. Banasik, Warszawa: Difin, 2019, pp. 313-322; J. Zając, *Poland’s Security Policy: The West, Russia, and the Changing International Order*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 159.

a specific formula features almost all regional cooperation groupings in Central Europe.

The primary purpose of the B9 was to strengthen transatlantic security through strengthening NATO's eastern flank. The B9 states did not specify by what means this aim was to be achieved. Generally, they planned to exchange views of NATO's eastern flank states on security matters, renew emphasis on NATO's collective defense, and advocated the deepening of the NATO-EU cooperation.<sup>7</sup> They declared that: "We will maintain and intensify our involvement in shaping the common response to the emerging risks, with a special focus on hybrid warfare, cyber defense, energy security and strategic communication."<sup>8</sup>

The B9 was established as a complementary format parallel to the 3SI. Romania's ambassador to Poland explained that the B9 is complementing the 3SI, but in different domains. He said:

The 3SI aims to contribute to enhancing economic resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, a goal with strategic relevance as well, while turning the region into a focal point for NATO and EU strategic convergence and a strategic contributor to the collective defense and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic community. The B9 and the 3SI are very different formats but they certainly complement each other, because security cannot be achieved without economic development, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup>

According to the head of the National Security Bureau (BBN) of Poland Paweł Soloch, the Bucharest Nine states had a common assessment of threats and the security situation.<sup>10</sup> This reflects one of the basic assumptions of the theory of realism that states, as essentially rational unitary actors, give priority to strengthening their security. That was the main motivation for initiating the B9.

7 "We will continue to act consistently in the spirit of NATO's unity and solidarity, as well as to strengthen the transatlantic bond, vital for the Alliance, in order to be ready for threats and challenges wherever they arise", Joint Declaration on "Allied Solidarity..."

8 Ibidem.

9 Interview with ambassador of Romania to Poland Ovidiu Drăgășescu conducted by A. Orzelska-Stąćzek and M. Czernicka on 26 June 2019, in: A. Orzelska-Stąćzek, P. Ukielski, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza...*, p. 161.

10 'National Security Bureau head: Bucharest Nine unity strengthens NATO', *prezydent.pl*, 5 April 2019, <https://www.prezydent.pl/en/news/art,1010,national-security-bureau-head-bucharest-nine-unity-strengthens-nato.html> [2020-03-19].

The Russian Federation's aggressive policy contributed to consolidating NATO members' policies for a short term. Their different threat perception had been one of the major challenges for the Alliance after the Cold War. However, in 2014, with the consent of all Alliance countries, efforts were made to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. At the Newport summit on September 4-5, 2014, NATO adopted a package of decisions to strengthen collective defense. At the Warsaw summit on July 8-9, 2016, further decisions were taken to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. These steps demonstrated that the Alliance can take effective actions, despite its internal divisions. In the face of growing military threat in the region, NATO, with the leading role of Americans, is considered by the Bucharest Nine states as the main guarantor of security for the Euro-Atlantic community.

## 2. The Three Seas Initiative

The Bucharest Nine is complemented by the Three Seas Initiative which, comprises the nine above-mentioned states and Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia. It is not an international organization but a group of states without any permanent institutional structures. It is an example of *summit diplomacy*, based on annual summits of the heads of states. Whereas the Bucharest Format focuses on the military dimension, the Three Seas Initiative on cooperation in the field of transport, energy, and digital communications infrastructure.

The Three Seas Initiative cooperation does not directly comprise security matters. However, economic development is vital for security, and infrastructure development is crucial for military mobility.<sup>11</sup> The Dubrovnik 3SI declaration stated that "by expanding the existing cooperation in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors, Central and Eastern Europe will become more secure, safe and competitive."<sup>12</sup> The Bucharest 3SI declaration referred to energy security and building a more prosperous, united,

11 Interview with the head of the President's Office Krzysztof Szczerski conducted by A. Orzelska-Stączek and M. Czernicka on 17 July 2019, in: A. Orzelska-Stączek, P. Ukielski, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza...*, p. 145.

12 The Joint Statement on the Three Seas Initiative (The Dubrovnik Statement), <http://three-seas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DUBROVNIK.pdf> [2020-03-19].

and secure European Union. Finally, in Ljubljana 3SI declaration, we read that “the 3SI complements our cooperation within the EU and contributes to prosperity, security [...] 3SI Business Forum in Ljubljana, and its three areas that are essential to the future of the region – energy, infrastructure and digitalization, as well as the crosscutting topics of security.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the word “threat” does not appear in any of the four declarations adopted at subsequent summits in Dubrovnik (2016), Warsaw (2017), Bucharest (2018), and Ljubljana (2019), the Three Seas Initiative was established as a response to new challenges and threats, which were related mainly to economic and infrastructural problems of Central European states, their energy security, and to the erosion of the transatlantic community. Firstly, the Initiative is to reduce the economic and infrastructural gap between Western and Central Europe. The lag may lead to the consolidation of hierarchical relations based on the center-periphery relationship, as K. Szczerski argues. In his opinion: “There was a unilateral transfer of patterns from dominant centers to subordinated centers with the simultaneous exploitation of the latter in terms of their human and material resources.”<sup>14</sup> The Initiative is to dynamize economic growth in the eastern part of the European Union.

Secondly, the Three Seas Initiative aims to expand the existing cooperation in energy, strengthening Central and Eastern European states’ energy security. At present, they remain heavily dependent on Russia’s supplies. The Nordstream, linking Germany and Russia, is an example of conflicting interests in the region. Opponents of the project, with the United States on the lead, Poland, the Baltic states, and Slovakia, among others, argue that this project has security implications which do not only relate to energy. In addition to posing

13 Joint Declaration of the Fourth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative (Ljubljana, 5-6 June 2019), <https://three.si/joint-declaration> [2020-03-19].

14 K. Szczerski, *Utopia europejska: kryzys integracji i polska inicjatywa naprawy*, Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2017, p. 187. The state of infrastructure illustrated ambassador of Bulgaria to Poland Emil Savov Yalnazov: “I will give you a practical example of an infrastructure gap in the region: you know that the river Danube is the natural border between Bulgaria and Romania, our neighbour to the north. Over the 700 km border, there are now only two bridges to connect us: at Ruse-Giurgiu and at Widyń-Calafat,” interview conducted by A. Orzelska-Stączek and M. Czernicka on 18 June 2020, in: A. Orzelska-Stączek, P. Ukielski, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza...*, Warszawa 2020, p. 7.

a threat to Central European states' interests (impacting their gas markets' development, planned diversification of supply, gas prices, and transit role), the construction of the gas pipeline challenges security in general.<sup>15</sup> During the Bucharest Three Seas Initiative summit, Polish Prime Minister M. Morawiecki openly expressed concern and disagreement with the construction of this gas pipeline. However, in the German authorities' opinion, it is an infrastructure project that strengthens Europe's energy security in the field of natural gas supply.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, in broader terms, the Three Seas Initiative is a response to threats connected to the emerging post-Atlantic Europe. A key element of a post-Atlantic world is the progressive process of weakening the ties connecting allies on both sides of the Atlantic, leading to a fundamental change in their relations.

The Three Seas Initiative was founded during turbulent times. Apart from the threats posed by Russian policy, transatlantic relations faced other challenges. The risk of a transatlantic split used to be discussed regularly after the Cold War but reached a new intensity in the second decade of the XXI century. For the countries of Central Europe, it carries serious risks for the foundations of their security. The Three Seas Initiative was presented by its proponents as a tool for building relations between Central Europe and the USA, as a strategic "bridge" connecting the Euro-Atlantic community. Strengthening transatlantic ties is one of the declared priorities of the Three Seas Initiative.<sup>17</sup>

- 15 A. Łoskot-Strachota, R. Bajczuk, Sz. Kardaś, 'Nord Stream 2 divides the West', *OSW commentary*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-06-18/nord-stream-2-divides-west> [2020-03-19]; P. Wilczek, Poland's ambassador to the United States, G. Mosbacher, United States ambassador to Poland, 'Partnerstwo polsko-amerykańskie jest silniejsze niż kiedykolwiek', *Rzeczpospolita*, 13 November 2018; W. Jakóbiak, 'Nord Stream 2 w polityce zagranicznej rządu RP w latach 2015-2018', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, vol. 74, no. 4, 2018, pp. 120-121; M. Ruszel, 'Znaczenie gazociągu Nord Stream 2 dla polityki energetycznej Republiki Federalnej Niemiec', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, vol. 74, no. 4, 2018; Sz. Kardaś, 'Nord Stream 2 w polityce energetycznej Rosji', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, vol. 74, no. 4, 2018, pp. 93-111.
- 16 German Minister of State for Europe M. Roth in interview with J. Bielecki, 'Niemcy o sporze UE z Polską: Chodzi o wolność', *Rzeczpospolita*, 19 September 2018.
- 17 P. Kowal, A. Orzelska-Stączek, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie*, Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2019; A. Chojan, 'The United States on the Three Seas Initiative', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2019; B. Wiśniewski, O. Pope-scu, M. Ehl et al., 'Trójmorze – nowy instrument w polskiej polityce zagranicznej', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2017; T. Stępniewski, G. Soroka, 'The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2019; P. Żurawski vel Grajewski, A. Baeva Motusić, K. Redłowska, *Adriatic – Baltic – Black Sea:*

In August 2018, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs H. Maas called for redefining transatlantic relations and, in his speech entitled *Planning a new world order*, outlined Europe's post-Atlantic vision. In his opinion, the world we knew, in which we felt comfortable, no longer exists.<sup>18</sup> President of France E. Macron outlined a similar thesis when he expressed to *The Economist*, in dramatic terms, that NATO, the transatlantic Alliance, is suffering from “brain-death”. He claimed that Europe needs to develop a military force of its own. In his view, Europe is “on the edge of a precipice.”<sup>19</sup> The extreme scenario of post-Atlantic Europe may mean the disintegration of NATO, the USA's withdrawal from the Old Continent, the ongoing disintegration processes in the European Union, and a return to the rivalry of the powers.

For Poland, no vision of post-Atlantic Europe is better than the transatlantic Europe. The Three Seas Initiative declaration adopted in Bucharest (2018) emphasized the importance of transatlantic relations and EU cohesion. It was reaffirmed in the Ljubljana declaration, where it was stated: “The overarching pillars of the Three Seas Initiative are threefold – economic development, European cohesion and transatlantic ties. [...] [T]he Initiative is intended to contribute to the strengthening of transatlantic ties. The US economic presence in the region provides a catalyst for an enhanced transatlantic partnership.”<sup>20</sup>

*Visions of Cooperation*, Warszawa: Institute for Eastern Studies, 2017, [http://www.forum-ekonomiczne.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Adriatyk-Ba%C5%82tyk-Morze-Czarne16x24\\_2017en\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.forum-ekonomiczne.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Adriatyk-Ba%C5%82tyk-Morze-Czarne16x24_2017en_PDF.pdf) [2020-03-19].

- 18 “My goals are detailed work plans for a balanced partnership with the US, a new European Ostpolitik and the establishment of a sovereign and strong Europe.” H. Maas, *Courage to Stand Up for Europe*, 13 June 2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-europe-united/2106528> [2020-03-19]. “It is high time to reassess our partnership – not to leave it behind, but to renew and preserve it. (...) Let's use the idea of a balanced partnership as a blueprint, where we assume our equal share of responsibility. In which we form a counterweight when the US crosses the line. [...] And where the USA crosses the line, we Europeans must form a counterweight — as difficult as that can be. [...] One final point is elementary: We must begin a new dialogue with the people on the other side of the Atlantic.” H. Maas, *Making plans for a new world order*, 22 August 2018, <https://global.handelsblatt.com/opinion/making-plans-new-world-order-germany-us-trump-trans-atlantic-relations-heiko-maas-europe-956306> [2020-03-19].
- 19 ‘Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead’, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead> [2020-03-19].
- 20 Joint Declaration of the Fourth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative; A. Orzelska-Stączek, “Między transatlantycką i postatlantycką wizją Europy. Zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa z perspektywy Polski”, in: *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej...*, pp. 298-312.

The Three Seas Initiative gained the USA's support from the onset but initially met with a reserve from the European Union and Germany. Critics claimed that it divided the European Union into the "new" Europe opposing the "old" Europe.<sup>21</sup> This way, it would paradoxically create new threats for the Euro-Atlantic community, instead of strengthening it. In particular, Poland's authorities were accused of seeking to build a Central European group to unite the region and balance against Germany under the United States' patronage.

The first summit in Dubrovnik 2016 was attended by American diplomats, but not by their counterparts from the European Union, Germany or France. Officially, the European Commission did not criticize the Three Seas Initiative, however, no high-level EU representatives or high-level diplomats from Germany or France had attended the Three Seas summit in 2016 or even in 2017 when the US President D. Trump arrived as a special guest for the 2017 3SI summit in Warsaw.

A few months later, the policy of the EU and Germany towards the 3SI changed substantially. In 2018 Germany declared its will to join the Three Seas Initiative. Finally, it received the status of a state partner, the same as the US. For the first time, the President of the European Commission J.C. Juncker attended the 3SI summit. In Bucharest, he said that:

We missed the occasion to respond positively to the invitation of the President of Croatia two years ago and then to the invitation of the Polish government one year ago. But we are here today because we do think that what you are doing, what you are undertaking is completing the work which the European Union as such is trying to do.<sup>22</sup>

- 21 "Recent efforts by the Trump administration, which has adopted the TSI project, have shown that the goal of the United States is to further deepen the split between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe", B. Dziwiłtowski-Gintowt, 'One Belt, One Road Between Three Seas: China's Soft-power Policy Towards "New" EU Members', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2019, [https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/2020-01/RIESW\\_2019-3-06.pdf](https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/2020-01/RIESW_2019-3-06.pdf) [2020-03-19], DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2019.3.6. About Germany's position: M. Dahl, 'Evolution of Germany's Stance Regarding the Three Seas Initiative', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2019, [https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/2020-01/RIESW\\_2019-3-04.pdf](https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/2020-01/RIESW_2019-3-04.pdf) [2020-03-03], DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2019.3.4.
- 22 Commission européenne, *Discours du Président Jean-Claude Juncker au sommet de l'Initiative des Trois Mers*, Bucarest, 18 September 2018, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-18-5825\\_fr.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-18-5825_fr.htm) [2020-03-19]. I wrote about it: A. Orzelska-Stączek, 'Inicjatywa Trójmorza w świetle teorii realizmu. Polityczne aspekty nowej formy współpracy dwunastu państw', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2019.

The participation of the German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Ljubljana at the 3SI summit in 2019, along with the President of the European Commission J. C. Juncker's presence, closed the phase of treating the 3SI as a potential anti-European form of regional cooperation. However, some questions concerning the conflicting German and American interests in Central and Eastern Europe remained.

To sum up, in responding to the evolution of military and non-military threats the Bucharest Format and the Three Seas Initiative are closely correlated. The Bucharest Nine comprises 9 out of 29 NATO members and focuses on military consultation within NATO, whereas the Three Seas Initiative, which consists of 12 out of 27 EU members, supports pragmatic cooperation mainly in transport infrastructure, cyber cooperation, and energy security.

The theory of realism explains the rivalry and conflict well by focusing on security and power. When explaining cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative, this approach faces difficulties. Realism gives priority to the political sphere, while the Three Seas Initiative, on the declaratory level, focuses on the economic dimension. The common interest of the twelve states, indicated in the declarations adopted so far, is narrow. Cooperation in the energy sphere, presented as one of the pillars, may be unstable in the face of Russia's policies, which skillfully use the differences between Central European states. The development of the transport and communication infrastructure on the North-South line is in the common interest of all the 3SI states, but the relative gains will be greater for some and less for others, which may in practice hinder their cooperation. In case of further unfavorable changes of the global order, new threats may lead to strengthening the political dimension of the Three Seas Initiative as a tool for building relations between Central Europe and the USA. In such circumstances, the role of the theory of realism in explaining the motives of this cooperation will increase.<sup>23</sup>

23 Commission européenne, *Discours du Président Jean-Claude Juncker...*

### 3. Visegrad Group

Both the Bucharest Format and the Three Seas Initiative include all the Visegrad Group states: the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, and Poland. The origins of the group date back to the beginning of 1990, when the Visegrad Triangle was established. It developed with different dynamics up to 2004, when all four states acceded the EU, thus reaching the goal written down in the Visegrad declaration of 1991. At that point, it was not clear what its new *raison d'être* would be.

There are clear correlations between the activation of the Visegrad Group in 2015 and the new threats related to the migration crisis of 2015. The EU policy towards the sudden influx of migrants in Europe became a catalyst for the revival of the Visegrad Group cooperation. At that time, representatives of the four states intensified meetings at the highest level, issued firm joint statements, communiques, and joint articles which attracted international attention. The prime ministers of the Visegrad Group, who met in Prague on September 4, 2015, at an Extraordinary Visegrad Group summit on migration, underlined that migration flows presented a serious challenge. Initially, Poland did not follow the unified stance agreed upon by the V4 group, but following the 2015 autumn elections its policy changed.<sup>24</sup> The Czech Republic, Poland, and the Slovak Republic declared their support for Hungary, which as a transit country for immigrants on the so-called "Balkan migration route", was one of the states most exposed to migratory pressures.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the Visegrad states negatively received the proposal for mandatory amounts of relocation of refugees, which was put forward by the EC and supported by some EU Member States. The countries of the Visegrad Group promoted the approach known as "flexible solidarity", meaning that the countries should independently decide on the extent of their participation in solving the migration problem. Their position was criticized as a "threat to in-

24 H. Bauerova, 'Migration Policy of the V4 in the Context of Migration Crisis', *Politics in Central Europe*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2018, pp. 99-120, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327723240\\_Migration\\_Policy\\_of\\_the\\_V4\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_Migration\\_Crisis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327723240_Migration_Policy_of_the_V4_in_the_Context_of_Migration_Crisis) [2020-09-01].

25 Joint Statement of The Heads Of Governments of The Visegrad Group Countries Prague, 4 September 2015, [http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements#\\_2015](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements#_2015) [2020-03-19].

tegration processes in Europe,”<sup>26</sup> and were met with resentment and criticism for undermining fundamental values and principles from many EU states, with Germany on the lead.

In many documents issued by the Visegrad Group, the states argued that the EU policy towards illegal immigration posed serious threats. For example, in a joint statement issued in November 2016 ministers of the interior of the Visegrad states acknowledged that uncontrolled mixed migration movements were a threat to the EU and its Member States’ security. The ministers expressed their concern about their citizens’ safety and agreed “that it is a threat that cannot be underestimated.”<sup>27</sup> They emphasized the necessity to protect the EU’s external borders, reduce illegal migration and to safeguard the integrity of the Schengen area. They also called the EU to move beyond its proposals dividing the EU Member States.

In the Visegrad states, the potential mass influx of migrants was identified as a serious threat for a number of reasons. First of all, they were not prepared to handle a large number of migrants logistically and provide them with appropriate living conditions. Moreover, their societies did not have contacts and experience with the Muslim culture and religion on such a scale as France or Germany do. An important argument was concerned with security considerations, namely fears that there might be Islamic terrorists among the refugees.<sup>28</sup> There were also concerns that the European Commission’s proposals of mandatory quotas for refugees are too great an infringement of national sover-

26 S. Koziej, ‘The role of the Visegrád Group in European Security’, in: *Place and Role of the Visegrád Group Countries in the European Union*, eds. J. Fiszer, A. Chojan, P. Olszewski, Warszawa: IPS PAS, 2019, p. 70. See also: A. Chojan, ‘The Visegrad Group and the Migration Crisis in Europe: a Discussion in the Context of the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy’, in: *Place and Role of the Visegrád Group Countries...*, pp. 87-102.

27 Joint Statement of V4 Interior Ministers on the Establishment of the Migration Crisis Response Mechanism, 21 November 2016, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-v4> [2020-03-19].

28 This topic has been widely discussed: A. Adamczyk, ‘Visegrad Group countries and the immigration crisis in the European Union’, *Przegląd Europejski*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2017, pp. 11-40; A. Czyż, ‘Państwa Grupy Wyszehradzkiej wobec kryzysu migracyjnego’, *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis*, no. 18, 2017, pp. 43-161; J. Groszkowski, ‘Czechy i Słowacja wobec kryzysu migracyjnego’, *Analizy OSW*, 16 September 2015; M. Pachocka, ‘Understanding the Visegrad Group states’ response to the migrant and refugee crises 2014+ in the European Union’, *Yearbook of Polish-European Studies*, vol. 19, 2016, pp. 101-132.

eignty.<sup>29</sup> From a global perspective, the immigration crisis weakened the EU, which is one of the pillars of the Euro-Atlantic system. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that despite all the disputes the EU remains the main point of reference for Visegrad cooperation and issues concerning the EU dominate the Visegrad agenda.<sup>30</sup>

The Visegrad Group states have developed their cooperation in various fields, but they do not plan to set up a formalized international organization with a seat, status, and a secretary-general. So far, they have used to intensify their cooperation on an *ad-hoc* basis, in face of concrete common challenges. The question of broadening the Visegrad cooperation, so as it includes new areas, are discussed regularly.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusions

The study shows that the creation of the Bucharest Nine and the Three Seas Initiative, as well as the revival of the Visegrad Group in 2015, came as a response to new threats and challenges posed mainly by the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation, risks related to the German-Russian energy cooperation, and the erosion of the Euro-Atlantic system with the EU migration crisis. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the Bucharest Nine aimed at strengthening NATO's eastern flank while the Three Seas Initiative focused on boosting economic development and strengthening the transatlantic ties, thus preserving Americans' presence in Europe. Visegrad group cooperation intensified, as the four states shared a common threat perception in the face of the migration crisis in the European Union.

To sum up, the new wave of regional cooperation in Central Europe which commenced in 2015, has significantly contributed to strengthening Central European states' voice within the EU and NATO. However, it should be emphasized that the new forms of regional cooperation do

29 The Economist Intelligence Unit, [https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1823495766&Country=Poland&topic=Politics\\_1](https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1823495766&Country=Poland&topic=Politics_1) [2020-09-30].

30 A. Orzelska-Stączek, 'Should the Visegrad Group become an international organization?', in: *Place and Role of the Visegrád Group Countries...*, pp. 127-129.

31 Regarding security, the idea of the Visegrad Battlegroup (V4 EU Battlegroup) appeared and it was one of the initiatives in the area of European defense policies. It had been discussed as early as 2007, but the first group went on duty in the EU in the first half of 2016; S. Koziej, 'The role of the Visegrád Group...', p. 78.

not have an institutional infrastructural background and their transformation into international organizations is not being considered. The EU and NATO are undisputed pillars of security architecture in Central Europe.

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