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Preparations for the Three Seas Initiative Bucharest summit: 3SI countries in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine

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On September 6-7, 2023, Romania will host a summit of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) which, for the second time, will be against the background of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. Despite settling relations between 3SI and Ukraine during last year's summit in Riga, 3SI countries do not present a unified stance towards Russian aggression. Hungary has exhibited the most controversial approach since the onset of the conflict, while Austria, promoting neutrality, demonstrates a comparatively restrained posture. The Russo-Ukrainian war has also changed the energy situation in the 3SI region – currently, the majority of countries source their energy resources from directions other than Russia.

Romania's vision for the Three Seas cooperation. In 2018, when Romania hosted the summit of the 3SI for the first time, it was seen as one of the main driving forces behind this form of regional cooperation, alongside the initiators – Poland and Croatia. This was reflected in the groundbreaking results of the Bucharest summit for the further development of 3SI, including creating a list of priority infrastructural, energy, and digital projects for the region and signing a letter of intent regarding the establishment of an investment fund. Romania's decision to host the 3SI summit again in 2023 is seen as an expression of its continued strong commitment to this format of regional cooperation. Especially since not all countries participating in the 3SI have taken on this role (Austria, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Hungary).

This year's Bucharest summit aims to promote regional security and stability, which is reflected in its slogan presented by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis – “together we are stronger”. Romania's vision assumes strengthening transatlantic ties and the security of NATO's eastern flank and the Black Sea region. In this context, the divergence of positions of the 3SI countries on the Russian aggression against Ukraine remains a significant challenge.

(Dis)unity of 3SI countries towards the war. During the Bucharest summit – as in the case of the Riga Summit (“IES Commentaries”, No. 639) – the agenda will focus on the war in Ukraine and its implications for the countries of the 3SI region. It should be emphasized that most 3SI countries, in response to Russian aggression, clearly support Ukraine politically, militarily, and humanitarily. Poland and the Baltic states are at the forefront in this respect. Already in the first phase of the conflict, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and declared their readiness to support it (“IES Commentaries”, No. 531), which, in the following months, was reflected in military, humanitarian, and financial aid amounting to hundreds of millions of euros as well as the acceptance of war refugees and the voice of opposition to the aggressor noticed on the international arena (“IES Commentaries”, No. 596, “IES Commentaries”, No. 712). Also, in the Czech Republic, the outbreak of war triggered an unprecedented wave of social and political solidarity towards Ukraine. This state also provided extensive military assistance to Kyiv (“IES Commentaries”, No. 763). A similar approach characterizes the authorities in Slovakia. However, a more ambiguous position is presented by Slovak society, which is often prone to pro-Russian disinformation. At the same time, a challenge to engaging in helping Ukraine is the political crisis in Slovakia, which has been going on for many months as well as the upcoming early parliamentary elections and the growing support in opinion polls for pro-Russian parties (including Smer-SD and Republika) (“IES Commentaries”, No. 784, “IES Commentaries”, No. 789, “IES Commentaries”, No. 825). The states of the southern flank of the 3SI also unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion. Romania supported the EU's imposition of sanctions on Russia and sent humanitarian aid and military equipment to

Ukraine. A similar position was taken by the Bulgarian authorities, which condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine despite the strong pro-Russian attitudes of a part of society and some political groups. However, due to its energy dependence on Russia, Bulgaria has avoided demands for a radical tightening of sanctions, especially on Russian gas and oil. In turn, the Croatian authorities have supported Ukraine since the beginning of the war but limited their criticism of the Russian authorities. The position of the Croatian government is also supported by the parliamentary opposition and President Zoran Milanović, who had previously expressed scepticism about Croatia's involvement in a potential conflict. The Slovenian authorities also supported actions against Russia's aggression in Ukraine - already in March 2022, the then Prime Minister Janez Janša visited Kyiv, which was surrounded by Russian troops.

Austria has a specific position on the conflict. The Austrian government the lack of arms supplies to Ukraine explains by the neutral status of its country, while the reluctance to impose EU sanctions on Russian energy resources by the high degree of dependence on their imports. At the same time, Austria provides political and humanitarian support to the Ukrainian side. The Hungarian reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine is the most controversial. On the one hand, the Hungarian government supports EU sanctions against Russia, while, on the other hand, it neither supports Ukraine with arms supplies nor agrees to the transit of arms through its territory. The leaders of the ruling Fidesz party and the Hungarian pro-government media remain very reserved about Russian aggression, not mentioning, for example, the victims of the war ("IES Commentaries", No. 544).

(Dis)unity of 3SI countries towards energy architecture. Until the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the 3SI countries were largely dependent on supplies of energy resources from Russia. The new geopolitical situation has prompted the governments of these countries to redefine their energy policy and take active measures to diversify energy sources. At the same time, there are still some differences within 3SI in their approach to the Russian side.

Russia continues to be the key source of energy for Hungary, although Hungary is making some efforts to diversify the sources and directions of imports, primarily of natural gas. For several months, the government in Budapest has been conducting intensive talks in this regard, e.g., with Middle Eastern countries. In December 2022, a meeting was held regarding potential supplies of natural gas from Oman and Qatar. In January 2023, an agreement was signed with Azerbaijan on cooperation in the extraction and transport of natural gas. Hungary is also counting on the expansion of the LNG terminal on the island of Krk in Croatia, which will make it possible to increase the transmission capacity of gas supplies to this country.

Other 3SI countries have taken steps that enabled them to significantly reduce the supply of energy resources from Russia. This was largely possible thanks to the energy infrastructure developed in recent years. In 2022, gas pipelines connecting Poland with Lithuania (GIPL interconnector), Poland with Slovakia, Poland with Norway via Denmark (Baltic Pipe), and Greece and Bulgaria (IGB interconnector) were commissioned. At the same time, a reverse flow was created on the Trans-Balkan gas pipeline, thanks to which it is possible to import natural gas from Azerbaijan, Turkey or Greece to Moldova. The raw material from Romania also flows to this country via the Jassy-Ungheni-Kishinev gas pipeline ("IES Commentaries", No. 755). In addition, new LNG terminals in Finland are being built and put into operation, which will enable the supply of gas to the Baltic States via the Balticconnector gas pipeline. As mentioned above, the expansion of the LNG terminal on the island of Krk in Croatia is also planned.

The war undoubtedly also has an impact on accelerating the process of energy transformation in the 3SI countries. Numerous RES and nuclear energy projects are currently being implemented in the countries of the region. The use of low-emission energy sources is also increasing, e.g., hydrogen ("IES Commentaries", No. 799).

Conclusions

- The 8th summit of the Three Seas Initiative will take place in September 2023 in Bucharest. The previous Bucharest summit in 2018 was a breakthrough for the functioning of 3SI – the format then moved from the conceptual phase to the implementation of strategic decisions. This year, Romania stresses the

importance of regional security and stability, reflecting the ongoing war in Ukraine. It should be assumed that this year's meeting will bring important decisions regarding cooperation with Ukraine and the reconstruction of this country after the end of the war.

- Despite granting Ukraine the special status of a participating partner during last year's 7th Riga summit, the 3SI countries have not developed a unified position on the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. Most countries strongly condemn Russia's actions and provide Ukraine with both political and military support. However, some, especially Austria and Hungary, show restraint in their reaction. In this context, the approach of the 3SI countries to the issue of energy policy is also diverse, with most of them taking active steps to diversify energy sources and reduce dependence on Russia.
- The organization of the 9th summit in 2024 was announced by Lithuania. This shows the Baltic States' continued interest in the format of the Three Seas Initiative. Undoubtedly, the agenda for the next summit will include the subject of Ukraine and its reconstruction as well as security in the Baltic Sea region and the development of energy and communication infrastructure.