The emergence of a European project.
Three Summits for the Three Seas Initiative.
Abstract

This paper intends to present the origins and backdrop of the Three Seas Initiative (further to be named 3SI), the ground covered since the First Summit in Dubrovnik in August 2016, the accomplishments of the Warsaw Summit in July 2017 and the prospects of the forthcoming Summit to be held in Bucharest in September 2018.

The 3SI is just at the beginning of an ongoing effort on the long road that lies ahead. It might appear to be a novel format for regional consolidation, but it actually emerges from a venerable line of various relevant experiences in political cooperation. The heritage of past history serves both as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of (sub)regional fragmentation and as a guide for a common future.

The Initiative is focused, first and foremost, on objectives of organic nature: cohesion, development, prosperity and enduring commitment to the existing Euro-Atlantic integration formats. More precisely, it aims to pursue those objectives from within by relying on the geo-economic potential and momentum generated in strategic terms by the eastward enlargement of the European Union and NATO. While both entities sought to offer their new members a fast track into the European and Euro-Atlantic community, there were fewer incentives to address the issues of intra-regional cooperation and joint progress. That is where the 3SI can prove to be instrumental by complementing the already well-developed integration of ‘Old Europe’ with the regional integrative endeavours of the 3SI states.

Introduction

Apart from Croatia, Poland and Romania, the idea of Three Seas Initiative (3SI) remains less known in the wider region of Central and Southern Europe. Awareness of the existence of this project is quite limited among the population of countries participating in 3SI.

Even though the visibility of the project and knowledge of the Initiative increased after the second 3SI summit which was held in Warsaw in July 2017 (and was attended by the US president, Donald Trump), there is still a lot to be done in this respect. The initiators of the project have to continue their efforts to provide both 3SI countries and external partners with a clear vision of the initiative. At the same time they have to keep addressing concerns of the EU institutions and certain Member States by unequivocally signalling that the 3SI is not in any case a project against EU and that it should be perceived as an instrument that strengthens the cohesion and integration within the Union. That is because in order to succeed, the 3SI requires to mobilize and effectively use the existing tools and instruments which are offered to the region by the EU.

Therefore, the paper aims at outlining the historical background of the initiative and its evolution, describing how the new concept differs from interwar ideas of regional cooperation proposed by Poland after 1918, also showing the attitude of key external partners to the project. Key part of the work comprises of the analysis of the potential of the 3SI for the region and, to some extent, for the neighbouring countries outside the EU.
3SI as an “added value”. Historical background of the new initiative

For many years now, a number of different formats of regional cooperation (including V4 and V4+, macro-regional EU strategies such as the one concerning the Danube (EUSDR), the Baltic (EUSBR) or the Central European Initiative) as well as the regional high-level groups for sectorial cooperation (e.g. CESEC gas platform) have been active in Central Europe. Yet, despite the functioning of all those formats, a need to create an additional, complementary initiative which would reinforce the current cooperation models and fill the “gaps” or fix certain shortcomings existed. One of such gaps was for example the fact that despite existence of certain common strategies connecting the northern and southern regions of Central and Eastern Europe (such as for example TEN-T) their implementation encounters regular problems. The other one was the political discomfort that certain partners from outside the V4 may have felt when it came to the ‘V4 +’ initiatives.

Therefore, in 2015, a completely new model of regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, namely the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) began to take shape. Its main initiators were the Polish president, Andrzej Duda and the president of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. President Duda did not hide that the issue of deepening the ties between countries of the so-called Three Seas region is one of the key priorities of his presidency (which began in August 2015). The new project included 12 European Union Member States from Central and Eastern Europe, located between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas. In addition to Poland and Croatia, the project also included Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia (the Baltic States), the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary (which together with Poland form the Visegrad Group), as well as Austria, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia. The idea behind a new project was founded on a simple observation that the development of strong infrastructural and economic ties between Central and Eastern European states and Western Europe did not go hand in hand with the intra-regional integration which require additional attention.

Already on 29 September 2015, on the side-lines of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, representatives of twelve Central and Eastern European countries organised the first exploratory meeting of the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Initiative. The meeting was held under the initiative of Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The other heads of state attending the meeting were Polish president Andrzej Duda, Romanian president Klaus Iohannis and Bulgarian president Rosen Plevneliev. Other countries, such as the Baltic States, Hungary and Slovakia were represented by the ministers of foreign affairs, while Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Austria were represented by lower ranking officials. Additionally, representatives of the Atlantic Council think tank were also present at the meeting.
Less than a year later, on August 25 and 26, 2016, the first forum of the 3SI countries took place in the Croatian city of Dubrovnik. The event was held under the slogan “Strengthening Europe: Connecting North and South”. The Forum was topped by the joint declaration signed by all twelve participating states, which defined the framework of the new venture and refined its shape. This document referred to the 3SI as “an informal platform for securing political and economic development in Central and Eastern Europe”. It was agreed that the initiative aims to deepen sectorial cooperation and thus strengthen the cohesion of the Eastern part of the EU.

Forum participants have acknowledged the importance of the development of a network of both transport and energy infrastructure links between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. From the perspective of the countries involved in the project, the development of infrastructural connections in Central and Eastern Europe is perceived as an instrument which allows them to avoid unequal development of individual countries of the region. Participants of the forum pointed among others to the Carpathian region, which faces particular difficulties when it comes to transportation infrastructure. It was agreed that projects such as Via Carpatia, the North-South route from the Baltic States, through Eastern Poland to Greece addresses such problems effectively and constitutes part of the 3SI. At the same time, it became clear that the initiative should not only increase the investment attractiveness and competitiveness of the Three Seas within the EU, but to also foster trade and economic cooperation of the region with global partners. Such approach was openly stated by President Andrzej Duda during the forum.1

The summit participants confirmed very firmly that the 3SI is about generating regional synergy and not creating blocks within the EU or targeting any other EU country. In the aforementioned declaration, the Three Seas states directly emphasized that thanks to the expansion of the existing cooperation in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors, Central and Eastern Europe will become more secure, safe and competitive, thus contributing to making the European Union more resilient as a whole.

The interest in cooperation with the 3SI countries was expressed by the representative of China present at the forum, Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Haixing, who talked about the interconnectedness of the initiative with the New Silk Road. Presence to the forum of Minister Haixing, as well as representatives of two other important global economic and political actors - US (represented by former US National Security Advisor, General James L. Jones, Jr.) and Turkey (represented by Deputy Foreign Minister, Ambassador Ahmet Yildiz), gave the meeting in Dubrovnik supra-regional and even global character.

The fact that 3SI is an instrument for deepening the European integration process, and not an alternative to the EU has been emphasized for many times both at the summit in Dubrovnik and during the other events which were gathering political representatives of the Central and Eastern European region. Already in November 2016, President Andrzej Duda, speaking to the Council of Europe, said: „We actively work for the unity of the European community and to increase peoples’ confidence in this great project. (...) Through cooperation in those regional formats (the Visegrad format and a broader initiative of Three Seas – ed. note), we want to consolidate and deepen the European Community”. Later, during the Globsec forum, held in May 2017 in Bratislava, President Duda, once again defining the 3SI, said that through it “(…) we want to be not just a beneficiary, but first of all a co-author of European unity. Unity expressed in a dense network of roads, railways, air connections and energy links. The success of the Three Seas Initiative will ensure the positive functioning of the European market and is to raise our region’s credibility not only in the eyes of our European partners, but also globally.”

It is worth noting here that in the first period of crystallization of the 3SI, the project was frequently (and inappropriately, in essence) compared to the idea of “Intermarium”. Meanwhile, although “Intermarium” and the 3SI appear to cover a similar (but...
definitely not identical) geographical area, they diametrically and on many levels differ from each other. While the “Intermarium” was to a large extent a geopolitical concept designed to build a collective security system protecting the states potentially belonging to it from the two neighbouring powers (Soviet Russia and Germany), the modern 3SI is an economic project, the key objectives of which are the infrastructure development of the region and the strengthening of economic relations. Secondly, in the interwar period, the countries of the region were strongly divided and deprived of a common institutional umbrella, while today all states participating in the 3SI are part of one large political and economic organization - the European Union.

According to the arrangements made at the forum in Dubrovnik, another summit of representatives of the Three Seas region was planned in July 2017 in Poland. Eventually, the event was combined with the planned bilateral visit (from the protocol point of view) of president Donald Trump to Warsaw. This step allowed raising the visibility of the whole event.

Ten out of twelve 3SI countries were represented in Warsaw at the highest possible level (by presidents). The exceptions were the Czech Republic (represented by the chairman of the lower house of the parliament - formally the second person in the country) and Austria, represented by the ambassador of this country in Warsaw. President Trump himself was a guest of honour to the Summit and took part in the section dedicated to the transatlantic link. He also gave a very important speech in which he explicitly referred to the 3SI. He declared that he wanted to develop commercial and economic cooperation between the USA and the region. In particular, he underlined the energy and energy security dimension of cooperation between the US and the Three Seas region, declaring that his country is committed to securing 3SI countries access to alternate sources of energy, so that they are “never again held hostage to a single supplier of energy”. The message was simple: 3SI cooperation, with US help, will finally neutralise the energy threat hanging over the Central and Eastern Europe due to its dependence on Russian gas.

Similarly to the forum in Dubrovnik, the summit in Warsaw was crowned with the signing of a joint declaration (more extensive than the previous one) of the countries taking part in the

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initiative. This document once again underlined the fact that the initiative is part of the process of European integration and is not an alternative to it. This thought was included among the three key priorities of the 3SI outlined in the declaration:

1. Enhanced transportation connections of the region to develop and further integrate into the trans-European transport (TEN-T) network,
2. Implementation of the Union’s Energy policy objectives,
3. Promote business character of joint economic projects, full synergy with the EU policies.

The signatories also defined the key principles on which the 3SI is based, including most importantly: membership of the EU, long-term nature of joint plans and openness to business circles. At the same time, one of the tangible results of the Warsaw Summit was the decision to establish the 3 Seas Business Forum which aims – according to the declaration – to bring together economic entities interested in economic cooperation aimed at enhancing economic bonds within the region.

The 3SI summit was accompanied by a side-event - Global Forum - organized on July 6-7 by the Atlantic Council and the Polish Institute of International Affairs. One of the goals of this Forum was to help translate the Three Seas leaders’ agenda into commercially viable pathways as well as an exclusive international briefing of Poland’s strategic defence review.

The July Forum confirmed that the 3SI is primarily a flexible forum for cooperation between heads of state, designed to offer political support to foster a more effective cooperation of governments, business entities and non-governmental organizations interested in boosting regional bonds, while recognizing that achieving concrete results within this Initiative requires an active involvement of the respective governments and working contacts among respective Presidential Administrations. This is how the 3SI was defined in the Warsaw Forum declaration. It was also described in the similar way by Croatian President, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, who called the Three Seas Initiative an informal mechanism for cooperation among presidents "to exchange views and launch projects that can involve civil society and business”.

The Warsaw Summit agreed that the 3rd summit would be held in 2018, in Romania. It will take place in Bucharest, on 17 - 18 September.

The Warsaw summit of the 3SI countries entitled ‘Connectivity, Commerciality, Complementarity’ proved to be a huge success and gave the young initiative the necessary visibility (thanks in large part to the presence of Donald Trump and a significant number of high-ranking representatives of the region’s states) and political impetus. It has also clearly shown that the goals set by the countries of the region (especially the development of energy infrastructure and the development of trade) fit into the wider policy of the USA.

Perspectives of 3SI - cooperation with EU partners and external actors

Germany

Besides the EU central institutions – which have maintained a vague and reserved position towards the Three Seas Initiative so far – its ‘core’ member-states have individually approached the Initiative with caution or confusion. Berlin has long been engaging most of the 3SI region, allowing it to be the top commercial partner of numerous states in the area, as well as a prime investor across Central and Southeastern Europe. And that is why Germany is likely to look at the initiative with certain concern.

However, its fears – if any - are misplaced. There is no structural challenge to the EU, nor any attempt to axiologically divide the Union. Rather, the 3SI states seek to make efficient use of the instruments and mechanisms offered by European institutions, so as to improve their economic and infrastructural position. And such development could well serve Germany, the dominant exporter within Europe. Better transport links towards countries with a higher growth rate would bring higher profits for German producers and traders, while – simultaneously – allowing a swifter access to non-EU markets beyond the 3SI borders.

The Danube corridor (with Germany controlling one of its most important parts, the connection with the Rhine and the North Sea) can also receive a developmental impetus, as the downstream 3SI countries would be more inclined to invest in transforming it into a veritable transport artery. In this context, Berlin would have a direct fluvial – and thus cheaper – connection to Central and Southeastern Europe, as well as to the Black Sea. Better highways and railway lines would be supplemented by a river route crossing the continent and uniting two of its seas, with Germany in a strategic position to fully benefit from it.

On the other hand, given the distinct energy-related approaches existing between Berlin and most of the 3SI members - due to the emergence of Germany as dominant hub for Russian gas and especially the geopolitical impact of Russia’s dominant position on the European energy market - the dilemma does not seem to be unsurmountable. In practical terms LNG terminals in the Baltic and the Adriatic or additional interconnectors and pipelines through Turkey and the Balkans do not necessarily represent a threat to Nord Stream's functionality, but complement the existing infrastructure so as to ensure a higher level of energy security. Such connections actually work both ways: securing Eastern Europe's energy supply, while also maintaining Germany's possibility to acquire gas directly from Russia through the Nord Stream. The development of the N-S gas corridor (coupled with BRUA as well), ensures that there is no 'single' gas hub or delivery line through Europe, but multiple energy itineraries that allow the EU as a bloc not to be dependent on only one supplier. In reality, the diversification of transport routes and import origins would strengthen Germany's position as well, especially in relation to its (main) Russian supplier. Berlin would gain additional leverage in negotiations – political and economic – as it would become less likely to be shown how dependent its industry is on a sole provider of energy resources. Gazprom would no longer be the only (relevant) game actor in town.

The basic problem lies in the strategic dimension of energy security and the vital necessity for Central Eastern European countries to extract themselves from the energy trap poised by the major dependency on Russian supplies and its geopolitical consequences.

Recent statements from Berlin that a project such as Nord Stream 2 is not possible without clarity on how Ukrainian transit will proceed and that Nord Stream 2 is not only about an economic project but there also political factors to be considered, indicate that Germany is aware of existing concerns and shares the strategic perceptions reflecting the overall interests of the Euro-Atlantic Community.

Germany is one of the acknowledged major, or in some cases, the major trade European partner of most of the 3SI participating countries and an essential partner within the European and Euro-Atlantic community. It is only natural to put to good account the potential of the 3SI for further developing the economic links with Germany. It is also natural, at the same
time, to take into account and acknowledge the geopolitical concerns resulting from the specific historical and current circumstances specific to the 3SI participants also reflecting the new realities of the European Union or NATO.

**France**

Across the Rhine, however, the situation is slightly different. Paris does not regard the Three Seas Initiative with the same intensity. It does not share Germany’s fears of ‘division,’ nor does it feel any immediate strategic pressure. Despite a targeted presence in the banking, retail sales and car-building sectors, France’s economic footprint in the 3SI region is more limited. And it does not directly depend on Russian gas for fueling up its industry. That is why it avoided taking a direct stance on the initiative, as it did not look upon it as a challenge to the Union’s coherence. But only as a flexible (and moldable) cooperation format that could either enhance or block the EU’s quest for consolidating its peripheries and adjacent neighborhood.

Nonetheless, France cherishes it relation with Germany within the European Union and (largely) accommodates its strategic imperatives, in order to enhance the close collaboration of the ‘inner core’. Such a partnership runs very deep, meaning that Paris would not cross Berlin’s redlines with regard to the 3SI (and its own energy-related designs under the Baltic). It would not imperil the stability of their close strategic relation for supporting a cooperation format which offers no direct benefit for France. However, France can be a ‘stabilizing’ factor within the Union’s inner core, curtailing the over-cautious views of Berlin upon the 3SI.

As an active part in the Berlin process (regarding Balkan enlargement) and in the Ukraine peace talks (Format Normandie), France has a clear stake in the regions contiguous to the 3SI countries. Even though it sees no direct threat or gain from those areas, its diplomatic prestige is on the line. As EU’s soon to remain only permanent member of the UN Security Council, France is an indispensable foreign policy actor in the Eastern Neighborhood and in the Balkans. And it would much benefit from relying on 3SI countries that are active in the region and are direct stakeholders on the outcomes of both processes. In this sense, France and 3SI could mutually support each other in such diplomatic endeavors, albeit at different levels. France’s support of the format would bring along an increased credibility, while also giving Paris the opportunity to be seen as a multi-vector player which is not absent from any point of inflection on the continent. Moreover, Germany’s concerns would be – perhaps – toned down if its major ‘core’ partner would support the Three Seas Initiative, being able to follow it along the same path into a cooperation framework that would benefit the entire Union and not just its eastern flank.

**USA**

Among all external partners, the USA presents the most favourable attitude towards the entire initiative of cooperation between the countries of Three Seas region. This is confirmed – among other things - by regular positive statements about the 3SI coming from high-ranking American politicians. The official speech of President Donald Trump in July 2017 in Warsaw, during which he gave the project full and unambiguous support, serves as one of many, yet very vivid, examples. “The Three Seas Initiative will transform and rebuild the entire region and ensure that your infrastructure, like your commitment to freedom and rule of law, binds you to all of Europe and, indeed, to the West.”

– said president Trump at the event. This favourable stance was confirmed recently also by the former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson during his visit to Warsaw, which took place on January 26 this year.

The 3SI fits perfectly into the long-term post-cold war strategy pursued by the US in Europe. Its goal is to build a Europe that is economically connected to the USA, but also strong and independent from external pressure (be it political, military or economic - especially in the field of energy). What’s more, the policy of supporting European independence is directly connected to the strategy announced by Trump for the USA.

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regarding the increase of American LNG exports to the external markets.\(^8\) The development of gas infrastructure in the Central and Southern Europe region, which is one of the key objectives of the 3SI, is therefore fully complementary to the long-term US policy. What’s important, from the US perspective, cooperation with 3SI region in the energy sector is already very well developed. In 2017 first American LNG carrier reached the terminal in Šwinoujście. In the same year first mid-term contract for the supply of liquefied gas to Poland from the USA was signed. Further expansion of the network of energy connections within the 3SI area (particularly the creation of the North-South Corridor) from the point of view of the US not only increases the number of potential recipients of US gas (and thus widens the market) but also multiplies the number of access points (LNG terminals), which facilitates the supply of gas to Central and Eastern European consumers and reduce its transport costs.

The interest of the US in energy investments under the 3SI is clearly visible. The last example of this is the political and technical support provided by the USA for the gas terminal project on the Croatian island of Krk. In January 2018, during the visit of the Croatian Minister of the Interior in Washington (just a few days before the government in Zagreb passed the law on the LNG terminal) the US Undersecretary of State, Aaron Wess Mitchell said the Krk LNG energy project “enjoys full support” from the US and is seen as one of the “strategic projects” of the government under President Donald Trump.\(^9\)

Washington is aware that a multi-dimensional 3SI is also an opportunity for US companies outside the energy sector. It improves the condition of companies which are already operating in the region and gives the US business a chance for new lucrative contracts related to investments implemented under the 3SI.

**China**

A few years before the Three Seas Initiative officially emerged, China had already established its regional cooperation format. In 2012, it coagulated a group of 11 EU member-states and 5 Balkan states on the (long) waiting list to join the Union,\(^10\) deploying a loosely institutionalized mechanism. With a Permanent Secretariat (at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and an initial agenda which proposed the establishment of a special infrastructural credit line, the creation of an investment fund, currency swaps, cultural cooperation, academic exchanges, tourism and an increased trading activity,\(^11\) the 16+1 format was designed to increase the level of China’s economic activities in CEE countries and consolidate its strategic position in this part of the European Union.

Within the functional confines of this framework, Premier Li Keqiang addressed the 16 partner countries at the 2015 Suzhou Summit, pleading for a more enhanced cooperation on the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea axis.

It was not a surprise when – at the 2016 Dubrovnik forum – China’s high-ranking diplomat responsible for CEE relations, welcomed the advent of the Three Seas Initiative. He underlined that the new format is ‘highly compatible in concepts’ with Beijing’s own 16+1, while appearing ‘quite consistent in content and identical in the pursuit of goals’\(^12\).

Therefore, at a conceptual – and rhetorical – level the two regional cooperation formats appear to be aligned. They both are economic in nature – with an emphasis on infrastructural development and interconnectivity – while sharing almost the same geographical domain (see the figure below). In this latter sense, the Three Seas Initiative has a membership formed of EU countries. Comparatively, the China-CEE cooperation extends the boundaries of the format to also include five Balkan countries which are not part of the Union, but failing to take Austria within its ranks.

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By assessing all these factors and looking at the wider geo-economic context, it is likely that China will continue its own separate quest in the region, working in parallel to the Three Seas Initiative, as it geographically (although not conceptually) spans along a crucial part of its landmark Belt-and-Road. Nonetheless, the two projects share no essential features and no common drivers, as the 16+1 largely remains an asymmetric venue for (divergent) bilateral deals with China, while 3SI is a strongly multilateral initiative that aims at enhancing European integration and the transatlantic link and its set of embedded strategic purposes.

Therefore, the basic strategic goals of the 3SI participants on one side and of China on the other are generated by their own specific perceptions of national or global interests.

Hence, considering relations with China also from the 3SI perspective, would be useful both for individual member states, and the Union as a whole, to reduce the concerns of Brussels that singular states might be tempted into bilateral deals which pay little attention to EU rules.

**Turkey**

Turkey is a significant regional actor both in the Black Sea and in the Balkans (up to the Adriatic shoreline). In this sense, it controls the Black Sea straits, fact which makes it a strategic pivot for the European Union and for China’s Belt-and-Road vision. Without the cooperation of Turkey, there is no outflow of goods from the Black Sea basin, nor any land-crossing from Asia to Europe that would circumvent Russia. In addition, its political and commercial influence extends well into the Union, being for some-member states among their largest extra-EU commercial partners.

In this context, the tacit unravelling of the ‘strategic depth’ doctrine – championed by Ahmet Davutoğlu – presents both opportunities and pitfalls for the Three Seas Initiative’s regional designs. However, the uncertainty that accompanies the current Turkish international position is a factor that must be taken into account, before laying down plans for cooperation. It might be regarded as a transition period, a tactical readjustment of short-term objectives, which offers the 3SI members a possibility to engage the Turkish neighbor in a pragmatic fashion. Ankara’s temporary unclear stance for the Balkans, the Black Sea or its stalemate with the European Union allows its 3SI neighbors to deploy a more constructive approach, based on shared interests and more modest goals.

As a point of common development, energy ranks the highest by integrating Turkey in the 3SI project for supply diversification and attaining a (relative) autonomy from Russia’s gas quasi-monopoly. The existing Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline shall be continued up to the EU’s borders through TANAP (due for inauguration in 2018), bringing Caspian gas to Greece and Bulgaria. From that point on, regional inter-connectors shall take the Azerbaijani gas where it is needed, with the envisioned TAP further crossing the Balkans and the Adriatic. Another piece of the 3SI energy puzzle is the BRUA pipeline which will contribute in connecting the Turkish gas network with the Austrian hub.

In this sense, the 3SI need for resources would not allow a definitive circumvention of Russian hydrocarbons, but Turkey’s alternative routes would grant a higher leverage in negotiating prices and avoiding energetic blackmail. Cumulating the Anatolian transit with the TAP, BRUA and the LNG hubs in Poland and Croatia, combined with the exploitation of new off-shore gas reserves in the Black Sea, 3SI would attain an enhanced level of energy security, being able to fend off the risks associated with dependence on a single source. Thus, an in-depth energy cooperation between Turkey and the 3SI would strongly benefit the European Union as a whole – and not only its borderland region – aiding it to relieve the Russian pressure in its strategic ‘soft spots’ and to better negotiate bloc-wide deals.

Moreover, Turkey’s position at the end of one of the major

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14 In this regard, Professor Tank Oğuzlu (Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences and the Director of SEPAM at Antalya International University) pertinently argued that 3SI would be regarded by “Turkish policy-makers from a positive perspective in that this might help lessen Russia’s dominant position in the European energy market. Diversification of energy resources, not solely relying on Russia, is also a Turkish goal. [...] Provided that 3SI is combined with the projects that recognize Turkey as a key player in European energy market, Turkey might offer further support” – mini-interview with Prof. Tank Oğuzlu (21.02.2018), conducted by Horia Ciurtin.
European infrastructural corridors (the Orient/East-Med) will strongly benefit if the 3SI countries manage to coordinate themselves in developing the ports, rails and roads included within the TEN-T financeable projects. In this sense, Turkey would have direct land access (from Edirne) into an upgraded and fast transport network leading directly to the Western markets, as well as deep into the Balkans. In addition, the development of the Burgas and Constanta ports would also serve interconnectivity with large Turkish ports on the Black Sea, while bringing a more intense traffic through the straits.

On a broader perspective, the 3SI can be an additional bridge within the Euro-Atlantic community in promoting the durable relations with Turkey.

Present and Future Perspectives: Consolidating the Region, Strengthening the European and Euro-Atlantic Community

The Three Seas Initiative seeks to inter-connect the Union’s Central and Eastern members among themselves and to raise their overall level of economic development. North-South transport and energy corridors are also promoted as a manner to increase the commercial exchanges within the region, as well as mutual FDI. Attaining a sustainable economic consolidation in the 3SI area would – thus – rather act in supporting veritable convergence throughout the wider EU membership. And in increasing the EU’s general leverage in international affairs.

A more prosperous and better inter-connected (in terms of energy infrastructure) 3SI region would relieve the Union from a constant challenge within its ‘new’ membership, making it less concerned about the influence of external actors that seek to increase economic leverage exactly in such vulnerable spots. Moreover, a cohesive and developed 3SI space would enhance the EU appeal world-wide, showing how EU membership actually allows its new members to set their own pace of development and – gradually – catch up with the ‘old’ states in Western Europe. In essence, it would be a win-win situation both for the central EU institutions (and old member-states) and for the 3SI region.

And, for reaching these ambitious – but feasible – long-term geo-economic goals, the Three Seas Initiative is designed to work along three main areas: energy, transport infrastructure, digitalization. Therefore, it is important to also show on a short- and medium-term basis what the concrete perspectives of the project actually are. And, as the third 3SI summit in Bucharest (2018) is approaching, a set of limited – but fundamental – large-scale projects need to be reiterated.

Energy. In this sector, the 3SI participants are involved in two different distinct macro-projects: (a) connecting the Świnoujście LNG terminal in the Baltic Sea with the one under construction in the Adriatic island of Krk; (b) building the BRUA gas pipeline. Both can qualify as very important initiatives of the cooperation framework and aim to ensure a greater diversification of energy inputs not only for the 3SI region itself, but also for the entire European Union.

Therefore, the first project would allow LNG to be shipped from the United States, Norway, Algeria or Qatar – to name just a few major exporters – and enter the European energy market through a new route, spanning North-South across the continent. In addition, the BRUA inter-connector would permit Caspian gas to reach Europe via Turkey (given that the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline
is due for inauguration this year), guaranteeing an alternative to Russia’s quasi-monopoly on the (Eastern and Central) European energy market. Another planned source is the gas from the Black Sea. Its end-route point is none other than the Austrian hub which is able to ensure the re-distribution of natural gas throughout the entire continent. East and West. North and South. To ‘new’ and ‘old’ members alike.

**Transport infrastructure.** On the other hand, a very important sector for 3SI cooperation is the development of transport infrastructure. While most current EU-funded projects look for establishing East-West routes, the proposed Via Carpatia is meant to connect the Baltic city of Klaipeda (in Lithuania) with the Aegean city of Thessaloniki, passing through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Similarly, the so-called Baltica railway initiative would likely bind Helsinki, the Baltic capitals, Warsaw and – finally – Berlin. On the other side, it is to be mentioned that establishing land connections and eliminating existing bottlenecks in the Central European transport networks should be a priority.

This infrastructure-impoverished region would greatly benefit from an updated transport corridor, allowing goods, people and capital to move more easily within the Eastern part of the Union, but also reach contiguous markets in Western Europe, Russia, Ukraine or the Western Balkans. Therefore, such a connectivity project would likely be a key asset for the EU itself who can finance segments of the two corridors within the bounds of its existing TEN-T programme. In this manner, Finland would also be relieved from relative infrastructural isolation, while Turkish products would find a more convenient path to the North-Eastern part of the continent.

**Digitalization.** Adding to the ‘classical’ sectors of inter-state cooperation, i.e. energy and transport, the 3SI format includes a consistent initiative in jointly developing the digital infrastructure of the region. For certain time already this topic is subject to analysis by experts and think-tanks, such as Cracow based, Kosciuszko Institute. Evocatively called ‘3 Seas Digital Highway’, such a perspective envisions the building-up of fiber optic links along the North-South axis, allowing a better data connectivity at the intra-regional level. In addition, projects need to be laid down for a closer cooperation in the 5G sector, as well as in a common harnessing of cloud-computing and novel blockchain technologies, so as to ensure that the 3SI area is at the forefront of digital innovation.

Such a strong presence in the ICT domain would strongly benefit the European Union as a global driver in technological development, as well as NATO in securing its members against hybrid-warfare cyber techniques. Moreover, given the local level of expertise and the increasing concentration of ICT hubs across the 3SI area, ensuring a better inter-connectivity among them (and the unimpeded, free flow of data) at a regional level – coordinating them to form larger ‘clusters’ – would greatly compensate the limited available capital for research and development (as compared to Western member-states).

**Open for cooperation.** Among the key features of the 3SI is the organization of a Business Forum that facilitates mutual knowledge of regional and local private actors. In this regard, it is crucial to maintain the Business Forum open to cooperation with the US, with all EU countries – and Brussels-based bureaucracy (such as those dealing with competition issues, energy, transport, digital, regional policy) – with Western Balkans, Eastern Neighborhood and Turkey, thus enhancing the economic attractiveness of the 3SI region.

Building upon the business-oriented fundamentals of the larger 3SI vision, the Business Forum should eventually develop into a landmark discussion (and deal-making) venue that fosters free trade, easy-flowing FDI, enhanced cooperation opportunities for like-minded commercial partners, discuss infrastructure projects in energy, transport, digital, but also devote attention to high potential drivers of growth and innovation, such as SMEs, young entrepreneurship, start-ups and business incubators in the region.

And, thus, consolidating the 3SI region means strengthening the Euro-Atlantic community.
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