



New
Direction

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THE 3SEAS INITIATIVE AND ITS ADDED VALUE FOR THE EU



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1	Who Rules Central Europe	5
2	Three Seas, an Opportunity for Central Europe	19
3	The most Important Public Debate about Three Seas Initiative	31

WHO RULES CENTRAL EUROPE

Heartland

At the turn of the 20th century, one of the founders of modern geopolitics was the British geographer Halford John Mackinder. In his famous work *The Geographic Pivot of the History*, published in 1904 by the Royal Geographical Society, he presented his most famous theory of the 'Heartland' (meaning the heart of Eurasia). To this day, his work forms the basis of international relations, and in the United States it has even become the foundation of the doctrine of containment of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The English scholar developed his ideas in subsequent books, including *Democratic Ideals and Reality* in 1919, in which he wrote the oft-quoted words: 'Who rules East

Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands World'.¹

The aforementioned work was not theoretical in nature. It was written with the Versailles Peace Conference in mind, which was to determine the order in Europe after the end of the First World War. The author wanted to convince the statesmen sitting at Versailles of the crucial importance of Eastern Europe for world rulership. What did Mackinder mean by 'Eastern Europe'? Well, he rather had in mind what we today call Central Europe, the lands situated between Russia and Germany.

Versailles settlement

From the end of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century, no independent states existed between Russia and Prussia, later Germany. If wars did break out between the two countries, they were fought in their border areas. The greatest of such conflicts was the Great War of 1914-1918, which claimed 14 million lives. After it ended, the negotiators at Versailles set themselves the goal of establishing an international order in Europe that would eliminate the threat of a similar hecatomb in the future. According to

Mackinder, in order to avoid another war and preserve peace, a belt of buffer states had to be created to separate Germany and Russia. This programme corresponded perfectly with the independence aspirations of the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Lithuanians, Latvians or Estonians. In spite of appearances, the biggest losers of such a solution were not Russia or Germany, but Austria-Hungary, which ceased to exist as a single state and, separately, Austria and Hungary were reduced to the level of rump states.

Drang nach Osten

The existence of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic states, proved, however, to be an ineffective bastion to stop the outbreak of another world war. The road to it was opened when two hostile powers – the Third Reich and the Soviet Union – unexpectedly concluded an agreement between themselves in August 1939, at the expense of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Hitler and Stalin divided up spheres of influence in the region. However, the alliance of the two dictators did not last long: on 22 June 1941, Wehrmacht troops attacked the USSR.

Yugoslavia, made the Slovaks and Croats vassal, and made Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria dependent on them. Only after gaining control of these territories could they set out to conquer Eurasia.

The National Socialist government in Germany decided not to build a classical empire, but a new type of superpower, based on race theory and genocide. This led to the mass extermination of civilians in the conquered lands, especially Jews and Slavs. In doing so, the Nazis rejected a different programme of taking control of Central Europe, whose best exponent was the German politician Friedrich Naumann, author of the famous work *Mitteuropa*.

Before the Germans began their following 'Drang nach Osten', Germany had subjugated practically the whole Central Europe. They annexed Austria, eradicated Poland, Czechoslovakia and

¹ Kumar Chowdhury Suban, Hel Kafi Abdullah, "The Paper I Heartland Theory of Mackinder & its Relevancy in Central Asia Geopolitics", IndraStra Global. Retrieved 27 June 2016.

Mitteleuropa

Naumann published his book in 1915, after the successful offensive of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies on the Eastern Front. Through a series of victorious battles, the armies of the Central Powers reached Lithuania, Polesia and Volhynia. They occupied, among others, Kaunas, Vilnius, Brest and Luck. The front stabilised on a line running from Riga in the north to Chernivtsi in the south. Never before had the German administration reached so far east. In this situation, the local political elites faced the challenge of developing a new strategic concept towards Central Europe, i.e. the countries lying between Germany and Russia.

Little Entente

The Treaty of Versailles established a new order on the Old Continent. With it came further ideas to create international blocs in Central Europe. Some of these alliances, however, fostered division in the region rather than its integration. One such alliance was the Little Entente, an agreement created by Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. It was aimed at Hungary, which felt wronged by the terms of the Peace Dictate of Trianon of the 4th of June 1920. At that time, the Magyars lost 71 % of their country's territory, 2/3 of

Intermarium

After the First World War, another idea for Central European integration emerged, called Intermarium. It was born in the circle of the Polish Marshal Józef Piłsudski, who considered Russia to be the greatest threat to the nations of this part of the continent. He therefore sought to build an alliance of states lying between Russia and Germany. The core of such a bloc would be Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and Ukraine, i.e. the countries most exposed to the danger from the

Promethean programme

The concept of the Intermarium was complemented by the idea of Prometheism developed in Józef Piłsudski's circle. It envisaged the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies in the Soviet Union by supporting independence movements among the nations that had had the communist system forcibly imposed upon them after World War One. The aim was to liberate Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Crimea, Turkestan, the North Caucasus and other regions of the empire from Moscow's rule. This must have meant breaking up the Soviet Union from within. In the interwar period, the Promethean

Neumann then put forward the idea of establishing German political, economic and cultural hegemony in the area stretching between the three seas: Baltic, Black and Adriatic. He envisioned the possible existence of separate national states there, such as the Balkan ones, but they should be subordinate to Berlin. The 'Mitteleuropa' project envisaged above all German economic domination, making Central Europe a German sphere of influence. A precursor to such a policy was the establishment of the Central European Economic Association already in 1904. It was founded in Breslau at Professor Julius Wolf's instigation, who put forward the idea of economic integration of the region under Berlin's tutelage. Germany's defeat in the First World War prevented the above plans from ever being realized.

their population and access to the sea. More than 3.5 million Hungarians found themselves outside the country, becoming citizens of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. As the authorities in Budapest sought to change the borders and regain the lost lands, the governments in Prague, Bucharest and Belgrade formed a joint alliance against Hungarian revisionism. However, the Little Entente disintegrated in 1938-1939 with the collapse of Czechoslovakia and the Versailles system.

East. Ultimately, however, the alliance should be expanded to include Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia, and possibly Finland and Georgia. Such an agreement of the countries lying between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas would allow the region to avoid being dominated by Moscow or Berlin. However, the project was never realised in the inter-war period due to too great a divergence of interests between the various states.

movement developed mainly in the émigré communities of Ukrainians, Georgians or Azerbaijanis, who benefited from the support of anti-communist forces. The main centres of this movement were Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Paris, Helsinki, Istanbul, Tehran and Harbin. Although the Promethean movement disintegrated even before the Second World War, it won a posthumous victory because its most important postulates were realised in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, and 15 independent states were founded on its ruins.

Spheres of influence

The idea of the Intermarium remained only on paper. Instead, the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939 were put into practice. Pursuant to a secret protocol attached to this agreement, the Third Reich and the Soviet Union shared spheres of influence in Central Europe. As a result, all the countries lying between the three seas (the Baltic, the Black and the Adriatic) came under the domination of Berlin or Moscow. Either they lost their

Generalplan Ost

Adolf Hitler sought to dominate the whole of Central Europe, but in a different way to that proposed by Friedrich Neumann. He wanted to create a Greater Reich, in which there would be no place for nationalities he considered racially inferior. The result was the mass genocide carried out against the Jewish population. It was part of a larger project developed in 1941 and called the Master Plan for the East (Generalplan Ost). In addition to the murder of 11 million Jews, it further envisaged the destruction of 51

Iron Curtain

The end of the war and the defeat of the Third Reich did not mean freedom for Central Europe. The entire region, against its will, found itself in Moscow's sphere of influence. This was determined by the attitude of the Great Powers, especially US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who gave in to Stalin's demands at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The Soviet Union thus became the only state to start the Second World War with aggression and to end up consolidating and extending the conquests it had made. In this way, the USSR not only legitimised the territorial acquisitions it had gained through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, but also took control of the rest of Central Europe. In the capitals occupied by the Red Army, collaborationist governments were established,

Council for Mutual Economic Assistance

The Cold War that followed the Second World War divided the Old Continent into two parts: the capitalist West and the communist East. For 45 years, the authorities in the Kremlin decided what the order in Central Europe should look like. They also enforced the way the region was organised. When, in 1947, the United States announced an economic aid programme for Europe to rebuild it after the devastation of war (the Marshall Plan), the countries in the Soviet sphere of influence, under pressure from Stalin, rejected the project. Moscow presented its own Molotov Plan as a

independence completely, incorporated into one of the two totalitarian empires, or they kept their statehood, but as puppet creations or satellite countries. The inhabitants of the lands directly incorporated into both totalitarian dictatorships were in the worst situation. In these territories, the Soviets and Germans implemented genocidal policies, exterminating especially the leadership layer and elites of the conquered nations.

million Slavs and Baltics, including 80-85 percent of Poles and Lithuanians, 75 percent of Belarusians, 65 percent of Ukrainians, 50 percent of Czechs and Moravians, Estonians and Latvians. A mass colonisation of 10 million German settlers was to be carried out on the lands inhabited by these peoples. The few million Poles left alive were to provide them with cheap labour. The aforementioned plan was not carried out, but left behind countless human casualties and enormous destruction.

which forcibly introduced the communist system. Within the Soviet sphere of influence fell the following countries: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the eastern part of Germany (since 1949 as the German Democratic Republic). Communism was also installed in Yugoslavia and Albania, but over time both countries emancipated themselves from under Soviet influence, building a totalitarian regime on their own terms. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill summarised in his famous speech delivered on 5 March 1946 at the American Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri: 'From Stettin in the Baltic, to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent'.



Warsaw Pact

Against this background, the Eastern Bloc's political-military cooperation within the Warsaw Pact proved much more efficient. This was a geopolitical-military pact that was established in 1955 as a response to the establishment of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) a year earlier. The purpose of creating the organisation was to unify the Soviet Union's foreign and military policy with the satellite countries of

Central Europe. The Kremlin's strategic projects even included plans for an attack by Warsaw Pact armies on the western part of the continent. In practice, however, the Eastern Bloc armies were used together only once – in August 1968. They were not directed against the capitalist West, but against one of their members, instead. This led to the suppression of the so-called Prague Spring.

Doctrine of limited sovereignty

In 1968, the authorities of communist Czechoslovakia sought to build 'socialism with a human face', i.e. to carry out economic and social reforms that would make their country independent of the Soviet Union. Moscow perceived this as a threat of the Czechs and Slovaks withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact. The contemporary leader of the USSR, Leonid Brezhnev, therefore ordered an armed invasion of Czechoslovakia, in which the combined armies of the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and the GDR took part (the only Warsaw Pact country to refuse

to send troops was Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu).

The result of the aforementioned military interference was the promulgation of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, or the doctrine of 'limited sovereignty' of the Eastern Bloc countries. The communist leader claimed that the socialist community as a whole (and de facto the Soviet Union) had the right to intervene on the territory of any member state if it considered that there was a threat there to overthrow communism and restore the capitalist system.

Phenomenon of Solidarity

The nations of Central Europe, enslaved by the totalitarian system, tried several times to rebel against the communist order. However, their protests were bloodily suppressed, such as those of the East Germans (Berlin, 1953), Hungarians (Budapest, 1956) or Poles (Poznań, 1956 and Gdańsk, 1970). The most serious peaceful attempt to change the situation in the Eastern Bloc was the establishment of the Independent Self-governing Trade Union Solidarity in 1980 – the only organisation independent of the communists between the Elbe and Vladivostok, to which 10 million Poles soon subscribed.

union, democracy and nation. Firstly: it asserted the interests of working people; secondly: it challenged the totalitarian system; and thirdly: it opposed the enslavement of the homeland by a hostile empire.

During the First Convention of Solidarity, held in Gdańsk in September 1981, the delegates officially adopted a document known as the *Appeal to the Working People of Eastern Europe*. It was a message addressed to the workers of Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Romania, Hungary and the nations of the Soviet Union, supporting their struggle for trade union rights. It was an attempt to build solidarity among nations enslaved by totalitarianism. It was aptly received by the leaders of the Soviet Union – as a challenge to the communist system. Three months later, General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law in Poland. 'Solidarity' was outlawed and thousands of opposition activists were deprived of their freedom.

The left-wing French sociologist Alain Touraine, who came to Poland at the time to study the phenomenon of the Polish workers' strikes, called Solidarity the most beautiful thing that happened to humanity in the second half of the 20th century. He regarded it as the greatest freedom uprising that had emerged in the world after the Second World War. He called it a 'total social movement' because it combined three dimensions: trade

Autumn of Nations

'Solidarity' was one of the elements which accelerated the collapse of the post-Yalta order in Europe. The pontificate of John Paul II and the presidency of Ronald Reagan were also key factors in this process. The former revealed the ideological and spiritual emptiness of the communist system, the latter deepened its economic inefficiency. As a result, the second half of 1989 saw a whole series of events

that brought down regimes in Central Europe. Some were peaceful, such as in Czechoslovakia, where the playwright and dissident Václav Havel became president, while others were bloody, such as in Romania, where the government of Nicolae Ceaușescu was removed by force and the dictator himself was executed. This period went down in history as the Autumn of Nations.

The years 1989-1991 witnessed the complete collapse of the totalitarian system in Central Europe. Nations enslaved by communism chose freedom. The Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance were dissolved. The

Central European Initiative

After years of being vassalised by Moscow, the countries of Central Europe began to regain their subjectivity. They found themselves in a new situation that presented both opportunities and threats. It was then that projects for new partnership formats in the region began to emerge. The first institutionalised form of state sub-regional cooperation was the Central European Initiative, linking Central and Southern Europe. This geographical orientation was due to the fact that the originator of the project was the government in Rome. In this way, the Italians intended to fill the gap created by the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and to prevent a possible German hegemony in this part of the continent. They wanted to take on the role of Central Europe's advocate in international forums, facilitating the integration of post-communist countries into the West. Initially, the initiative was called Quadrangone, as it was founded in November 1989 by four countries: Italy, Austria, Yugoslavia and Hungary. In 1990, after the admission of Czechoslovakia, the group changed its name to Pentagonale and, after the accession of Poland in 1991, to Hexagonale. Over time, it brought together as many as 18 countries, including

Visegrad Group

The other initiative, the Visegrad Group, turned out to be much more momentous. At the beginning it consisted of three countries: Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which is why it was called the Visegrad Triangle (after the 'Velvet Divorce' and the division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, the initiative became the Visegrad Quadrilateral – V4). This was the first attempt of Central European countries to jointly articulate their own interests, undertaken on their own initiative, without an external protector.

The origins of this project go back to the period when the communist system was collapsing and the political transformation was taking place. In April 1990, the first Central European conference was held in Bratislava, attended by representatives of anti-communist circles from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. President Vaclav Havel intended to create a joint regional alliance together with Warsaw and Budapest. However, two factors prevented him from taking such a step: the communists were still in power in Hungary and General Wojciech Jaruzelski was the president in Poland. The Czech leader could not imagine forming an alliance of free Central European nations together with the recent communist dictator.

culmination of this process was the self-dissolution of the Soviet Union on the 8th of December 1991 and the creation of 15 independent states in its place.

former Soviet republics that had declared independence, such as Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova (although one of the founders, Austria, left the group in 2018).

However, Italy failed to achieve its objectives, as a major corruption scandal erupted on the Italian peninsula in 1992, linked to the launch of an investigation called 'clean hands'. The scandal caused the collapse of the entire political system that had existed in Italy for almost half a century. The 'pentapartito' (or five-party coalition) arrangement was swept away: the Christian Democrats disintegrated, the Socialists and Liberals dissolved, and the Republicans and Social Democrats disappeared. Italy, immersed in an internal crisis, was unable to act as Central Europe's patron and advocate in the process of integration with the West. Nevertheless, the Central European Initiative still exists today, remaining the oldest and most extensive forum for regional cooperation. Its activities mainly consist of political consultations, cross-border cooperation and the implementation of various economic and social tasks, but the actual role of this institution on the international stage remains minor.

The way to the alliance was paved by the victory of the Hungarian Democratic Forum in the April 1990 parliamentary elections. At this time, in Budapest, the first post-1945 government was formed without the participation of communists. József Antall Junior became prime minister. The second key election took place at the end of 1990 in Poland. Lech Wałęsa became president then, replacing General Jaruzelski. Havel felt that his hands were finally untied. His determination was strengthened by the events of the 13th of January 1991 in Vilnius, where 14 Lithuanian civilians were killed and more than 600 wounded due to the intervention of Soviet troops. It became clear that Moscow had not yet abandoned its imperial policy and that the changes in the 'people's democracies' were not irreversible.

In these circumstances, a meeting between József Antall, Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa took place on the 15th of February 1991 at Visegrad Castle in Hungary. The venue of the event was not chosen by accident. It was there, in 1335 and 1338 (or 1339), that two meetings took place between three kings: Poland's Casimir the Great, Bohemia's John of Luxembourg and Charles of Hungary. Their aim was to jointly agree on specific international conflicts in the region. By choosing Visegrad Castle as the venue for their joint meeting, Antall, Havel and Wałęsa wanted to make a reference to a time when



their countries enjoyed subjectivity in foreign policy and were able to cooperate together.

Within the walls of a medieval fortress, the three anti-communist leaders established a new initiative called the Visegrad Triangle. They decided that Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland would jointly support each other, consult and coordinate their actions on the international stage to ensure security in the region. The first step to achieve this was to break out of the Soviet sphere of influence. This officially took place five months later. In July 1991, Václav Havel hosted a conference in Prague at which the Warsaw Pact was dissolved.

A month later, the Janayev putsch took place in Moscow in an attempt to hinder democratic reforms in the Soviet Union and make a return to the communist system. The coup d'état of the representatives of the 'ancient regime' did not succeed, but it showed that the situation in the East could turn out in different ways. Havel repeated that Central Europe needed security guarantees, which only the North Atlantic Alliance could provide. The Czech leader believed that the offer to join NATO should, however, come jointly from several countries.

In this situation, Hável sent his close associates, Alexander Vondra and Michael Žantovský, to a secret meeting in the Tatra Mountains with the contemporary ministers in Lech Wałęsa's chancellery – the Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński brothers. It

was they who, according to Czech interlocutors, understood best in Poland that the strongest assurance of security for the countries of the region was entering NATO. During the meeting in the mountains, joint action was agreed upon.

At that time, the demand to join the North Atlantic Alliance was not very popular in Poland. Even within the 'Solidarity' elite, it was considered an irresponsible and even harmful idea. It was opposed by, among others, Bronisław Geremek and Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski, who said at a conference in London in January 1991 that nothing should be done that could create a sense of threat or suspicion on the part of the Soviet Union. There was a prevailing concept of seeking security guarantees outside the large political-military blocs, while maintaining an equal distance from the East and the West.

Contrary to this position, Lech Kaczyński, as minister in Lech Wałęsa's chancellery, was committed to building 'a kind of Central European Benelux', which could join NATO as a group of states. To this end, he visited Budapest and Prague, where he quickly reached agreement with the authorities there. This prepared the second summit of the Visegrad Group, which took place in Kraków on the 6th of October 1991. A declaration was then adopted, in which the three Central European states (Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia) jointly demanded security guarantees from the North Atlantic Alliance.

Integration with the West (NATO, EU)

The goal was achieved in 1999, when Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic became the first post-communist countries to join NATO (Slovakia joined in 2004). This paved the way for other countries in the region to join the pact. Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Slovenia also joined the North Atlantic Alliance in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020.

The Visegrad format thus worked well as a formula for achieving joint NATO membership. Later, the same pattern was repeated when entering the European Union. In 2004, the EU members became: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Slovenia, in 2007 Bulgaria and Romania, and in 2013 Croatia. Thus, after the fall of communism, Central Europe made the strategic decision that it wanted to be anchored in the European (EU) and transatlantic (NATO) communities, which were to guarantee its economic development, prosperity and security.

V4, V3+1, V2+2?

In the following years, the Visegrad Group experienced moments of both dormancy, when mutual cooperation withered away, and extraordinary activity, when the V4 countries seemed

However, a fundamental question remained: does accession to these organisations automatically imply the abandonment of regional cooperation formats? After all, there were alliances of this kind in Western Europe, such as the Nordic Council, which has existed since 1952 and brings together Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Greenland, the Åland Islands and the Faroe Islands.

After joining NATO and the EU, the authorities of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary were thus faced with the dilemma of whether there was any point in the continued existence of the Visegrad Group, since it had achieved its goal by integrating the countries mentioned into the military, political and economic structures of the West. Ultimately, the idea that it was worthwhile to continue to maintain this format as a forum for mutual consultation prevailed. A feature of the V4 was the lack of its own structure in the form of even a secretariat to coordinate joint activities.

to present themselves internationally as a monolith. The best period for the Central European alliance was between 2016 and 2021, during which time the group often spoke with a common

voice in the EU forum, protesting, for example, against Brussels' immigration policy, unrealistic energy transition standards, the EU's increasing centralising tendencies or directives eliminating the region's competitive advantages. Commentators in Western capitals pointed out at the time that for the first time since the fall of communism, Central Europe had gained subjectivity and agency, articulating its own interests and influencing decision-making processes on a continental scale. Some even compared the V4 to the four musketeers, who were supposed to follow the principle 'one for all, all for one'.

In reality, this unanimity was far from clear. Indeed, there have been times when the Musketeers have failed to honour their commitments. In 2015, during a meeting of the V4 prime ministers, all member states agreed that they would jointly speak out in the EU arena against a quota mechanism for the forced relocation of refugees. However, when it came to the EU summit in Brussels, Ewa Kopacz broke from earlier agreements and expressed her readiness to accept the imposed number of refugees on behalf of Poland. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary voted against in solidarity. After the incident, Czech Interior Minister Milan Chovanec claimed that Poland had thus excluded itself from the Visegrad Group and that V4 had turned into V3.

Later, the term V2+2 also appeared in the public space, as publicists and politicians in the Czech Republic and Slovakia pointed out in 2019 that the course of Jarosław Kaczyński's Poland and Viktor Orbán's Hungary was increasingly diverging from that of Prague and Bratislava. After successive political changes in the region, the term V2+2 has already come to mean a different configuration. In 2024, Poles and Czechs were placed on one side and Hungarians and Slovaks on the other.

The biggest challenge to the cohesion of the Visegrad Group is the internal politics of the individual countries. Attitudes

Austerlitz Format

The V4 Group, however, is not the only regional format in Central Europe. Apart from it, there are a number of other organisations with different objectives. One of these is the Slavkov Triangle, also known as the Austerlitz Format. The origins of this initiative lay in a failed attempt to expand the V4 Group to include other countries. Such a project was put forward by the Czechs and Slovaks. On the 3rd of April 2014, Czech President Miloš Zeman announced the creation of the Visegrad Plus Group, expanded to include Austria and Slovenia, but was countered the next day by Hungarian Foreign Ministry spokesman Gábor Kaleta, who denied the existence of such plans. As the authorities in Prague and Bratislava were very keen on rapprochement with Vienna, in January 2015 the prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria met together in the town of Slavkov (German: Austerlitz) near

towards the V4 there change depending on who is currently in power in the country. When Ferenc Gyurcsány was prime minister of Hungary, for example, he never once paid an official visit to Warsaw during his five-year rule (2004-2009). He was critical of Poland on many occasions, e.g. in March 2007, in an interview with Time magazine, he placed Poland (along with the Balkans) in the so-called third category of states. When Donald Tusk became prime minister, on the other hand, he officially visited Budapest only once during his seven-year rule (2007-2014). This was because his cabinet had other foreign policy priorities, focusing on reactivating the Weimar Triangle and a 'new opening' in relations with Moscow. In such a perspective - when Tusk saw the leaders of Germany, France or Russia as equal partners for himself - the people of Central Europe appeared as powerless outsiders from the periphery. Not surprisingly, regional cooperation, including the activities of the V4 Group, almost came to a standstill during his reign.

Cooperation within the Visegrad Group usually runs smoothly when all governments present the same direction. This was the case for a long time regarding attitudes to EU immigration policy and especially to the forced quota mechanism for the relocation of refugees. Problems arose when the authorities of individual countries had different approaches to key issues, such as external security. This became particularly apparent after Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. From the outset, the governments in Warsaw, Prague and Bratislava strongly supported Kyiv, while Viktor Orbán's cabinet presented a more pro-Moscow stance. When early parliamentary elections took place in Slovakia in autumn 2023 and Robert Fico became prime minister, the diplomacy there radically changed course, taking the same stance on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as Budapest. All this caused an internal crisis in the Visegrad Group, which continues to this day.

Brno in Moravia, where they signed a document called the 'Slavkov Declaration'. At that time, they decided to create a new format, the Slavkov Triangle (S3), which was to provide a platform for cooperation in infrastructure, transport, energy security, cross-border relations, youth employment, the social dimension of European integration and contacts with neighbouring countries of the European Union. The Czechs and Slovaks reiterated that the new initiative was not a competition to the V4 Group, but a complement to it. In fact, the S3 governments at the time were strongly oriented towards cooperation with Russia. They hoped that the Austerlitz Format would make it easier for them to conduct their eastern policy together. In the end, however, the Slavic Triangle turned out to be a creation without much vitality on the international scene.

Craiova Group

Three months after the formation of the Slavkov Triangle, in April 2015, an association of the three Balkan states was in turn formed in the Romanian city of Craiova. The leaders of Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia created a format that was called the Craiova Group. As then Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta emphasised, the initiators of the project were inspired by the activities of the V4. In October 2017, Greece also joined the regional bloc. The founders of this initiative set goals such as energy, transport and telecommunications integration of the member states, the construction of a motorway connecting Bucharest, Sofia and Belgrade, and the construction of the Balkan Stream gas pipeline. The latter investment was partially

completed in 2021, when the Serbian section of more than 400 kilometres, stretching to the border with Hungary, was finalised.

It is worth mentioning that the aforementioned Balkan Stream pipeline was built at Moscow's instigation and, apart from the economic dimension, also had a geopolitical purpose – namely, to supply Russian natural gas to a number of Balkan countries bypassing Ukraine. This example shows that various regional formats can be open to point-to-point cooperation with a variety of non-EU partners. Thus, it was not only the Slavkov Triangle but also the Craiova Group that was oriented towards greater cooperation with Russia.

From 17+1 to 14+1

The best-known case of this type of organisation is the 14+1 Initiative (known as the 17+1 Initiative in 2019-2021). It is a forum for political and economic cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Declared priorities include trade, investment, expansion of infrastructure and transport links, energy and finance, among others. An investment fund is to be used to realise common goals. In addition to China, the group comprises: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, Greece, Northern Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were also part of the group, but withdrew from it in 2021-2022 in protest at Beijing's excessive closeness to Moscow. Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn recognised that the Chinese fell into a camp that also threatened the independence of the Baltic states.

cooperating with an extra-regional power outside the structures of the European Union. Typically, EU member states develop a coordinated position on all key foreign policy issues at the European Council and foreign ministers' level (such is the case with sanctions against Russia, for example). The 14+1 format, however, bypasses this practice and involves interaction with China outside the EU institutions.

The aforementioned initiative, according to critics, undermines the political unity of the European Union and especially its coherence in its relations with Beijing. The most prominent example of that was the 2016 vote in the EU Council to condemn Chinese provocations in the South China Sea. At the time, four countries – Hungary, Greece, Slovenia and Croatia – blocked the adoption of a joint statement because, in their view, it was too confrontational towards Xi Jinping's government. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, contributing to the loosening of the 14+1 format.

The 14+1 initiative is a unique format on a continental scale, as it is the only example of a large group of European states

Bucharest Nine

Yet, another group, called the Bucharest Nine (B9) and bringing together the countries of NATO's eastern flank – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria – became much more effective around the same time. The aforementioned initiative was established after Russia's armed attack on Ukraine in 2014. Most Central European countries then felt seriously threatened by Moscow's imperialism and revanchism. It was therefore decided to cooperate more closely among themselves, especially in the military sphere.

Poland and Romania, Andrzej Duda and Klaus Iohannis. At that time, a declaration on cooperation in the military field was signed, setting out the main objectives of the group. Strengthening NATO's eastern flank against threats from Russia, ensuring stability and security in Central and Eastern Europe and strengthening the position of the entire region within the North Atlantic Alliance became a priority. The organisation's activities intensified after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when there was a need for more frequent consultation and coordination of decisions in the face of a war taking place just beyond NATO's borders.

The first B9 summit took place on the 4th of November 2015 in Bucharest at the initiative of the presidents of

Lublin Triangle

The Russian attack on Ukraine on the 22nd of February 2022 also triggered the activity of another regional format, which was established in July 2020 in Lublin. Namely, the Lublin Triangle (L3) founded by Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. In 2021, the foreign ministers of the aforementioned countries signed the 'Declaration of Joint European Heritage and Common Values of the Peoples of the Former Commonwealth of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania'. The document emphasised the historical ties between the three nations, which had lived together as a single state organism for several centuries.

The signatories of the act emphasised that what constituted the political specificity of the former Polish-Lithuanian

Commonwealth was its republican, democratic and constitutional tradition. This distinguished it from authoritarian Russia. Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian politicians have appealed to this common historical heritage in the face of the contemporary threat from Moscow. While referring to the glorious pages of the past, they decided to focus on the present. Cooperation in both military and non-military security (health, energy, IT, etc.) and in combating hybrid and disinformation threats became the hallmark of their agreement. The main threat they decided to jointly oppose remains Russian imperialism. The L3 leaders also declared their readiness to welcome Belarus, which was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the past, into their ranks in the future – provided it becomes a democratic country.

Eurasianism

Are the fears of most Central European countries about danger from Moscow justified? After the end of the Cold War, it seemed that Russia would embark on a path of democratisation. Many analysts predicted that, devastated by the communist system, it would not be able to take offensive military action for a long time. However, the reign of Boris Yeltsin was followed by the era of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB lieutenant colonel, who declared publicly that the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like him, the political elite derived from the communist secret services that seized power in Moscow thought the same way. The new president set out to rebuild Russia's imperial power. In 2008, he attacked Georgia, leading to the separation of two regions from that country: South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2014, he launched a war with Ukraine, annexing Crimea and seizing parts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. In 2022, it initiated the next phase of this conflict by launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

military academies) by the main ideologue of Eurasianism, Alexander Dugin. His vision outlines that Russia should be a great Eurasian continental power, with its influence extending from the Azores to Tokyo. One of the main goals of Moscow's policy must be to push the Americans, especially their troops, out of Europe, and then share control of the Old Continent with the Germans and the French. Central Europe, in this concept, would become (as was the case in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) a territory for the division of influence between Moscow and Berlin.

Moscow's aggressive actions were not the result of coincidence, but the logical outcome of the strategy pursued by the Kremlin in the 21st century. Its goal is the restoration of the empire, which leads through the re-assimilation of countries that were once in the Soviet sphere of influence. Central Europe, treated as a gateway to the West, remains an object of particular interest for Putin's regime.

For Dugin, the main enemies remain primarily the United States, Poland and Ukraine. According to him, Ukrainian statehood should be completely destroyed, while the Poles must be stripped of their own subjectivity and reduced to the role of a Russian-German condominium. Such views propounded by Alexander Dugin thirty years ago were considered exotic and extreme. Today they are part of the mainstream message and are repeated by representatives of the Russian establishment as self-evident claims.

The assumptions of this strategy were laid out in a book titled *Fundamentals of Geopolitics* (which is a textbook in Russian

The main weakness of this geopolitical concept is the attitude of modern Germany, which is in no hurry to follow in the footsteps of the Third Reich by making secret deals with Moscow. Russia, however, hopes to force such a course of action on Berlin by the method of accomplished facts. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the 22nd of February 2022, preceded by an ultimatum to the West, served this purpose, among others.

Russia's ultimatum

The Kremlin's concept of a new order in Central Europe found expression in the ultimatum Moscow presented to the West on the 17th of December 2021. On that day, the Russian foreign ministry published a communiqué announcing that two draft security guarantee agreements (with the United States and with NATO member states) had been handed over to the US side two days earlier. Both documents were short - the first consisted of a preamble and eight articles, the second of a preamble and nine articles.

The draft agreements contained Russian demands regarding US and NATO military presence and activity on the Old Continent. Moscow demanded that the US and the North Atlantic Alliance meet its demands not only for the post-Soviet area (including mainly Ukraine), but also for Central Europe. The Kremlin reiterated once again its demands not to expand NATO eastwards, especially beyond the former post-Soviet republics, not to establish military bases and not to conduct military activity there. These prohibitions mainly harmed the aspirations of Ukrainians, who saw membership of the North Atlantic Alliance as a guarantee of their security.

Russia's demands, however, went much further and also applied to the Three Seas countries. In the aforementioned documents, Moscow demanded the withdrawal of NATO troops from the territories of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. It also set the condition of creating a buffer zone around the borders of Russia and its Collective Security Treaty Organisation allies,

Eye of the storm

Halford John Mackinder's words, written in the early 20th century, seem particularly relevant today if we look at the map of our globe. Indeed, the three largest powers in the world today have their own blueprints for their own geostrategic spaces. For the United States it is the transatlantic community, for Russia the Eurasian area and for China the One Belt, One Road (New Silk Road). Territorially, these are large collections that do not overlap - with one exception. The only common subset remains Central Europe, especially Poland. Only this region of the world remains common to all three global geopolitical concepts.

Such a location makes Central Europe necessarily a place where various influences clash and an object of rivalry. After the fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of this region chose a course towards the West - towards integration into the European and transatlantic community. Russia, however, has different plans for this part of

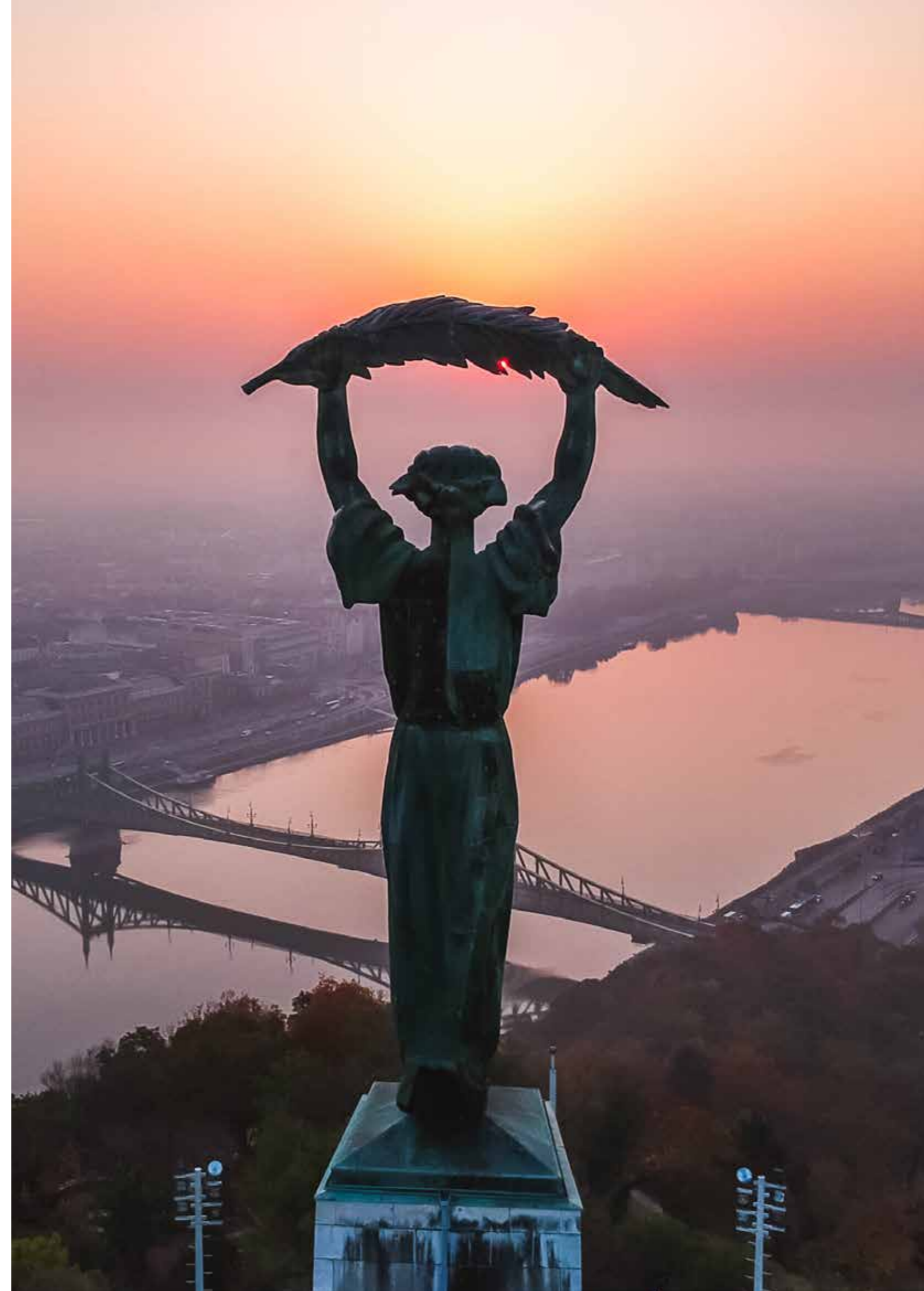
where exercises and other military activity at the brigade level of the armed forces and higher would not be allowed. It also demanded a ban on the overflight of NATO bombers and the movement of NATO warships in areas close to the borders with Russia, mainly in the Baltic and Black Seas.

Agreeing to the above ultimatum from the Kremlin would mean a complete demolition of the security architecture in Europe. Firstly, it would be to recognise the post-Soviet area as Moscow's exclusive sphere of influence (with the exception of the Baltic states). Secondly, the countries on NATO's eastern flank would be demilitarised and become a de facto grey security zone between Russia and the West. Deprived of a NATO military presence, they would be more vulnerable to attack from the East.

The fact that the Kremlin decided to make the documents public so quickly, the contents of which were a slap in the face to the North Atlantic Alliance, the United States and the countries of Central Europe, shows that it did not even intend to wait for a response from the addressees. Why? Because, at that point, the decision had already been taken in Moscow to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and, by extension, to change the balance of power in Europe. In this context, the publication of the two documents and the failure of NATO and the US to respond promptly were later used propaganda-wise as a justification for Russian aggression. The Kremlin could claim that it was ready to negotiate and reach agreements with the West, but it could not find a negotiating partner on the other side. The later developments confirmed this version.

the world. In recent years, the Kremlin has decided to forcibly alter the balance of power on the Old Continent. The aim is to make the Three Seas region a grey sphere of security between East and West.

This scenario will not be realised as long as the West has the will, determination and strength to oppose Russian imperialism. To this end, it is necessary to: firstly, to support Ukraine so that it does not lose the war; secondly, to increase the military potential of Central Europe so that it constitutes an effective means of deterring the adversary (in this context, the presence of NATO troops is necessary); thirdly, to strengthen the unity of the countries of the region and intensify cooperation between them. This cohesion can be served by establishing various platforms of joint partnership. In this context, the broadest and most promising international format appears to be the Three Seas Initiative.



THREE SEAS, AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CENTRAL EUROPE

Three Seas: north – south axis

Against the backdrop of the regional formats that emerged in Central Europe after the fall of communism, the Three Seas Initiative stands out in particular. It was born on the 29th of September 2015 thanks to the then presidents of Poland and Croatia, Andrzej Duda and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who met in New York on the occasion of the UN Summit. During this event, the issue of the development imbalance between the so-called Global North and Global South was discussed. At the time, it was pointed out that the planet's infrastructure connections are mainly built on an east-west axis, while more north-south projects need to be created in order for the world to develop in a more sustainable way.

As Beata Daszyńska-Muzyczka, former President of the Management Board of Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego and former Chair of the Supervisory Board of the Three Seas

Fund, recalls: "These remarks, which concerned the global scale, the presidents of Poland and Croatia referred to our region: Central and Eastern Europe. We also had the majority of connections, for example in the field of transport and energy, on the east-west axis, while there was a dramatic lack of such initiatives on the north-south line, which was, and still is, a loss for the countries in our region. It was in this context that the Three Seas project was born, which was our presidents' original contribution to the global debate on sustainable development. At its core was the conviction that a closer economic cooperation between the 12 countries of our region, located between the three seas - the Baltic, Adriatic and Black - was necessary. Generally speaking, this involves countries that were once behind the Iron Curtain, under communist rule, and have entered the European Union in the 21st century (Austria is an exception in this group)."²

Dubrovnik Summit

The first summit of the Three Seas Initiative took place on the 25th and 26th of August 2016 in Dubrovnik, and was attended by representatives from Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. At that time, they identified large-scale infrastructure investments in the region in three areas as a priority for cooperation: energy, transport and digitalisation. Central Europe's backwardness vis-à-vis Western Europe, caused by decades of communism, was enormous in these areas. Projects such as the Via Carpatia expressway running from Klaipeda on the Baltic Sea to Thessaloniki on the Aegean, the Rail Baltica railway line linking Helsinki with Warsaw via Tallinn, Riga and Kaunas, and the Świnoujście-Krk gas pipeline

running from the Polish Baltic coast to the Croatian Adriatic coast, were just a drop in the ocean.

The transport gap in the Three Seas area is demonstrated by the highly telling fact that, in 2016, a train journey from Tallinn in Estonia to Constanta in Romania took three days and three nights, while the two cities are some 2,500 kilometres apart. According to 2019 calculations, if the countries of the region wanted to catch up with the countries of the western part of the Old Continent in the three spheres alone, then they would have to spend more than 650 billion euros by 2030. Clearly, such capital is not available in Central Europe, so it was felt that it should be attracted. This was the purpose of establishing a new institution.

² Beata Daszyńska-Muzyczka w rozmowie z Grzegorzem Górnym, „Trójmorze, czyli synonim sukcesu”, tygodnik „Sieci” 26/2023, 25 czerwca 2023.

Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund

In 2017, on the occasion of the second Three Seas summit, held in Warsaw under the slogan of 3xC (Connectivity, Commerciality, Complementarity), the idea of creating an investment fund to finance large infrastructure projects involving at least two countries in the region was conceived. At the time, a letter of intent was signed to set up a joint fund, which was created two years later as the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. The founding act was signed in Luxembourg by the aforementioned Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego from Poland and EximBank from Romania.

As Beata Daszyńska-Muzyczka said in 2023: ‘We have established cooperation with banks, development agencies or government institutions in the Three Seas countries, finding nine investors. From the beginning, Austria refused to participate in the fund, which can be understood because they do not have the same infrastructural backwardness as other countries and are therefore not interested in doing so. The Czechs and Slovaks, on the other hand, have not made a decision on their financial participation. We, as BGK, are the largest investor in this group - our commitment is 750 million euros. The total amount available to the fund for investments in the region is close to €930 million.’³

Five investments of the Three Seas Fund

The Three Seas Fund is a commercial investment institution. Its task is not only to support and co-finance infrastructure projects in the region, but above all to bring a return to investors. To this end, the Fund has become involved in five major projects in the countries of the region.

The first company in which the Fund has taken a 100% stake is Cargounit of Wrocław, Poland, which specialises in the rental and leasing of electric and diesel locomotives for rail carriers. It is one of the largest independent suppliers of rolling stock in Central and Eastern Europe. It works with a wide variety of rail operators, supplying them with vehicles. The company’s services are used by, among others, operators in the petrochemical, chemical, energy, metallurgical, construction and intermodal industries. Locomotives leased by Cargounit played a major role especially during the first phase of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Thanks to the rail fleet supplied by the Wrocław-based company, it was possible to organise transports with aid for the fighting Ukrainians.

The second entity in which the Three Seas Fund invested, taking a 92% stake, is Greenergy Data Centers, based in Tallinn, Estonia. It manages and builds data centres with a particular emphasis on renewable energy and sustainability. It focuses on providing energy-efficient and eco-friendly solutions for companies looking for a secure IT infrastructure, e.g. it offers server space or databases for data storage. It is mainly active in three Baltic countries.

Attracting capital to Three Seas

The Three Seas Fund has put its money into the regional projects mentioned above and manages them to ensure that investors get a return on their capital. Beata Daszyńska-Muzyczka,

former head of the institution, stresses that the Fund was never intended to finance all infrastructure needs in the region, and that its task should be more about creating incentives to

encourage others to make structural investments in Central Europe: ‘It’s about building the recognition of Three Seas as a forward-looking and attractive place to invest capital and do business. The success of the Fund is to show that it is worthwhile to engage your financial resources in this part of Europe. However, we cannot replace cooperation at the level of the national governments and ministries, because many decisions on cross-border issues have to be taken at this level. If there is political will, it will also be easier to attract private investors.’⁴ One of the tasks of the Three Seas Fund is therefore to stimulate economic development in the region.

BGK vice-president, Paweł Nierada, explained in 2022 that ‘one of the objectives of setting up the fund was to create an

access tool for global investors - a financial gateway to the region - which will allow us to attract additional private capital for these much-needed investments. As I said, our goal is for the fund to achieve the expected rates of return, meaning that all investors who put money into it will make money from it. This goal is ambitious when it comes to infrastructure funds, because here we are looking at a level of more than ten per cent annual rate of return. So far, all these projects we are investing in allow us to be optimistic about the future, but this is of course only the beginning. And, by the way, since the investments in the fund will create projects that will develop positively, and each of them will serve at least two countries in the region, if not more - because we see such potential - we will also contribute to their economic development.’⁵

Economic success of Central Europe

Potential investors may also be encouraged by the attractiveness of Three Seas, which is the fastest growing economy not only in the European Union but also on a global scale. In recent years, the region - despite the coronavirus epidemic and the war in Ukraine - has recorded higher GDP growth than Western Europe. Besides, the pandemic has made the political and economic elite in the West realise that they are too dependent on China’s economy and especially on imports of essential goods from that faraway country. All it took was one blow to the supply chain from that direction, and the health security of entire European populations was called into question. Consequently, there was a need to shorten the supply chain and allocate investment capital. In this situation, an opportunity to attract new investments has arisen for the Three Seas countries, which have a financially competitive yet well-educated workforce with a high level of cognitive competence.

Central Europe is also attractive to outside capital thanks to lower labour costs, favourable tax conditions and its geographical location between the east and west of the

continent. In addition, Three Seas is home to around 122 million people, which represents a large consumer market. Modern economic sectors, especially the IT industry, are also developing rapidly in the region.

The aforementioned investment fund was the first and, for a long time, the only institution set up within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative, which is an amorphous creation without any structures, not even its own secretariat. This is not an exceptional situation. The Visegrad Group, which also has no organisational forms, operates on a similar basis. According to the former foreign minister, Zbigniew Rau, Three Seas is a ‘coalition of the willing’, i.e. countries that understand that they have many converging interests and can therefore carry out some projects together. Of course, this willingness is not the same in every sphere, but all the countries in the region are keen to expand their transport, energy or digital infrastructure and, in the long term, to close the civilisation and economic gap with Western Europe. This is why, in the words of Zbigniew Rau, ‘sectoral cooperation of individual governments in the implementation of specific projects’ seems crucial.⁶

Three Seas Stock Market Index

One of the sectors in which regional cooperation developed particularly intensively was the stock market. The main initiator of cooperation in this area in was Marek Dietl, CEO of the Warsaw Stock Exchange from 2017 to 2024. This is an institution that accounts for as much as 57% of the market share of the Three Seas market in terms of trading volume (28% is accounted for by the Vienna Stock Exchange and the remaining 15% by the 10 countries of the

region). Thanks to Dietl, the CEEPlus Index, also known as the Three Seas Index, was created, which included more than 150 companies from Central Europe. In this way, investors from outside the region, especially from Asia or North America, were given a tool to analyse the liquidity of the largest capitalisation companies. This proved to be an effective way of increasing the attractiveness of Three Seas for foreign capital.

3 op.cit.

4 op.cit.

5 Paweł Nierada, <https://trimarium.pl/sekcja/pierwszy-wiceprezes-bgk/>

6 Zbigniew Rau, <https://trimarium.pl/sekcja/prof-zbigniew-rau-trojmorze-jest-dobrodziejstwem-dla-ue/>

Three Seas Regions Forum

Another area in which regional cooperation developed was that of local self-government. The initiation of co-operation in this field resulted from the realisation that international relations do not function in an abstract vacuum, but in a specific social milieu. The conditions prevailing in this environment often have a decisive influence on the state of these relations. In this context, social capital, especially mutual trust, appears to be a fundamental factor. This applies to both economic and security issues. It is impossible to create a lasting alliance or build major cross-border infrastructure projects without mutual trust capital. This, in turn, requires greater mutual knowledge, information flow, networking and cultural cooperation and exchange.

Three Seas is turning into Eight Seas

Central Europe's economic success was able to attract other countries to the Three Seas Initiative. The United States, Japan, Ukraine, Moldova and Germany became strategic partners of the organisation. Berlin even submitted an accession to the aforementioned group, but it was not accepted. It was considered that Germany would be a foreign body in this alliance, as it did not need to catch up economically with the West. Besides, there was a fear that they were too big and powerful and could therefore subjugate the whole project.

In September 2023, during the Bucharest summit, it was announced that Greece had become the new (thirteenth) member of Three Seas, seeing an opportunity for its development in, among other things, joining the Via Carpatia. According to Jerzy Athanasiadis, President of the Polish-Greek Chamber of Commerce and Industry, if the Baltic Sea

Investment in security

Investments in the economy, and especially in the three mentioned areas of energy, transport and digitalisation, are also investments in the security of Central Europe. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has made the elites of most countries realise how crucial these spheres are for national and regional security. In this situation, many infrastructural investments can be elements of the resilience structure of NATO's eastern flank, such as motorways, railways, gas interconnectors etc. The war in Ukraine has

That is why, in 2018, President Andrzej Duda initiated a new project in Rzeszów — the Three Seas Regions Forum, which in turn established the Three Seas Regions Observatory, i.e. an institution for gathering statistical information on the whole region. In 2021, during the second edition of the Forum, representatives of 15 local governments from five countries signed the Lublin Declaration, announcing the creation of the Economic Network of the Three Seas Regions. The initiative mainly involved representatives of local authorities in the regions that lie along the Via Carpatia transport corridor, the international 'north-south' route running from Lithuania, through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to Greece.

and the Aegean Sea were to be connected by this motorway, Polish ports would become much more competitive than German or Dutch ports. Ships coming from Asia via the Suez Canal would then no longer have to circumnavigate the whole of Europe from the south, but, thanks to the Via Carpatia, they could unload their goods in Thessaloniki and then transport them overland across the continent to, for example, Gdynia and Gdansk. In this context, Athanasiadis noted that he is not surprised by the constant difficulties that are piling up against the construction of this route, as too many influential circles are keen to ensure that it is never built or is commissioned as late as possible.⁷

Greece's admission to Three Seas means that the initiative no longer connects three seas, but eight, as Hellada lies on five seas: the Ionian, Aegean, Cretan, Thracian and Mediterranean.

also made the nations of this part of Europe realise the importance of regional cooperation. Indeed, in the event of external aggression, the fastest and most effective assistance can be provided through neighbouring countries. This was demonstrated by the example of Poland, which became the logistical centre for military and humanitarian aid to the fighting Ukrainians. Without this support, especially in the first weeks of Russian aggression, it might even have led to the collapse of Ukraine.

Donald Trump at the Three Seas summit

The issue of security is closely linked to US support for Central European integration. This was particularly manifested in July 2017 during the Three Seas summit in Warsaw, which was attended in person by US President Donald Trump. In a speech delivered at that time, the US leader drew attention to the danger facing the West from Russia. He said: 'Today, the West is also confronted by the powers that seek to test our will, undermine our confidence, and challenge our interests. To meet new forms of aggression, including propaganda, financial crimes, and cyberwarfare, we must adapt our alliance to compete effectively in new ways and on all new battlefields. We urge Russia to cease its destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere, and its support for hostile regimes — including Syria and Iran — and to instead join the community of responsible nations in our fight against common enemies and in defense of civilization itself.'⁸

Donald Trump used his visit to Warsaw to call on the North Atlantic Alliance countries to increase their defence spending to 2 % of GDP, as they had pledged to do at the September 2014 NATO summit in Cardiff, Wales. However, only a few of the member states fulfilled their promises at that time, and one of the few was Poland. For this reason, Warsaw lived to see public praise from the US President, who said: 'Americans know that a strong alliance of free, sovereign and independent nations is the best defense for our freedoms and for our interests. That is why my administration has demanded that all members of NATO finally meet their full and fair financial obligation. As a result of this insistence, billions of dollars more have begun to pour into NATO. In fact, people are shocked. But billions and billions of dollars more are coming in from countries that, in my opinion, would not have been paying so quickly. To those who would criticize our tough stance, I would point out that the United States has demonstrated not merely with words but with its actions that we stand firmly behind Article 5, the mutual defense commitment. Words are easy, but actions are what matters. And for its own protection — and you know this,

American consensus on Three Seas

There is a consensus above divisions in America on support for Three Seas, uniting Republicans and Democrats, despite their differences in domestic politics. This is evidenced, for example, by the resolution passed unanimously in 2020 by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in support of the development of the Three Seas Initiative, which was considered extremely important for the American *raison d'état*. This position is determined by both

everybody knows this, everybody has to know this — Europe must do more. Europe must demonstrate that it believes in its future by investing its money to secure that future.'⁹

Continuing his speech, Donald Trump said: 'That is also why we salute the Polish people for being one of the NATO countries that has actually achieved the benchmark for investment in our common defense. (...) the example you set is truly magnificent, and we applaud Poland. Thank you. We have to remember that our defense is not just a commitment of money, it is a commitment of will. Because as the Polish experience reminds us, the defense of the West ultimately rests not only on means but also on the will of its people to prevail and be successful and get what you have to have. The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it? We can have the largest economies and the most lethal weapons anywhere on Earth, but if we do not have strong families and strong values, then we will be weak and we will not survive. If anyone forgets the critical importance of these things, let them come to one country that never has. Let them come to Poland.'¹⁰

The above words were widely perceived not only as praise of Poland, but also as a public rebuke of Germany, which was far from fulfilling its Cardiff commitments. Furthermore, during his European trip, Donald Trump visited Warsaw and bypassed Berlin. In these circumstances, many commentators have begun to write about the fact that the White House, under the Republican president's leadership, would prefer to see Poland rather than Germany as its main strategic partner in Europe. Why? Because it is living up to its alliance commitments and also (like Washington, and unlike Berlin) sees Russia as a threat to the international order. In this context, an additional advantage for Warsaw was its role as the natural leader of Three Seas.

economic reasons and the international security architecture, especially in the context of the Russian threat.

Poland's former foreign minister Zbigniew Rau considered the American involvement to be completely understandable: 'Simply put, our interests coincide with their interests. For them, Three Seas is an alternative to China's Belt and Road.

⁷ <https://wpolityce.pl/swiat/661681-grecja-w-trojmorzu-oznacza-nowe-perspektywy-takze-dla-polski>

⁸ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/>

⁹ op.cit.

¹⁰ op.cit.

Besides, the eastern flank of NATO is important to them. And if they see our region as strategically important, they need to invest in it, not only militarily but also in terms of infrastructure. History after the Second World War shows that

where American soldiers start to be stationed (e.g. in Japan, South Korea or Western Europe), prosperity comes there. Why? Because there is security, stability, and so investment comes in, the free market works, etc'.¹¹

Central Europe as a community of destiny

The Three Seas countries have long alerted the West to the danger of Moscow's imperialism, but for years their voice was ignored by the elites of Berlin, Paris and Brussels. History, however, has conceded the point to the leaders of Central Europe, whose most prominent representative was Lech Kaczyński, who warned of the Russian threat in his high-profile speeches, including ones at a rally in Tbilisi on the 12 of August 2008 and in Gdansk on the 1st of September 2009.

The greater sensitivity of the peoples of the region to this danger is determined by the historical memory, which is still alive and has its roots in historical experience. In this context, Zbigniew Rau spoke of the community of destiny that unites the Three Seas countries (with the exception of Austria, which had a different historical experience): 'First of all, in the last five hundred years, each of our countries has lost its independence at least twice. (...) The result of the long-term loss of independence was the experience of lack of subjectivity. The neighbouring powers, when they fought each other, it was on our soil. When they made peace, it was at our expense. For them, we were always a periphery, a province, a buffer. As a

result, for a long time we had no institutions of our own and no experience of public life that assumed subjectivity. There was no institutional stability characteristic of the West at that time. In the 19th century, no one here thought in terms of elections, tenure, parliamentarism, representativeness, etc. Here one thought from one armed uprising to the next. Politics was done in the forests, streets, underground. That is why politics was experienced in a very personal and emotional way'.¹²

Such a community of destiny is not shared by the countries of Three Seas with the countries of Western Europe, which have had completely different historical experiences. The awareness of how fragile independence is and how thin the line between national existence and non-existence remains, has been inscribed in the cultural code of the region. This is expressed, for example, in the national anthems, in which the motif of an existential threat to the whole nation appears. This is why Central Europe takes a different view of Muslim immigration waves or the centralist ambitions of Eurobureaucrats than the western part of the Old Continent.

Central Europe as a community of remembrance

Three Seas also does not constitute a community of remembrance with Western Europe. Central Europe still has vivid memories of the horror and misery of communism that Western countries did not experience. Most of the region's anti-communist heroes are not heroes for Western societies. Marxism in Central Europe is not seen as a hope for humanity, but rather as a dead end and a nightmarish experiment entailing millions of victims. For this reason, European

Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's speech in honour of Karl Marx, delivered in 2018 in Trier, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the author of the 'Communist Manifesto', caused widespread outrage in the former Eastern Bloc countries. For the same reason, the Three Seas nations seem more sensitive to the utopian social engineering projects to which the intellectual elites of the West often succumb.

Central Europe as a community of values

Three Seas does not constitute a community of values with Western Europe, either, as vividly illustrated by the results of a sociological survey published in 2018 by the renowned sociological centre Pew Research Center.¹³ It was conducted

between 2015 and 2017 with a large sample of as many as 56,000 respondents in 34 Western, Central and Eastern European countries. The questions dealt with axiology, but not at the level of general declarations, but of specific life situations.

¹¹ Zbigniew Rau, op.cit.

¹² op.cit.

¹³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>



In the declarative sphere, what unites the people of our continent are 'European values'. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that these can be understood in different, often contradictory, ways. Respondents were asked, among other things, whether they were in favour of legal gay 'marriages', whether they would accept a Muslim as a member of their family, whether Christianity was an important part of their national identity, etc. The results of the survey, later reflected on a geographical map, showed a radical division between the east and the west of our continent on axiological matters. They show that the majority of Europeans from both areas no longer share a common attitude towards the Christian religion, traditional morality, the natural family or the nation-state. The two parts of Europe seem to represent different value systems. Remarkably, the boundary line between the two territories

Bastion of democracy

The average Frenchman, German, Englishman or Dutchman looks at the countries from behind the former 'Iron Curtain' as countries whose citizens have yet to learn the rules of democracy. However, the people of Three Seas can boast much older democratic and constitutional traditions than those living in Western Europe. In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville distinguished between two main political traditions on our continent: absolutist and republican. According to him, absolutism characterised the Germans, French or Austrians, while republicanism characterised the Poles and Hungarians.

While the English Great Charter of Liberties (Magna Charta Libertatum) of 1215 is widely known in the West, the Golden Bull of Hungarian King Andrew II of 1222 remains completely forgotten. Both documents, dating from the same period, gave rise to the codification of human rights in Europe, becoming the foundation of the rule of law and the state of law. It is characteristic that the Golden Bull was not a borrowing from insular models, but grew out of the Central European cultural circle, drawing on its own original political tradition. Its influence later radiated into Central Europe. In 1425, King Władysław Jagiełło of Poland granted a privilege to the nobility that guaranteed personal integrity by the monarch and his officials without a valid court judgment. This was a document that predated the equivalent document in England, the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679, by almost 250 years. Such was the birth of the political order of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (i.e. the common state of Poles and Lithuanians), which for

runs exactly where the 'Iron Curtain' used to be only three decades earlier. The entire Three Seas (with the exception of Austria) found itself on this map on a different side to the West.

One of the differences that emerged during the aforementioned research was the attitude towards the nation-state. It turned out that Central and Eastern Europeans are more strongly attached to this category than people in the West, who in turn are more likely to see themselves as citizens of a federated European state with ambitions to transcend national differences. This difference is due to the fact that the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe did not have their own statehood for a long time, and therefore value it particularly strongly today, seeing in the nation-state a better guarantee for the defence of their interests than in the case of various supranational entities.

more than three centuries was based on constitutional order, state democracy, a representative system and a republican ethos. It was a unique model compared to the absolutism prevailing in Western Europe. Its essence was, as Zbigniew Rau put it, 'the experience of freedom under the rule of law'.¹⁴

The commitment to democracy in the Three Seas area is not only a matter of the past, but also of the present. As already mentioned, the long-standing absence of their own statehood has meant that the idea of the nation-state and its subjectivity has more relevance today in Central Europe than in Western Europe. As a result, however, the people of Three Seas are more committed to democracy than Europeans in the West. Why? Because a democratic system could only develop within the framework of a nation-state and not within the framework of supranational creations. For the sovereign in a democracy is the people, 'demos' in Greek and 'populus' in Latin. There is no such entity as the European nation. The sovereign in a democracy cannot therefore be the European nation, because there is no such thing. Democracy is only possible in a nation state. Thus, when more and more powers and competences are transferred from the state to supranational and international organisations, then democracy is limited and real power passes into the hands of the oligarchy. The scenario where EU member states relinquish their national sovereignty to the Brussels headquarters thus means a de facto abandonment of the democratic system. People in Central Europe are aware of this, which is why they are protesting most loudly against the federalist and centralist ideas coming from Brussels.

Joint development project

The creation of Three Seas is the most ambitious attempt to integrate this part of the continent on the basis of cross-border infrastructure projects. It involves a process of realising the common identity of the Central European nations, resulting from similar historical experiences. With this comes a growing awareness of common civilisational and economic interests and the need for security. Three Seas can therefore be seen as an attempt to articulate their own sense of distinctiveness and subjectivity by the countries of the region.

As the already quoted Zbigniew Rau said: 'We have already had in the past projects for the unification of our region that were not imposed on us from outside, but came from within, such as the Great Moravian State or the kingdoms under the Jagiellonian dynasty, but they did not last long. A more common experience was the sharing of our lands by neighbouring powers. This was an important part of our common existence for hundreds of years. At the moment, we are experiencing a process of realising our common identity, resulting from similar historical experiences. With this comes a realisation of our common civilisational and economic interests and, above all, the need for security. If one has a

history like ours, one knows that the issue of security is crucial. That is why the countries of Central Europe did not have dilemmas about whether they should join NATO or not. If we understand that we have so many converging interests, then the logical conclusion is that we can do some things together. Three Seas is therefore a coalition of the willing. Of course, this willingness is not the same in every sphere. But, after all, we all want to develop transport, energy or digital infrastructure. We all want to eliminate the civilisational and economic gap with Western Europe. Three Seas is an opportunity for our regional business to grow and to avoid the middle development trap.'¹⁵

For the first years after joining the EU, Central European countries were mainly oriented towards catching up economically with the West, neglecting regional cooperation. This kind of policy, which consisted of implementing models from the EU centre, was called 'imitative modernisation'. In recent times, however, this is beginning to change. There is a growing awareness that 'catching up' with the West does not have to be at the expense of regional cooperation. On the contrary, there is an emerging conviction that the two courses of action complement each other.

Voice of thirteen is more than the voice of one

The Three Seas initiative can also become an effective tool to advance the interests of Central Europe on the EU forum. After all, the voice of the thirteen states weighs much more than the voice of a single country and there are many issues on which the region has a common position, such as defence against the elimination of competitive advantages or counteracting brain drain and the exodus of highly qualified personnel abroad. After all, the Three Seas countries have greater aspirations than just being a supplier of well-educated human resources to the highly developed economies of Western Europe. As the aforementioned Beata Daszyńska-Muzyczka said: 'We do not accept the training of qualified specialists, later absorbed by Western European countries, which not only drain our market of brains, but also create obstacles to the development of our region, e.g. by eliminating our competitive advantages. Such an attitude has nothing to do with equal partnership and solidarity, officially declared European values.'¹⁶

This imbalance was also pointed out by US sociologist Professor Salvatore Babones, who wrote: 'Although the 3SI countries are

European Union members sharing in the de jure political rights accorded on an equal basis to all member states, they frankly do not enjoy a similar equality in the economic sphere. Even in formal institutions like the European Central Bank their voting rights are attenuated. In the informal power structures of production networks and value chains, they are at an even greater disadvantage. The 3SI countries can to some extent leverage their membership of the European Union to ensure that Europe-centered production networks expand into the Three Seas region, but they cannot use it to ensure upward mobility in those networks. Nor can they realistically leapfrog the currently leading countries in enough of those networks to achieve levels of development on a par with the western European average.'¹⁷

The activity of a Central European coalition of states within the Three Seas framework could contribute to eliminating this imbalance. However, this requires, on the one hand, close political cooperation within the EU and, on the other hand, the coordination of joint infrastructure projects.

¹⁴ Zbigniew Rau, op.cit.

¹⁵ Zbigniew Rau, op.cit.

¹⁶ Barbara Daszyńska-Muzyczka, op.cit.

¹⁷ Salvatore Babones, https://trimarium.pl/think_tank/rozwoj-cyfrowy-i-3si-jak-mniej-rozwiniety-wschod-unii-europejskiej-moze-wykorzystac-internetowe-lancuchy-wartosci-do-dlugoterminowego-wzrostu-gospodarczego/

Lack of channels of communication

A barrier to the development of Three Seas is undoubtedly the insufficiency of strategic channels of communication between the region's elites and the lack of a proper flow of information between societies. During the communist era, the authorities of the individual countries cared about the unity and cohesiveness of the Eastern bloc. Therefore, there were many cultural and artistic institutions whose activities brought the history, tradition and art of the 'brotherly nations' of the 'people's democracy' closer. Of course, on the one hand there was a lot of top-down imposed indoctrination and propaganda, but on the other hand there was also a lot of reliable knowledge about each other. Many editorial offices, not only television, radio and news agencies, but also daily and weekly newspapers, had their own correspondents in other regional capitals.

Informal leader of Three Seas

Another challenge that complicates to some extent the development of Three Seas remains the question of the leader of this regional format. Poland, as the largest and most populous country in Central Europe, is naturally best suited for such a role. When the ten new member states were admitted to the EU in 2004, Poland alone had more people than all the other nine countries combined (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus, Malta). In addition to demographic arguments, Poland's role as a regional leader is supported by economic arguments (the strongest economy in Central Europe), military arguments (the most numerous army on NATO's eastern flank) or cultural arguments (the history of its own statehood dating back over a thousand years).

For these reasons, Poles seem to be the most predisposed to act as the keystone of Central European integration. What is their strength, however, may also be their weakness. Poland's size compared to other countries in the region may, in fact, arouse fears among smaller nations that Warsaw will dominate the initiative too much. This fear, moreover, is skillfully exploited

Most of these ties were severed after the collapse of the communist system and no new ones emerged in their place. The entire region switched politically, economically and culturally to integration with the West, while neglecting regional cooperation. The result is that today the media in Central Europe have virtually no permanent correspondents in the other countries of Three Seas. Instead, the largest journalistic network in the area is provided by Germany (e.g. Deutsche Welle or DPA). As a result, people in Slovenia mostly learn about what is happening in Latvia through Western media, mainly German. Similarly, thanks to German media, Czechs learn about events in Bulgaria and Estonians about the situation in Hungary. The circulation of news in the Three Seas information space is thus mainly via Germany. This lack of direct media contacts hinders the building of trust capital between the individual countries.

and fueled by Russian propaganda, which warns against the "superpower ambitions" of the Republic of Poland, which allegedly wants to become an empire again. Critics of Three Seas often portray it as a purely Polish project that serves only Warsaw's interests and could conflict the countries involved in this format not only with Moscow, but also with Berlin and Brussels. Such voices are also falling on fertile ground in other European capitals.

In this situation, the authorities of Poland, which has assumed the role of informal leader of Three Seas, must take into account the aforementioned concerns and sensitivities of smaller partners. A good example of this attitude are relations with Vilnius. After the fall of communism, the Lithuanians, as a result of their historical experience, were afraid of being dominated by the Poles, and were therefore distrustful of any initiative in which Warsaw would take a leadership role. However, both countries have managed to build up such a capital of trust in recent years that today relations between them are the best in their entire recent history.

Digitisation as an opportunity

The aforementioned Professor Salvatore Babones wrote: 'For three decades, the eleven developing country members of the 3SI grouping have focused on European integration as their overriding development strategy. The twelfth member (Austria) played a key supporting role in these efforts. This European orientation was entirely appropriate for the period: it was economically necessary for the developing 3SI members to reestablish their historical links to central and western Europe and politically necessary for them to rejoin the

According to the American researcher, a certain phase in the history of the EU has ended and the current model of development is on the wane. In this situation, the countries of Central Europe should consider looking for new solutions to avoid falling into economic stagnation with the rest of the continent. Babones writes: 'The consolidation of the 3SI countries' positions in Europe, reinforced by European Union structural funds, contributed to the modernization of the 3SI countries, and anchored their economies in one of the world's most advanced economic regions. This process has, however, firmly anchored them at the bottom of European value chains. To renew their growth prospects, the 3SI countries should seek to embed themselves in wider, faster-growing global production networks that have greater potential for future value creation. Smartphone app production networks (and adjacent production networks for cybersecurity, game design, virtual reality / augmented reality design, data science, cryptography, financial technology, and machine learning / artificial intelligence) offer exactly these kinds of globalization opportunities.'¹⁹

Babones believes that two of the three pillars of Three Seas - transport and energy - can better integrate the region

with the production networks of heavy industry in Western Europe. The biggest opportunity, however, is for the third pillar, digitalisation, which could become the flywheel of the economy and the key to the region's future development. This is already an area in which Three Seas have an advantage over Western European countries, although globally they are behind the United States, China, Japan or South Korea. Their competitiveness stems from a robust polytechnic education system, high cognitive skills or an existing engineering base. It is estimated that before the COVID pandemic, as many as 250,000 people worked in computer software development in Poland. Poland is also one of the world's champions of gaming and e-banking innovation. It has also succeeded in successfully recruiting a large part of the generation of Belarusian computer scientists and programmers who fled their country from persecution by the Alexander Lukashenko regime.

This example shows that if the Three Seas countries are unable to catch up with the West in traditional industries, they should look for their chance in new sectors in which they can surpass the Germans, the French or the Dutch. Such opportunities are created by the world's most dynamically developing digital economy.

¹⁸ Salvatore Babones, op.cit.

¹⁹ op.cit.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PUBLIC DEBATE ABOUT THREE SEAS INITIATIVE

The Three Seas Initiative does not provoke much controversy and polemics in the member countries. In fact, public opinion in all Central European countries is unanimous: it is necessary to cooperate with each other in order to make up for the economic backwardness towards the West and to provide more security for the whole region. Three Seas is a good tool to achieve this

goal. In some capitals, such as Warsaw, there is more support for the project, while in others for example in Vienna there is less of it. In this context, the most interesting public debate on Three Seas was not so much about the reasonableness of the whole initiative, but about how it works in the European context.

Fried, Mosbacher, Brzezinski

The media discussion was initiated by the paper *What is the Three Seas Initiative. From vision to action*, which appeared on the trimarium.pl portal on the 5th of July 2021.²⁰ The authors were three influential figures in American political life, members of the Atlantic Council: Daniel Fried – US Ambassador to Poland from 1997 to 2000 (under Bill Clinton), Georgette Mosbacher – US Ambassador to Warsaw from 2018 to 2021 (under Donald Trump), and Ian Brzezinski – former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Europe and NATO Policy from 2001 to 2005 (under George W. Bush), privately the son of Zbigniew Brzezinski, who died in 2017.

In their publication, the authors briefly outlined the history

of the Three Seas Initiative, presenting its main strategic objectives, i.e. energy independence from Russia, making up for the civilisational and economic underdevelopment in relation to Western Europe (especially in the spheres of energy, digitalisation and transport) and infrastructural development, especially on the north-south axis. They recalled that the venture was initially geopolitical and geo-economic in nature, only to turn over time into a primarily operational project based on commercial logic. In their view, the cooperation of the countries in the Three Seas area creates the hope that the inter-war period situation will not be repeated and the animosities between individual countries will not paralyse Central Europe's ability to act together in the face of two totalitarianisms.

Criticism of Trump's policy

In their paper, the three American authors pointed out the role of the United States as a strategic guarantor of the Three Seas Initiative. They emphasised that the continuity of Washington's policy towards Central Europe would be preserved in this area, despite the changes in the White House. At the same time, however, they highlighted the significant differences between the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations on this issue. In their opinion, the Republican president, who governed America from 2017 to 2021, supported Three Seas at the expense of the cohesion of a united Europe, while his Democratic successor takes more into account the necessity of integrating the aforementioned format into the European integration process. According to the three authors, Three Seas must not be 'an instrument to weaken the EU by bringing the

US into issues of Europe's construction', because 'the Initiative has the potential (and even purpose) to bring together the US and EU in common purpose, applying to new tasks the tradition of US support for the great European project'.²¹

Further in their publication, Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski criticised what they saw as Donald Trump's wrong approach to the Three Seas issue. They wrote: 'Nevertheless, President Trump's skepticism (or worse) about the EU in general led to suspicions in Germany and the EU that the Trump Administration saw Three Seas as a mechanism to divide the EU. Some speculated that the US, using its long history of support for Central Europe, might see the Three Seas as an opportunity to advance its national interests at Europe's

²⁰ <https://trimarium.pl/projekt/brzezinski-fried-mosbacher-czym-jest-inicjatywa-trojmorza-od-wizji-do-dzialania/>

²¹ op.cit.

expense. This was a new variant on a years'-old concern that Central Europe could become Washington's "Trojan Horse" in Europe. There had been little basis for such suspicions until Trump's occasional hostility toward the EU revived them; Trump's seeming embrace of some of the Euro-skeptic governments in Central Europe led some in Western Europe to interpret his administration's support for Three Seas in a darker light than warranted. These concerns were exacerbated by some of the Euro-skeptic rhetoric coming from Warsaw in 2015. While the language in Three Seas declarations was pro-EU, some unofficial Polish speculation noted that Three Seas

New course for Three Seas

According to Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski, the aforementioned period of distrust has already been overcome in 2021. As they wrote: 'In the process, it [the Initiative] picked up regional buy-in and managed to shed some unfortunate baggage and ease initial (and generally unfounded) German and EU concerns. Three Seas had US support from the start – a rare case of a Trump Administration embracing a multilateral initiative – and also managed to survive the transition from the Trump to Biden Administration, no small feat given the politics of US foreign policy team transitions.'²³

In Fried's, Mosbacher's, and Brzezinski's view, the Three Seas Initiative should embark on a new phase of its functioning and 'strengthen its support within the EU Commission and key member states, Germany especially. As it does, it should advance its "branding" as a pro-business, pro-European initiative that can advance, simultaneously, regional, European, EU and transatlantic interests in the Three Seas region's development.

Who was right: Trump or Biden?

It is worth recalling the geopolitical context in which the Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski article in question was published. Well, it was shortly after the Joe Biden administration's decision to lift US sanctions on Nord Stream 2, which had still been imposed by Donald Trump's government. Washington's decision was warmly welcomed in Moscow and Berlin, as it opened the way for the finalisation of the gas pipeline bypassing Poland and Ukraine. This gave Vladimir Putin a new tool to put pressure on Warsaw and especially Kyiv.

On the one hand, the three American experts acknowledged in their paper that Russia poses a great danger to order in

had origins in the pre-War Polish notion of an "Intermarium" alliance of Central Europeans, a valid idea but failed initiative that sought to enable the countries "in-between" to better deal with challenges from Soviet Russia and revanchist Germany. This was interpreted by some in Europe as a Polish effort to form a regional group, bringing in the US to give it weight, at the expense of European solidarity. This was a mistaken interpretation of both the Intermarium concept and Polish aims in Three Seas (which, after all, had its origins under the previous, liberal Polish government). But it did negatively affect the initial German approach to the Three Seas.'²²

Critical to its success will be its business logic as a public-private initiative able to attract private capital based on reliable rates of return on investment.'²⁴

The American authors wrote: 'A key current objective of European IFIs is to direct 3SI investments into green technologies and away from oil and gas infrastructure. This is laudable, and it is possible that some European support to energy infrastructure could be earmarked for green projects. That could be fit into the Three Seas objectives, which could be broadened to include a green energy pillar. Given the Kremlin's use of gas as a political weapon, and threats to use Nord Stream 2 in that context, Germany especially would seem to have an obligation to support energy projects – including gas projects – that would mitigate Nord Stream 2's downside risks, such as LNG facilities and gas interconnectors. Gas is not green but is greener than coal and Germany's staunch defense of Nord Stream 2 means that it is past purity on green-only energy projects.'²⁵

the Old Continent and that Nord Stream 2 is a dangerous political weapon used by the Kremlin against Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, however, the same authors recognised Germany (i.e. the main builder of Nord Stream 2 together with Gazprom) as the main strategic partner of the United States in Europe. They also praised the Central European policy of Joe Biden, who lifted sanctions on Nord Stream 2 and thus increased the threat to the whole region. At the same time, the same experts criticised Donald Trump's policy towards the Three Seas, despite the fact that he was the one who imposed sanctions on Nord Stream 2. The Republican president also warned the Germans not to trade gas with

Moscow, as by doing so they are feeding an enemy that may soon attack. In February 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine, Trump's prediction came true one hundred percent. In this context, Georgette Mosbacher's presence among the authors of the article may come as a surprise as she was, after all, the US ambassador to Poland on Donald Trump's nomination, .

The three mentioned US experts acknowledged that 'Belatedly, the US reportedly has started consulting with Poland and Ukraine about this [the US removing sanctions on Nord Stream 2] as well. As of this writing, it is not clear whether

Three Seas Secretariat beyond Three Seas

According to Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski, in order to move to a higher level of effectiveness, a further institutionalisation of Three Seas is necessary. To this end, an international secretariat of the organisation should be established. This would make it more possible to get individual governments, international financial institutions and large companies more involved in the functioning of the format. In this context, a

Polemic by Żurawski vel Grajewski

The paper by the aforementioned three American authors provoked many reactions in the Polish media. The most extensive response was provided by Professor Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski, a member of the political cabinet of two Polish foreign ministers: Witold Waszczykowski (2015-2018) and Zbigniew Rau (2020-2023), as well as a member of the Polish President's Foreign Policy College and vice-president of the Three Seas Association. He published his polemic entitled *What the article by Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski actually tells us* on trimarium.pl.²⁸

The Polish political scientist and historian treated the above piece as 'a certain programmatic vision of the new US administration's [Joe Biden's] attitude to the Three Seas forum for Central European infrastructure cooperation'.²⁹ He began his analysis with an assessment of Donald Trump's policy of forcing NATO member states to increase spending on their defence, and thus invest in their own security. As he noted: 'The Americans promised to support allies in need, but refused to pay for their defence when those who ask for it reduced their military budgets and armies, and

these discussions will result in serious measures, but increased support for 3SI projects would logically be part of credible arrangements. 3SI could be part of a solution to a nasty problem that has divided Europe.'²⁶

Thus, the US authors themselves acknowledged that the Biden administration did not consult its Central European allies about the decision to remove sanctions on Nord Stream 2, but began to discuss the issue with them post factum. The White House had thereby created a 'nasty problem that has divided Europe', and the Three Seas should solve it.

trio of American experts from the Atlantic Council proposed that the secretariat of the Three Seas Initiative should not be based in Warsaw, Prague or Bucharest, but it 'should be based in a key West European financial center, such as Brussels, Berlin, London, or Amsterdam, a location that combines both an accumulation of commercial and governmental finance and geopolitical power'.²⁷

some like Germany, through their business dealings in the Russian direction, financed the armaments of hostile powers, threatening NATO's eastern allies forcing them to ask Americans for the help (Nord Stream 2 is emblematic of just such a Berlin policy, but let us also recall the German concept of the EU-Russia 'partnership for modernisation', the culminating blossom of which was the construction by Germany's Rheinmetall of the Russian Federation's Land Forces Training Centre in Mulino near Novgorod-Nizhny, implemented between 2011 and 2014).'³⁰

Such a policy of 'reducing the cost of stabilising the world'³¹ led America to try to build a security system based on leading regional allies who would take over some of the burden of common defence from the United States. The State Department saw several such local leaders: in the Far East, Japan, which, in cooperation with South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines, would contain Communist China; in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, which could block Iran's influence in the region; in Europe, Poland as the leader of Three Seas and the largest country on NATO's eastern flank.

22 op.cit.

23 op.cit.

24 op.cit.

25 op.cit.

26 op.cit.

27 op.cit.

28 https://trimarium.pl/think_tank/prof-zurawski-vel-grajewski-co-w-istocie-mowi-nam-tekst-frieda-mosbacher-i-brzezinskiego/

29 op.cit.

30 op.cit.

31 op.cit.

Donald Trump was disappointed with Germany because it did not want to spend money on defence, while at the same time paying massive amounts of money for energy resources to the Russians, who with this financial injection could arm themselves and threaten Europe, while the burden of defence would have to be borne by the Americans. As a result, the US president has placed a greater bet on the Three Seas countries, especially countries such as Poland and Romania, which better understood the threat from Russia. Unlike Trump, Biden chose Germany (i.e. the country with the greatest economic and political potential on the continent) as the main strategic ally

of the United States in Europe.

Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski accused the three American authors that, due to their dislike of Donald Trump, they marginalised the importance of his support for Three Seas. However, it was the American president's visit to Warsaw in 2017 that led to a strong involvement of the Baltic states and Romania in the initiative. Germany, too, stopped treating it as an 'ephemera resulting from Polish megalomania'³². They started to relate to Three Seas seriously, gaining observer status within it.

Combination in the square: Germany, US, Russia, China

Professor Żurawski vel Grajewski also polemicised the Atlantic Council analysts' claim that Germany is the most reliable US ally in Europe. He pointed out not only Berlin's attitude towards Moscow, but also towards Beijing. He recalled that an EU-China agreement was reached in December 2020 during the German presidency of the European Union, and Poland was the only country on the Old Continent to protest against it. Despite this, shortly afterwards the White House lifted sanctions against Nord Stream 2, i.e. 'punishing' Warsaw and 'rewarding' Berlin.³³

According to Żurawski vel Grajewski, the Biden administration made the mistake of assuming that it could count on Germany in its policy towards Russia and China. According to the Polish analyst, Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski made the same mistake. Their calculation was based on the false hope that Berlin would be a loyal US ally in confronting Moscow and Beijing. For the Germans, Russia was too important as a supplier of cheap gas and China too big of a market for its goods to give up such opportunities. Only Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 forced the Germans to at least partially change their attitude towards Moscow.

As Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski notes: 'A peculiar recommendation of the authors is the establishment of a permanent Secretariat of Three Seas, but beware! – based outside the member states, preferably in Berlin, Brussels, London or Amsterdam. The UK is already outside the EU, so London is mentioned here probably for reasons of courtesy, while the other locations imply a de facto domination of German

interests. The establishment of the seat of administration of a structure outside its territory would, moreover, be an unprecedented development in human history.'³⁴

In summary, the Polish author states: 'The essence of the message contained in the paper by Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski is to open Three Seas to Germany and to fit in with the US policy of recognising Berlin as a leading ally in Europe, while at the same time confirming the fact that the US, also under Biden, considers the Three Seas Initiative worthy of support and able to serve them as an instrument for limiting Chinese penetration in Central Europe and also as a key to the region's gas market, which is being opened up to US gas import (LNG).'³⁵

In this situation, argued Żurawski vel Grajewski, Polish diplomacy should convince Washington that Warsaw is a more reliable and predictable US ally in Europe than Berlin. The Democrats' calculation is based on the belief that China remains the most important adversary of the United States, and therefore Berlin's loyalty and peace on the part of Moscow should be secured in a confrontation with China. According to the Polish author, such a deal does not stand a chance: 'For the Americans will succeed neither in an anti-Chinese combination involving Germany, nor in satisfying Russia so much that it does not want more and allows the United States to concentrate on the Far East'.³⁶ Sooner or later, according to the Polish analyst, Washington will become disillusioned with Berlin's position, which defines its interests towards Beijing and Moscow differently. Then again, the Americans will turn towards Poland, seeing it as a more loyal ally.

32 op.cit.

33 op.cit.

34 op.cit.

35 op.cit.

36 op.cit.

Tomasz Teluk's response

The paper by Daniel Fried, Georgette Mosbacher and Ian Brzezinski also received a polemic from another Polish political scientist, Dr Tomasz Teluk – a long-time expert at the Centre for New Europe in Brussels and the Adam Smith Centre. He published his response on trimarium.pl website and entitled it: *Three Seas. From words to deeds.*³⁷

The Polish author rightly pointed out that the existence of Three Seas, which wants to become energetically independent from Russia, is in the interest of the Americans

America: many words, few deeds

According to Teluk, the Americans can count on much more political sympathy in Central and Eastern Europe than in the West. This is determined primarily by concern for military security, which can only be ensured by the North Atlantic Alliance led by the US. For the author, however, the US does not treat the countries of the region as it should treat allies. In this context, he mentions 'Poland's disappointment from previous hyped forms of cooperation, which turned out to be the sale to our country of a dilapidated fleet of F-16s more than a decade ago, which reported 1,700 defects in their first year of service alone and consumed almost the entire budget for repairs and unrealised offset investments'.³⁹

Tomasz Teluk also noted that the Three Seas Fund is severely underfunded, while the Americans are in no hurry to put their money into it, although it should be a good investment for them. As the author writes: 'the US has spent \$732 billion on armaments in 2019. Isn't it cheaper and more effective to build a belt of strong and independent countries from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Black Seas, separating the free world from

Germany as a commissioner of Three Seas?

The paper by Fried, Mosbacher and Brzezinski was interpreted by Tomasz Teluk as a proposal to 'put Three Seas under Germany's tutelage'.⁴¹ In his view, this is the wrong approach: 'Since the Initiative is not competitive but rather complementary to the European Union, and since Central and Eastern Europe is already sufficiently

themselves: 'The United States has, moreover, become a beneficiary of the region's energy transition by supplying liquefied natural gas to terminals in Lithuania, Poland or Croatia. In the period 2016-2019. LNG export to the European Union from the US increased by as much as 272 per cent, exceeding 10 billion cubic metres. By next year, US LNG exports will already surpass pipeline exports, according to the Energy Information Administration. The Three Seas countries have become an important partner of the US in this market.'³⁸

Russia? Wouldn't this bring much greater strategic and financial benefits for both sides? Especially since most countries in the region have not experienced the investment benefits of the Marshall Plan, estimated after inflation at around \$115 billion. A boost to the market economy would provide a strong growth impulse and contribute to global prosperity, benefiting the US in particular. Leaving the budget of the Three Seas Fund at a minimal level makes the weight of the project only illusory. With an estimated 600 billion euros of necessary investment in energy and transport, the initiative is reduced to the role of a debating club.'⁴⁰

The idea of the Atlantic Council's experts to locate the secretariat of Three Seas outside Three Seas is, according to Teluk, part of a strategy to marginalise the region. In this context, he notes that none of the 15 most important institutions of the European Union are located in Central or Eastern Europe. Thus, according to the Polish political scientist, the declarations of the Americans about the support of Three Seas are not followed by concrete actions.

integrated with Germany as its most important trading partner and its production and investment base, this means that it is of greater benefit to Europe as a whole being a voluntary alliance of independent states rather than a dependent territory to be potentially placed under receivership'.⁴²

According to the Polish political scientist, the European Union has a future as a partnership alliance of equal states, not as a structure dominated by one entity – Germany. Instead, Berlin is currently institutionalising its own interests at the EU level at the expense of other countries. This is most evident in the forcing of climate and energy policy, which breaks European solidarity and causes dependence on Russia. Germany is, according to Teluk, a key and necessary partner of Three Seas, but it cannot be the operator of this project. As the author writes: 'If Three Seas is to achieve strategic success it must

Nature abhors a vacuum

The abovementioned discussion took place in 2021, when Poland was governed by the Law and Justice party, a party that heavily criticised Berlin for maintaining too close a relationship with the Putin regime. The right-wing governments of Beata Szydło and Mateusz Morawiecki demanded many times that the Germans stop the construction of Nord Stream 2, but their arguments were never understood. In this situation, the Law and Justice party felt that the United States was a much more reliable ally for Poland than Germany, as they better understood the danger from Russia.

However, a lot has changed since then. First of all, on the 22nd of February 2022, Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine began. The new phase of the war forced a revision of Berlin's position towards Moscow. Germany was forced to recognise that its 'Wandel durch Handel' (change through trade) policy had failed. On the other hand, however, there were countries in the region breaking out of Central European solidarity in the face of the Russian threat. In the beginning it was only Hungary, over time it was joined by Slovakia and now Austria is moving in the same direction. This has resulted in a breakdown of political cooperation not only within the Visegrad Group, but also within the entire Three Seas area.

The situation in Poland also changed, as the government in Warsaw changed after the 2023 parliamentary elections. A centre-left coalition led by Civic Platform took power and Donald Tusk, a politician known in Europe for his openly pro-German policies, became prime minister. As a result, Three Seas slipped down the list of priorities of Polish diplomacy to

bounce back from its financial bottom, with the involvement of the European Union and the United States. It is important to emphasise, that of partnership involvement and not putting the Initiative under the management of the countries with the strongest political position in the EU. If this did not happen, Central Europe would not be part of a strong, undivided Europe, but a field of clashing global power interests. As history shows, such experiments have always ended tragically, as the natural drive for freedom cannot be stopped by any politics, interest or ideology.'⁴³

a distant position. This undoubtedly weakened the strength of the format, as Poland had been its main driving force since the Initiative's inception in 2015. Warsaw, however, has stopped behaving like a regional leader. It is difficult to imagine the success of a project whose leader has abdicated its role, and there is no other country capable of performing a similar function. The chances of the Central European countries organising the region on their own terms are therefore diminishing. Yet nature abhors a vacuum. There are many indications, therefore, that the role of the integrator of Three Seas may be taken over by Berlin in the near future (perhaps with strong American support, if the option represented by Joe Biden's entourage wins in the US).

Germany's strength is the institutional continuity of its foreign policy and the fact that it places the national interest above party divisions. Despite their ideological differences, the most important groupings are able to speak with one voice when it comes to the *raison d'état*. This is why key issues such as national security, geopolitics or economic diplomacy are subject to a cross-party consensus there, which is universally respected. The situation is different in Central Europe, including Poland, where party logic prevails over the good of the state. A project regarded as crucial from the point of view of the national interest can be abandoned there overnight by the new authorities without any public discussion and without the need to justify this decision publicly.

The question posed over a century ago by Halford John Mackinder remains relevant today.

37 <https://trimarium.pl/projekt/trojmorze-od-slow-do-czynow-teluk-odpowiada-na-tekst-frieda-mosbacher-i-brzezinskiego/>

38 op.cit.

39 op.cit.

40 op.cit.

41 op.cit.

42 op.cit.

43 op.cit.



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