



MARTIN ROGER

Ambasador Republiki Estonii w Polsce

AGNIESZKA LEGUCKA

Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, Akademia Finansów i Biznesu Vistula

ORCID: 0000-0002-9438-2606

e-mail: legucka@pism.pl

AGNIESZKA ORZELSKA-STĄCZEK

Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN

ORCID: 0000-0002-3070-563X

e-mail: aorzel@isppan.waw.pl

Estonia's vision of the Three Seas Initiative

Interview with The Ambassador of Estonia to Poland

H. E. Martin Roger

By prof. Agnieszka Legucka and

prof. Agnieszka Orzelska-Stąćzek, 10 september 2020

A few days ago¹ we learned that the Three Seas Initiative summit in Tallinn would not take place in its traditional form but it will be virtual due to the pandemic. What are the current plans?

The Summit and the Business Forum as originally planned will not take place. Instead, we are organizing the Three Seas Virtual Summit and Web Forum. Technically, it will be similar to how Estonia hosted meetings as a member of the United Nations Security Council² – we organized virtual meetings on Belarus and on the 8 May commemoration, so we have professional teams to work on it.

We have tried to arrange **the Three Seas Summit** twice already this year, first in June, then in October. Because of COVID-19 pandemic, it is unfortunately impossible to do it in physical form and it is a problem for all major event-organizers this year.

At the Three Seas Virtual Summit and Web Forum on October 19, 2020, there will be closed and open sessions. During the closed session the matters will be discussed between the leaders. The open session (available at 3seas.eu) will be a moderated discussion between the presidents of the Three Seas states. There will be also a part on the recent developments on the Three Seas Investment Fund. Finally, we will use this meeting to launch our ideas on the smart connectivity, on the idea that we in Estonia have been working.

■ **What is Estonia's goal as the host?**

We want to take stock of and highlight the achievements so far. First of all, the **Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund**. I think that it is a litmus test for the whole Three Seas Initiative and in a concrete way shows the commitment of the Member states. This year we have had four more states who have declared their wish to join: Estonia, Hungary, Latvia and just last week Bulgaria. Having States committing to the Fund also shows trust of the public sector to the fund, and there is a hope that the private investors will follow. When we look at the region as a whole, there will be an IMF study on the infrastructure needs. Over the next ten years

- 1 Wywiad został przeprowadzony w Ambasadzie Estonii w Warszawie. Przypisy pochodzą od redakcji.
- 2 Estonia jest obecnie niestałym członkiem Rady Bezpieczeństwa ONZ. Została wybrana na dwuletnią kadencję przez Zgromadzenie Ogólne ONZ.

the infrastructure investment needs in the region are more than a trillion EUR . The Fund is the key element of the Initiative; this is why we will highlight it during the open part of the Virtual Summit and Web Forum on October 19, 2020.

Second, we are ready to launch **an interactive progress report** on the priority connectivity projects. At the previous summits, there was a long list of projects, annexed to the Summit documents and not easily processable. We are trying to create a sort of a digital gateway: divided by sectors, by countries, which shows the countries involved in a project that is easy to use, to update. It is a digital gateway for potential investors to look at what kind of projects they could be interested in. It is to communicate in a simpler way what is actually in the pipeline, what kind of projects we are talking about in the framework of the Three Seas Initiative. Thus, people do not have to go to the last summits websites and look at these hundreds of pages of documents, tables, charts, instead they have an interactive tool so they can click on it, easily filter and search.

The smart connectivity would be the third element that we want to highlight. It will illustrate the ways how to implement digital solutions so as to make energy and transport connections faster, cheaper, smarter, to give the Central and Eastern European region a more competitive edge. If we make future investments in infrastructure, we need to take into account all the new possibilities. Investment in a road should not be only an investment to concrete.

Basically, implementing this smart connectivity concept horizontally, we should use digital platforms in all infrastructure projects.

Using digital technology in infrastructure is something that we have not discussed in depth at the previous summits.

Forth, we have created a **technical secretariat for the initiative** to ease the information flow between the member states and help us to prepare for the summit. There have been different ideas about the secretariat. Currently a technical secretariat is a team working on preparing for the summit in Tallinn. In the framework of the Three Seas Initiative we talk about projects that may last five, ten or fifteen years, so there needs to be some kind of continuity, a team. We hope that this nucleus can become a more formal structure and keep this kind of a continuity between the summits as well. The discussions on the modalities of the secretariat are still ongoing. Now we have a secretariat related to the summit,

but a secretariat for the Three Seas Initiative that is another discussion between the participating states.

The last point that we would like to highlight is the **overall visibility of the initiative**. We created a website, a brand, a logo that we have registered in the European Union Intellectual Property Office. It is important to have this unified visual identity.

To sum up, there are five different elements: the Three Seas Initiative Fund, interactive progress report, smart connectivity focus, the secretariat, the visibility, more cooperation between executive levels. These are elements that we want to bring up and underscore. The main overall goal of the summit is of course to boost economic cooperation and connectivity. These five elements are instruments to achieve that.

On the website we read that „The fifth Three Seas Summit and its third business forum will be held at the Tallinn Creative Hub on 19 & 20 October 2020. (...). It will be one of the biggest and most influential events in Estonia’s recent history, with the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of Central and Eastern European countries and to the well-being of more than one hundred million people.”³ Is it still valid?

During the course of the past decade, we have hosted different events in Estonia, held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July 2017 to the end of December 2017 or the Informal Meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in April 2010.

The Three Seas Initiative in a physical form would have been a very important meeting, bringing together 12 participating countries, partners, a huge business community. The change of the format does not change the content and the aims. This is why we will host the Virtual Summit.

We read that the Tallinn 2020 summit aims to be a summit of consolidation. What kind of consolidation?

When we took the honor to be the host of the Three Seas Initiative Summit in 2020, we looked at the past years. There were summit in Dubrovnik,

3 <https://3seas.eu/event/summit-and-business-forum>

Warsaw, Bucharest, Ljubljana, so we were to be the fifth host. We looked at the previous summits; they were always quite flexible formats and there was an exchange of ideas.

Consolidation for us is to sum up the developments so far and have a look forward into what we want to achieve within the next years. We wanted to put forward some questions, for example how to best engage the governments as the executive arm of the member states. When we look at the initiative, we talk about tangible things, long-term resource intense projects. This is usually in our countries not the mandate of the presidents to implement. This is something that the governments, together with the private investors, maybe sometimes also using the European funds, need to work on. This was one of the issues that we wanted to bring forward.

Consolidation is not to discuss about the enlargement of the initiative, but to have a serious discussion about what each of us really wants from this initiative. By consolidation we mean consolidation in terms of defining the content, the Three Seas Initiative mission. Nationally, as Estonia, we agree that the Three Seas Initiative should be open to others, but first we should agree on the principles, on how we engage with that countries.

The Three Seas Summit in October will not be a summit of enlargement. It is about discussing what we really want to achieve within the Initiative. Meetings of presidents every year, discussing that there is a financing gap, that the region has infrastructure needs is fine in terms of rising the awareness. But what do we need to do about it? Maybe it comes from our Estonian minds. We are very pragmatic. We want to have the initiative more structured, organized, with a secretariat, at least a technical secretariat, with continuity, good management of documents, website, progress reports, all that.

Why is it Estonia that will host the Three Seas Initiative 2020 summit? Which states, if any, support Estonia in organizing the event?

There is a certain geographic rotation. We do not have any rules of procedures on how to pick the next host of the summit, but there was a summit in Poland at the Baltic Sea, then in Romania at the Black Sea, in Slovenia at the Adriatic Sea, so perhaps there was an understanding that

this time a Baltic state could be a host. There is maybe a point related to the personal relationship between the presidents. Generally, this decision came out of consultations. There was a consensus between Estonia's president and government for the event. We had Poland's support before we announced our wish to organize the summit. There were no official candidatures. We announced our wish at the Ljubljana summit and it was accepted by acclamation.

What are the key challenges facing Estonia as the Three Seas Summit host?

Definitely COVID-19. Due to pandemic, we had to make changes to the plans twice and now we have changed the format. Initially, the events were to take place in June, second time in October, and now we are changing the format. It has created opportunities but obstacles as well. Opportunities in a sense that it was sometimes easier to arrange meetings of the sherpas and the points of contacts virtually. At the end of June we had the first foreign ministers' meeting of the Three Seas Initiative, also virtual.

In spite of everything, we have managed to move forward on the main elements mentioned above. The situation with the pandemic also illustrates the need to develop the digital connectivity and new modes of interaction.

In terms of substance, as a host, we have received a lot of support from all the participating states and partners. Despite the COVID we see that things are moving forward, more countries are stepping up their commitment. We have had a more structured approach to the whole project, which might have inspired at least some countries. There is also the positive pressure, when one country commits, some other start considering. It is like a positive cascade.

Overall, to host something in a situation, which is very unpredictable, certainly that was a challenge.

The list of objectives of the Three Seas initiative presented by Estonia emphasizes „economic growth, security and a stronger and more cohesive Europe.”⁴ We read that „strong economic development across the board in Europe, including the Three

4 <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives>

Seas region, will help to more effectively defend current geopolitical interests, while at the same time making a stand against interests that are not conducive." What are the current geopolitical interests and „interests that are not conducive”?

Certainly, the Three Seas Initiative is not primarily a security initiative, but it has security implications. It has several aspects that relate to security. When you look at the harmonization of economic development interests, both in the EU and in the neighborhood, you see that the Three Seas Initiative has an effect of reducing inequality in the countries and between them. This interconnection also increases the cohesion of these countries, their resilience. It has a concrete security dividend. This kind of cooperation could serve as a soft deterrence.

There are also other interests in the region. When we look at for example the Western Balkans, the Three Seas Initiative could contribute to their stabilization. Many of the Three Seas Initiative countries are immediate neighbors of the Western Balkans. When you focus on the Black Sea, there may be new opportunities also with Ukraine, Georgia, maybe with some other Caucasus countries, and in the long term vision even in the Central Asia. When we look at the transport links development, it does not only have economic purpose, but clearly has a military purpose also it has security implications. When you look at the EU, we are trying to establish closer links. There is also a clear mobility capability aspect.

Of course, there is an Estonian interest, which is I think shared in Poland, to increase presence of the US, not only military presence, but also US economic presence, which would increase the importance of the region in the eyes of the US decision makers. It would give additional positive security implications to our region. There is a unified wish in the region that the US is involved in Europe both in terms of security and economy. Being a Three Seas Initiative summit host has given us new topics for discussion with the United States.

The economic cooperation has positive security implications. For us the transatlantic link is fundamental and the Three Seas Initiative can be a positive element in building and strengthening the transatlantic community.

How important are other forms of regional cooperation for Estonia?

Estonia is a part of the several regional initiatives i.e. Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative, but it is not a part of Visegrad Group (V4) or the Lublin Triangle. The last one is quite a new initiative, however with long historical roots. We will see, what is going to come out from it, but the best thing that this initiative can do is keeping Ukraine closer to the European Union and integrating with rest of Europe.

I do not see those regional initiatives competing with each other or with the EU itself. They have their own focus. For example, B9 is more security oriented within NATO and V4 is a longstanding format.

Currently, we have moved beyond the discussion that the Three Seas Initiative is somehow competitive with the EU. It is certainly not the case. The European Commission is an important institutional partner for us.⁵ For each member state being a part of the EU is a starting point, even if within the EU there are some regional initiatives. Maybe rhetorically some countries highlight their regional identity more. However, Estonia would not have joined the Three Seas Initiative, if it were competitive vis-à-vis the EU.

What are the main achievements of the Three Seas Initiative from Estonian perspective?

This is something we have discussed at the beginning. First of all, it is a connectivity concept and a project to increase visibility and continuity of the Three Seas Initiative. I cannot say that we have managed to execute fundamental infrastructure projects, but we have managed to take a step towards financial support of such projects. There is something we can be proud of because many people have done a lot of work, by taking those hundreds of papers and filtering them with all the countries and putting them forward. That was important not to leave any projects behind. We have prioritized political projects, because all cross-border cooperation

5 Komisja Europejska ma status instytucji partnerskiej Inicjatywy Trójmorza. Zob.: Deklaracja z Bukaresztu z 2018 r.: "partner states and institutions, namely the Governments of the United States and Germany, the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank Group", <http://three-seas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/BUCHAREST-SUMMIT-JOINT-DECLARATION.pdf>.

always needs political support and good will. This is tangible work, things are moving also in the field.

■ **What are the prospects for the Three Seas Initiative?**

I think that we could see an increased role of the governments in the Three Seas Initiative, so that we have structures and place where we manage to develop projects on energy or transport, for example. This is the positive scenario, something that we should all collectively work for. A positive scenario is also that the Three Seas Initiative Fund attracts more participants, investors interested in the region and funds from private sectors for projects. The goals of the initiative need to be more concrete and streamlined, as this will drive the will for cooperation. We need to be clear what we are going to do and countries need to have clear answers on the initiative's goals. Obviously, it depends on political will. At the end of the day we have to ensure that every country benefits, otherwise they would not be interested in committing.

■ **Which countries did Estonia gain the main support from as the Three Seas summit host?**

If you are asking with who we have been working the most, that would be the co-initiators of the Three Seas Initiative – Poland and Croatia, previous hosts Romania and Slovenia but also all other Members. Our coordination was especially intense with Poland, which is the biggest partner in the region, so the relations were very tight. Warsaw was the first destination for our Summit team. We have also reached out to partners of the Three Seas Initiative – the United States, Germany and the European Commission. The transatlantic link is very important to us, as a specific value of the initiative. It is important that Germany is there, as an important player in the region.

■ **What is the approach of Russia and China towards the Three Seas Initiative?**

I can imagine that China and Russia are observing the Three Seas Initiative, do what diplomats usually do when a foreign policy related initiative is interesting to them. I presume also that they are interested in the US involvement in the region. I do not think they consider the initiative as a threat. As to China, we have had a different format i.e. 17+1.

What do you think about the enlargement of the Three Seas Initiative and including Ukraine or other states from outside of the EU?

We have not figured yet the principles on how we engage in cooperation with third parties. Now, we have members states⁶ and partners: Germany, the United States and the European Commission. We can also have guests at the summit. The details of the format have not really been discussed. There needs to be a reflection and work for ourselves. I think that first we should know what we want to do before talking on expanding the format. In terms of energy and transport connection, Ukraine is a natural partner. We need to have an open mind for the next steps.

6 Potocznie mówi się o członkach Inicjatywy Trójmorza, ale w sensie formalnym są to państwa uczestniczące w inicjatywie. Nie ma kryteriów członkostwa ani określonej procedury uzyskania statusu członka tej formy współpracy. Inicjatywa Trójmorza nie jest organizacją międzynarodową, nie ma siedziby ani statutu.