

Political and Institutional Conditions for the Very Limited Engagement of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary in the Three Seas Initiative

The article's primary goal is to identify the most critical factors that cause the low involvement of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The mentioned states (as the landlocked small ones) of Central Europe are not interested in other political projects apart from the Visegrad Group (V4) or smaller formats such as the Slavkov Triangle or Central 5. The above-mentioned regional cooperation projects will allow them to achieve their foreign policy goals. There is no need to commit resources to new ones. Therefore, so far, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary have been passive observers of the evaluation of the Three Seas Initiative. They did not present a list of serious connectivity projects, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia did not join the Three Seas Investment Fund (TSIF) established in 2019. An additional obstacle to greater involvement of the countries, as mentioned earlier in the Three Seas Initiative, is institutional conditions. Among Central European countries, the position of the President there is one of the weakest. In Hungary, the President is not even directly elected. The presidents in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia do not have any significant political ambitions. Therefore, they do not need to use the Three Seas Initiative to fight on the internal political scene.

Key words: Central Europe, Three Seas Initiative, Visegrad Group, small states.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the political changes initiated in 1989, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary have constituted the core of a renewed Central Europe.¹ The relations between these countries were more than friendly neighbors and were well illustrated by the creation of the Visegrad Group in 1991. This fundamental difference was especially visible when we were trying to compare it to the collapse of the Soviet Union or the civil war in Yugoslavia. Despite political differences and sometimes different methods of political or economic reforms, these four countries have always been closer to each other than others in the Central European region. Therefore, it seems that the new regional cooperation project on a larger scale

¹ More: Piotr Bajda, 'The Visegrad Group between Trade-mark and the Political Organization of the Peripheral Countries', in Juraj Marušiak, ed., *Is Visegrad still a Central European 'Trade Mark'?* (Bratislava: Institute of Political Science Slovak Academy of Sciences and VEDA Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2013), pp. 30–32.

proposed by the presidents of Poland and Croatia should meet with a positive reaction from such close partners. That did not happen. Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians (though they are in the slightest form) reacted quite coolly to the invitation to the first summit of the Three Seas Initiative in Dubrovnik in 2016. Furthermore, to this day, they remain the most passive members of the Three Seas Initiative. However, it should be noted at the beginning that all three countries' attitudes were slightly different. The Czech Republic has not yet fixed its attitude towards the Three Seas Initiative, although it occasionally reflects on it. An excellent example is the short information about 3SI in Prime Minister Peter Fiala's expose delivered in December 2021.² The Three Seas Initiative is not a reference point for Slovak political elites at all. It can be heard that most will follow and support the Czech or Austrian position.³ However, Hungarians' activity in the Three Seas Initiative can be defined in terms of apparent activities, as noted by Dominik Héjj, an expert on Hungarian issues.⁴

With the above in mind, the main aim of the article is to identify the political, constitutional, legal, and organizational reasons why the Three Seas Initiative, instead of connecting the closest partners even more, is rather a source of disappointment than a way to build solid foundations for deeper cooperation. Why has none of the smaller Visegrad countries organized the Three Seas Initiative summit to this day? Moreover, their involvement in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund's (TSIF) activities is only declarative till now. In trying to answer this question we use primarily the decision-making and institutional methods.

DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

The first political reason may be identified as Poland's failure to communicate with its Visegrad partners in the initial phase of

² Piotr Bajda, *Stanowisko Republiki Czeskiej wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza w latach 2016–2024. Stałe poszukiwanie własnej roli*, <https://trojmorze.isppan.waw.pl/publikacje-w-ramach-centrum-badawczego-3si/stanowisko-republiki-czeskiej-wobec-inicjatywy-trójmorza-w-latach-2016-2024-stale-poszukiwanie-wlasnej-roli/> (access: 28 June 2024).

³ Tomáš Strážay, 'Agenda Setter of Agenda Follower? Slovakia's Perception of the 3SI and Other Regional Formats', in Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, ed., *The Three Seas Initiative an Original Concept of the Regional Cooperation in Different Approaches* (Warsaw: Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2024), p. 190.

⁴ Dominik Héjj, *Węgry wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Collegium Interethnicum, 2020), p. 5.

preparations for the creation of the Three Seas Initiative.⁵ The absence of the Czech Republic and Slovakia presidents at the first summit in 2016 was a personal unpleasant surprise for the Polish President—Andrzej Duda. The head of the Czech delegation was Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Václav Kolaja. The Slovak Republic was represented at a slightly higher level by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Digital Agenda and Investment—Peter Pellegrini.⁶ This was not the only surprise; the Chancellery of the Polish President sent an inquiry to academic and expert centers asking them to prepare policy analyses after the first summit in Dubrovnik. One of the detailed questions was why the Czechs and Slovaks did not take advantage of the invitation and sent a delegation at a lower rank. It was an opportunity to conduct a series of expert-level consultations with partners from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The first conclusion of these talks was that the interlocutors emphasized the lack of prior consultations at the government and presidential levels. Czechs and Slovaks were surprised by an invitation to Dubrovnik in 2016. The lack of these talks meant that the Three Seas Initiative was perceived more as a Polish–Croatian intrigue than as an opportunity to deepen cooperation.

Additionally, both capitals feared that Warsaw's greater involvement in the Three Seas Initiative format would lead to the marginalization of the Visegrad Group. The Visegrad Group has been experiencing a deep crisis since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that the Visegrad Group was previously one of the most essential tools in the foreign policy instrument, not only at the regional level but also at the European Union forum. Exclusive membership in the V4 allowed, especially in the case of small countries, to strengthen their voice in the EU. As former Slovak Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda emphasized, if the four countries agreed on a common position on the European forum, Bratislava could, during its V4 presidency, speak on behalf of 60 million EU citizens from Central Europe and not 5 million Slovaks only.⁷ To understand this attitude, it is worth using the theory of minilateralism by Molse

⁵ More: Konrad Walczuk, 'Formaty współpracy państw Europy Środkowej – założenia i znaczenie', in idem, ed., *Polityka europejska państw Europy Środkowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademii Wymiaru Sprawiedliwości, 2024), pp. 92–93.

⁶ Peter Pellegrini was elected President of Slovakia in the last elections in April 2024.

⁷ More: Piotr Bajda, 'The Geopolitical Challenges for Small European States', in Jacek Kolczkowski, ed., *Social Dictionaries. Geopolitics* (Cracow: Ignatianum University Press, 2021), pp. 342–43.

Naim, published in 2009 in the *Foreign Policy Magazine*. He said: 'We should bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem. Think of this as minilateralism's magic number'.⁸ The G7 format is such a magic number, as is the Visegrad Four. Especially when the V4 is treated by small countries as an auxiliary format for achieving their goals on a broader European forum. Moreover, as Paweł Ukielski from the Polish Academy of Sciences underlined, the Visegrad Group, although it is not a political alliance, remained the most compact grouping in Central Europe and capable of acting in the international arena.⁹ Therefore, faster small countries of Central Europe will create a limited number of members formats of regional cooperation than enter broader alliances. It is worth noting here that the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary can cooperate with each other in different formats other than the Visegrad Group. In February 2015, on the initiative of Czech diplomacy, a Slavkov Format was created, which announced the coordination of European policy of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria.¹⁰ The Hungarians decided to involve another regional format—Central 5—together with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Slovenia, which was initialized in 2020 in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their goal was coordination and cooperation in combating the effects of the pandemic.¹¹ It seems that for Bratislava, Budapest, and Prague, the format of cooperation between three, four, or five countries is still to be managed at the regional level. Cooperation of twelve countries within the Three Seas Initiative (and today 13) is already too much of a challenge for the Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians. Additionally, as aptly noted by prof. Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek plays a particularly important role in narrative, information, and messages in the case of small countries to build collective consciousness and consensus.¹² If we add to this

⁸ Moisés Naim, *Minilateralism. The Magic Number to Get Real International Action*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/> (access: 30 June 2024).

⁹ Paweł Ukielski, 'Mapa Trójmorza. Przegląd punktów wspólnych i rozbieżności w polityce 12 państw regionu', *Raport 3* (Warsaw: Klub Jagielloński, 2016), p. 8.

¹⁰ More: Dariusz Kała, 'The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?', *Bulletin PISM* 751: 19, 2015, https://www.pism.pl/publications/The_Slavkov_Triangle_A_Rival_to_the_Visegrad_Group_ (access: 5 July 2024).

¹¹ Minister dr. Logar se bo na Dunaju udeležil srečanja s kolegi iz Avstrije, Madžarske, Slovaške in Češke, <https://www.gov.si/dogodki/2020-06-16-minister-dr-logar-se-bo-na-dunaju-udelezil-srecanja-s-kolegi-iz-avstrije-madzarske-slovaske-in-ceske/> (access: 5 July 2024).

¹² Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, 'The Three Seas Initiative as an opportunity and challenge', in Piotr Bajda, ed., *Small States within the European Union. Challenges–Dilemmas–Strategies* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademii Wymiaru Sprawiedliwości, 2023), p. 130.

the specific hypersensitivity of the leaders of small countries, we have a partial answer to the fundamental question.

INTERNAL POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES TO THE ATTITUDE OF THE THREE SMALL V4 COUNTRIES TOWARD THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE

The lack of prior consultations was not the only reason why small Visegrad Group countries did not respond enthusiastically to the offer to engage in the Three Seas Initiative.¹³ There is also a lack of interest in joining regional cooperation formats extending beyond the immediate neighborhood. Specific political conditions in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia are also equally important. This is also an obstacle.

All three described small countries of the Visegrad Group do not formally differ from other Central European countries. Everywhere in the region, executive power is in the hands of the government elected by the parliamentary majority (parliamentary-cabinet system). The President's powers are mainly limited to his/her protocol and ceremonial role. Even the method of electing the President was not apparent for a long time. On this background, Hungarians are the most consistent, and to this day, they choose the President indirectly in the vote of the National Assembly (Hungarian: *Országgyűlés*). In this way, Hungarians elected their seven presidents: Árpád Göncz (1990–2000); Ferenc Mádl (2000–05); László Sólyom (2005–10); Pál Schmitt (2010–12); János Áder (2012–22); Katalin Novák (2022–24); and Tamás Sulyok (2024 till now).

For the first twenty years, the Czech Republic elected its President similarly to Hungary. Václav Havel (1993–2003) as well as Václav Klaus (2003–13) were elected by parliament at a joint meeting of the lower (the Chamber of Deputies; Czech: *Poslanecká sněmovna Parlamentu České republiky*) and upper (the Senate; Czech: *Senát Parlamentu České republiky*) houses. It was only in 2013 that Czechs elected their President in direct elections for the first time. The change in the method of electing the President was the result of discussions in the Czech Republic and the promise of the conservative-centrist coalition that

¹³ An interesting analysis of the sources of differences in the foreign policy of Poland and the other Visegrad countries was presented by Andrzej Wojtaszak, 'Stanowisko państw Europy Środkowej wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza', *Spółeczeństwo i Polityka* 66: 1, 2021, pp. 49–54.

won the 2010 elections. In his expose, the newly elected prime minister Petr Nečas emphasized that the direct election of the President would give citizens a voice.¹⁴ This is how the Czechs elected Miloš Zeman as their President in 2013 and 2018 and Petr Pavel in 2023.

In the case of the Slovak Republic, only the first president, Michal Kováč, was elected indirectly by members of the National Council (Slovak: *Národná rada Slovenskej republiky*) in 1993 for a five-year term. The years 1993–1998 were very specific in the political history of the Slovak Republic. They were characterized by the dominant position of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar on the domestic political scene, whose style of governance led to many conflicts and the international isolation of Slovakia at the end of his term. It is worth recalling that Slovakia was excluded from the group of the first Central European countries invited to NATO and the European Union as the only one from the Visegrad Group.¹⁵ In these circumstances, the parliamentary elections held in 1998 were fundamental for the place of Slovakia in Europe. The democratic opposition promised that, as one of the elements of the democratization of the state, the President would be elected in direct elections. After winning the elections, the promise was fulfilled, and an appropriate amendment was introduced to the constitution. In this way, former communist party activist and mayor of Košice Rudolf Schuster became the first directly elected President of the Slovak Republic in 1999 for a five-year term. The second directly elected President of Slovakia was Ivan Gašparovič (long-time speaker of the National Council under Prime Minister Mečiar), who served two terms from 2004 to 2014. Until now, subsequent Slovak presidents have served one term in office: independent Andrej Kiska (2015–2019) and liberal Zuzana Čaputová (2019–2024). We will see whether the newly elected President, Peter Pellegrini, will want to continue his mission in a second term.

However, it is characteristic that in the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a change in the method of electing the President did not result in an extension of his/her prerogatives. Despite the fact that the directly elected head of state has the most extensive political mandate, the presidents in Prague and Bratislava still perform mainly

¹⁴ *Vláda České republiky, Přímá volba prezidenta*, <https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/prima-volba-prezidenta--78534> (access: 5 July 2024).

¹⁵ A detailed analysis of the political processes taking place in Slovakia at that time in: Piotr Bajda, *Elity polityczne na Słowacji. Kręta droga do nowoczesnego państwa* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN and Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, 2010), pp. 114–15.

protocol functions. Comparing the presidents of the Visegrad Group countries, the Polish one has the strongest political position. Of the remaining three, the Czech President has the most informal power. This is related to the political tradition and the prestige of the head of state built by figures such as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk before World War II and by Václav Havel after the fall of communism in 1989 and the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Indeed, the informal position of the Czech President was somewhat eroded during the times of Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman. However, the current President, Petr Pavel, is trying to rebuild the prestige of the office. In the case of the Slovak Republic, the most characteristic figure was the first president, Michal Kováč. Many considered him the most effective defender of the remnants of democracy during the Mečiar government. Suffice it to say that one of the elements of the fight at the heights of power between the prime minister and the President was the kidnapping of Kováč's son by Slovak secret services SIS (Slovak: *Slovenská informačná služba*) to force him to resign from office in 1995.¹⁶ The rest did not have such challenges in their relations with Slovak prime ministers. Maybe the last little bit of Zuzana Čaputová at the end of her term, when Robert Fico took power after winning the elections in the fall of 2023. The Hungarian President is in the weakest political position, not only because of the way of election indirectly through the parliament but also from the perspective of public opinion. It is worth recalling that even the Visegrad Declaration (1991) was not signed by at the time president Árpád Göncz but by the prime minister, although the signatures of Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa were put next to it.

In the case of the presidential format of international cooperation, such formal and political weakness of heads of state does not facilitate the decision-making process regarding involvement in the project. In this situation, presidents must demonstrate exceptional mobilization or a well-defined goal to engage in projects that are on the margin of their competencies and prerogatives. Therefore, it was easier to notice such mobilization in the case of the Baltic states, which, through their involvement in the Three Seas Initiative, wanted to strengthen their security architecture and relations with the United States of America. Hence, the organization of presidential summits in Estonia in 2020, Latvia in 2022, and the last in Lithuania in 2024. We also see greater involvement from Romania, Bulgaria, and the Western Balkan

¹⁶ Euba Lesná, *Únos demokracie. Zo zakulisia Slovenskej tajnej služby* (Praha and Bratislava: G plus G and Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2021), pp. 101–12.

countries (Slovenia and Croatia). We can explain this by its smaller networking in the Central European region than in the case of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

A sense of threat and good regional networking is necessary for Bratislava, Prague, and Budapest to have greater political motivation to engage their resources in the Three Seas Initiative. This trend can be illustrated by the table below, which presents the presence of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary presidents at previous summits of heads of state.

TABLE 1
Participation of the presidents of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovak Republic in the summits of the Three Seas Initiative (2016–2024)

No.	Year	Place	Czech Republic	Hungary	Slovak Republic
1.	2016	Dubrovnik (Croatia)	Absence	János Áder	Absence
2.	2017	Warsaw (Poland)	Absence	János Áder	Andrej Kiska
3.	2018	Bucharest (Romania)	Absence	Absence	Andrej Kiska
4.	2019	Ljubljana (Slovenia)	Miloš Zeman	Absence	Absence
5.	2020	Tallinn (Estonia)*	Miloš Zeman	János Áder	Zuzana Čaputová
6.	2021	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Absence	János Áder	Absence
7.	2022	Riga (Latvia)	Absence	Katalin Novák	Absence
8.	2023	Bucharest (Romania)	Absence	Katalin Novák	Zuzana Čaputová
9.	2024	Vilnius (Lithuania)	Petr Pavel	Tamás Sulyok	Absence

* The presidential summit in Tallinn was held in a hybrid nature due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Only the President of Estonia (host), the President of Poland (initiator of the Three Seas Initiative), and the President of Bulgaria (host of the next summit) were physically present in the capital of Estonia; the others connected virtually for their speeches.

As can be seen from the table above, the three presidents described participated together in the summit of the Three Seas Initiative only once in Estonia. However, it was a special meeting organized in a hybrid format because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary presidents did not have to go to Tallinn; they only connected during the main session online.

Another effect of this attitude is the need for more willingness to organize a presidential summit in any of the three analyzed states. So far, meetings have not been organized in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Hungary. However, it must be admitted that Hungary was the closest to doing this. In the Joint Declaration of the Eighth Summit of Three Seas Initiative (Bucharest, 6–7 September 2023), it was written in the last 21st point: ‘We welcome the commitment of

the Republic of Lithuania to host the next 3SI Summit and Business Forum in 2024 and of Hungary to host the Summit and Business Forum in 2025'.¹⁷ Today, we know that the presidential summit will be organized not in Hungary but in Poland in April 2025. This will be a special moment of farewell for Polish President Andrzej Duda, who ends his second term next year.

The change in the location of the presidential summit shows another feature that characterizes the behavior of politicians representing small countries. The Hungarian President Katalina Novák tried very hard in Bucharest to have the next meeting take place in her country. On the one hand, it always raises the position of the host country in the international arena because it focuses the attention of the world's media on a given event. On the other hand, organizing the summit may strengthen the position of the main host—the President—on the domestic political scene. Another intention may be to emphasize the unique relationship with one of the partners. In President Katalina Novák's case, the idea to organize the Three Seas Initiative summit has resulted from the desire to rebuild Hungarian-Polish relations, which were severely damaged after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The Hungarian President could also use next year's meeting to at least slightly strengthen her position in relations with Prime Minister Victor Orbán. As we know, President Katalina Novák resigned in February 2024. The reason for the resignation was a wave of criticism after the pardon of a person convicted of sexual crimes against minors.¹⁸ The new Hungarian President—Tomás Suylok (former President of the Constitutional Court), shows no ambitions on the internal political scene. Therefore, it was unsurprising that he decided not to organize the presidential summit in 2025. He handed over the organization of the next meeting to Poland, which was presented as a special gesture in the name of Polish-Hungarian friendship. A special moment was chosen to announce this decision—the day of Polish-Hungarian friendship, celebrated since 2007.¹⁹

¹⁷ Joint Declaration of the Eighth Summit of Three Seas Initiative (Bucharest, 6–7 September 2023), <https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-releases/joint-declaration-of-the-eighth-summit-of-the-three-seas-initiative-bucharest-6-7-september-2023> (access: 6 July 2024).

¹⁸ More: Ilona Gizińska, 'Hungary: Resignation of President Novák', *Analyses OSW*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-02-13/hungary-resignation-president-novak> (access: 7 July 2024).

¹⁹ *Oświadczenie prezydenta RP po spotkaniu z prezydentem Węgier*, <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/oswiadczenie-prezydenta-rp-po-spotkaniu-z-prezydentem-wegier,83022> (access: 7 July 2024).

In the case of other Czech Republic or Slovakia presidents, they have not taken any actions aimed at strengthening their position in the domestic or international arena. Only in the last few months of his term did he have to cohabitate with the center-right government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala. In turn, former Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová could not use her prerogatives and available tools in foreign policy to build a stronger position in the political arena. From this perspective, observing the actions taken by the new presidents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia—Petr Pavel and Peter Pellegrini will remain interesting. Each of them won the election as the candidate of the ruling coalition camp. However, Petr Pavel and Peter Pellegrini have visible ambitions to build the image of independent and autonomous politicians. The Czech President made it in time to be present during the last Three Seas Initiative summit in Vilnius, which was organized in April of this year. Regional cooperation was one of the topics discussed during the first official visit of the Slovak president to Poland in July 2024. Although it is also a good illustration of the Slovak attitude towards the Three Seas Initiative, which has not changed in any fundamental way since Peter Pellegrini took office. The media release that appeared after the meeting of the presidents of Poland and Slovakia looked slightly different in Warsaw and Bratislava. The Slovak press agency TASR, reporting on Peter Pellegrini's visit to Warsaw, underlined that the topic of the talks was regional cooperation in the format of the Visegrad Group and the Bucharest Nine.²⁰ The official website of the Chancellery of the President of Poland mentions that the topic of discussion was also cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative format.²¹ The website of the office of the President of the Slovak Republic also does not mention the Three Seas Initiative. However, it quotes Peter Pellegrini's statement that vertical cooperation in Central Europe along the north-south line is also essential.²² As an aside, it is worth noting that the Polish Press Agency annotated the visit of the Slovak president only on its English version of the website. The press release does

²⁰ Alexandra Kubalová, *Prezidenti Slovenska a Poľska ocenili vzťahy oboch krajín*, https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/prezidenti-sr-a-polska-ocenili-vztahy/806642-clanok.html?utm_source=teraz&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=click&utm_content=.%253Bw%253BwIndex%253Btop (access: 8 July 2024).

²¹ *Prezydent Słowacji z wizytą w Polsce*, <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/prezydent-slowacji-z-wizyta-w-polsce,88523> (access: 8 July 2024).

²² *Prezident navštívil Poľsko*, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezident-navstivil-polsko/> (access: 8 July 2024).

not mention any regional cooperation format focusing on the NATO summit in Washington.²³

However, what may surprise observers and researchers is the complete lack of interest of the three small Visegrad Group states in using 3SI to pursue national interests. This, however, requires defining in advance what each of the countries wants to achieve thanks to involvement in the Three Seas Initiative. Such an in-depth analysis has yet to be conducted in any of the described states. Some fragmentary knowledge about the reasons for this attitude could be obtained as a result of the Three Seas Initiative Research Center project implemented at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. A series of study visits carried out in all three small V4 countries allowed us to conclude that the Hungarian government has developed some aspects of the national strategy towards the Three Seas Initiative. In the rhetorical sphere, Budapest's involvement in 3SI is intended to emphasize the uniqueness of its relationship with Poland. Since the Three Seas Initiative is the Polish President's own project, the Hungarians symbolically show how much they care about good bilateral relations.²⁴ In reality, Hungarians are most interested in attracting foreign investors, especially in the face of restrictions on the disbursement of European Union funds due to the conflict over the rule of law. That is why Hungary joined the Three Seas Investment Fund as the only small country of the Visegrad Group. Budapest indeed paid the minimum entry fee of EUR 20 million, hoping that some of the submitted Hungarian projects would receive funding. However, this has not happened to this day, and it has caused great disappointment on the Hungarian side. However, Budapest was the Visegrad Group country that most actively worked to create the List of Priority Interconnection Projects of the Three Seas Initiatives. The list includes 15 Hungarian projects, while Poland presented 11, Slovakia 7, and the Czechs 2.²⁵ Slovaks presented seven projects that are important to them, but without much hope that any of them will be implemented. As Julita Wilczek and Andrzej Rudowski said: 'Bratislava does not believe that Fund can help implement

²³ *Poland, Slovakia Have Overcome Various Crises Together—Slovak President*, <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/poland-slovakia-have-overcome-various-crises-together-slovak-president> (access: 8 July 2024).

²⁴ A few years ago, as mentioned above, Dominik Héjj, an expert in Hungarian issues, noticed this in his policy paper: Héjj, *Węry wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza*, p. 7.

²⁵ *The List of Priority Interconnection Projects*, <https://3seas.eu/about/progressreport> (access: 8 July 2024).

Slovakia its priority projects, and the Fund's professionalism and independence are undermined in the Slovak's eyes by the constant lack of provide investors and the lack of financing by EU and EBRD'.²⁶ This assessment of the fund may also be due to the decision not to invest even the minimum amount of EUR 20 million for now. In the case of the Czech Republic, political and procedural issues stand in the way of joining the TSIIF. Zbyněk Stanjura—the Czech Minister of Finance, who comes from the conservative ODS party, successfully questions the returnability of investment till now.²⁷ However, in September 2024, the Czech National Development Investments and the Polish National Development Bank signed an agreement establishing the 3SI Innovation Fund. Both institutions contributed 20 million euros each intended for companies in the growth phase in the Central Europe. It should be emphasized that the new financial instrument was created within the European Investment Fund, which will manage the collected funds.²⁸ It is too early to judge whether the Czech involvement means a change of approach to 3SI or rather inclusion in a new European fund.

It is difficult to determine precisely how much institutional and political conditions hinder the involvement of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary in the Three Seas Initiative. And to what extent are they just an excuse not to attempt to define national goals? One thing is certain: in the three mentioned capitals, there is no minimum determination to use the new instrument of regional cooperation. Despite the awareness, especially among Czechs and Slovaks, of their crucial role due to their geographical location. Currently, bypassing one of these two passive countries trying to build a north-south connection is impossible. This was pointed out by the current President of Slovakia, Peter Pellegrini, in 2017. At that time, he headed the Slovak delegation as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Investments during the Three Seas Initiative summit in Warsaw.²⁹

²⁶ Julita Wilczek and Andrzej Rudowski, *The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. Towards the operationalization of the Initiative?* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego, 2024), p. 32.

²⁷ Vít Dostál, 'The Czech Republic and the Three Seas Initiative', in Orzelska-Stączek, ed., *The Three Seas Initiative*, p. 40.

²⁸ BGK jednym z inwestorów nowego funduszu zarządzanego przez EFI – Three Seas Initiative Innovation Fund, <https://www.bgk.pl/aktualnosc/bgk-jednym-z-inwestorow-nowego-funduszu-funduszy-zarzadzanego-przez-efi-three-seas-initiative-innovation-fund-1/> (access: 28 February 2025).

²⁹ Slovensko v rámci iniciatívy Trojmorja zohráva kľúčovú úlohu, <https://mirri.gov.sk/aktuality/informatizacia/slovensko-v-ramci-iniciativy-trojmorja-zohrava-klucovu-ulohu/> (access: 8 July 2024).

INTERNATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF THE ATTITUDE OF THE THREE SMALL V4 COUNTRIES TOWARDS THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE

The attitude of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary towards the Three Seas initiative is influenced not only by domestic political factors but also by the international relations of each of the three countries individually. Small states are very specific actors in international relations. Small countries often struggle with political, economic, and defense weaknesses. A small territory, a small number of citizens, a weak army, and very often low nominal GDB are daily challenges for them. In foreign policy, the first effect of limited human resources (because of a small number of citizens) is a smaller range of conducting active diplomacy. What is visible on the map of diplomatic representation in the world? Poland definitely has more embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic representations than, for example, Slovakia.³⁰ At the regional level, an apparent typical behavior that characterizes small states is to limit cooperation to their immediate neighborhood.

This is best seen in the example of Czech foreign policy. For years, it has been an axiom of Czech diplomacy to maintain above-standard relations with all of its neighbors. Since 2015, cooperation with Germany has been carried out in the format of a strategic dialogue. Even on the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Germany is listed first in the chapter on European policy.³¹ The above-standard nature of relations with Poland is underlined by regular intergovernmental consultations and the functioning of the Polish-Czech Forum since 2010.³² The Polish-Czech Forum is also listed on the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, but several positions are lower than the strategic dialogue with Germany. Relations with Slovakia have been exceptional since the peaceful division of Czechoslovakia in 1993, which was called the Velvet Divorce. Until recently, all this was supplemented by cooperation within the Visegrad Group and with Austria in the Slavkov Triangle since 2015. It can be said that the Czechs are in a unique situation where relations with their closest neighbors are part of the consensus of all political forces. The details

³⁰ Piotr Bajda, 'Small European States – a Specific Actor in International Relations', in idem, ed., *Small States within the European Union*, pp. 74–80.

³¹ See: https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/cr_v_evrope/cesko_nemecky_strategicky_dialog/index.html (access: 9 July 2024).

³² <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/forum-polsko-czeskie> (access: 8 July 2024).

may change, but so far, no Czech government has devastated relations with any of its neighbors.

The Slovak Republic is not in such a comfortable position. It is not easy to talk about a consensus in Bratislava's foreign policy. A change of government has always led to a deep political correction, also at the regional level. A good example may be the last parliamentary elections in 2023, which allowed Prime Minister Robert Fico to return to power. The previous government maintained cool relations with Hungary due to Budapest's attitude towards the Ukrainian-Russian war. While the current Slovak officially socialist government, together with the ruling conservatives in Hungary, is trying to call for peace talks and an end to the war.

Hungarians are in the most challenging situation in relations with their neighbors. On the one hand, we are dealing with the longest-serving prime minister, Victor Orbán (since 2010), and foreign minister Péter Szijjártó (since 2014), which should translate into stable neighborly relations. Nevertheless, Hungary's struggles with the past of the Peace Treaty of Trianon (signed in 1920) are occasionally used by those in power for electoral mobilization.³³ This always causes anxiety among neighbors where the Hungarian minority lives and does not make it easier to build relationships based on complete trust. However, an even bigger problem for Hungary is its problematic relationship with the European Commission. Budapest's long-standing dispute with Brussels over the rule of law leaves Hungary in partial isolation. This also translates into less dynamic relations with other Central European countries. The situation is further aggravated by Hungary's attitude towards the war in Ukraine. In 2022, for the first time in the history of the Visegrad Group, there was a boycott of the meeting of defense ministers organized during the Hungarian presidency.³⁴ Since then, the political dimension of V4 cooperation has been severely limited. Therefore, among the countries described, Hungary is more willing to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in meetings organized on the forum of the Three Seas Initiative. This is a kind of way for them to get out of partial isolation.

³³ A few years ago, a fascinating report was prepared by the Center for Eastern Studies about the importance of Trianon for Hungarians: Andrzej Sadecki, *The Long Shadow of the Treaty of Trianon. Hungary's Struggles with the Past* (Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 2020).

³⁴ Anna Wolska, *Nie będzie spotkania ministrów obrony V4. Przyczyną stosunek węgierskich władz do inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę*, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/bezpieczenstwo-i-obrona/news/nie-bedzie-spotkania-ministrow-obrony-v4-przyczyna-stosunek-wegierskich-wladz-do-inwazji-rosji-na-ukraine/> (access: 9 July 2024).

The European policy of all three countries is an even more important factor than neighborly relations. Since we assume that regional cooperation is of an auxiliary nature in achieving main foreign policy goals, and the priorities are position in the European Union and NATO as well as partnership with the United States. These factors equally determine the attitude of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary towards new regional cooperation projects. It was the fear of a negative reaction from the EU, and Germany caused the Czechs and Slovaks to respond without enthusiasm to the Polish proposal to get involved in the Three Seas Initiative. As Vít Dostál noted, the Czech authorities 3SI 'perceived as an initiative that could potentially be leveraged by Poland in a power struggle with Berlin and Brussels'.³⁵ Only the participation of the head of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, at the Three Seas Initiative summit in Bucharest in 2018 partially dispelled the concerns of the Czechs.

Similarly, Slovaks are trying to present their involvement in 3SI in a broader European context, thus emphasizing the subsidiary importance of regional cooperation. During the Three Seas Initiative summit in 2017, Slovak President Andrej Kiska directly pointed to this European dimension. He said: 'At the 3SI meeting, we discussed the connectivity of the region in order to make the European Union stronger. This is the project's main goal: the more the states are interconnected, the stronger is the EU'.³⁶ A similar attitude was presented by his successor Zuzana Čaputová, who stated in 2020 that 'Slovakia supports all initiatives that will enhance connectivity within the European Union and will be governed by its principles and policies'.³⁷ As Tomáš Strážay emphasized European character of the Three Seas Initiative can be considered as the 'leitmotiv of Slovakia's position vis-à-vis the 3SI in general'.³⁸

Paradoxically, the European dimension is also one of the most critical factors in Hungary's attitude towards the Three Seas Initiative. Despite Budapest's dispute over the rule of law with the European Commission, one of Hungary's political goals is maintaining good relations with Germany. This is necessary for Hungary's further

³⁵ Vít Dostál, 'The Czech Republic and the Three Seas Initiative', p. 34.

³⁶ *Slovensko v rámci iniciatívy Trojmorja zohráva kľúčovú úlohu*, <https://mirri.gov.sk/aktuality/informatizacia/slovensko-v-ramci-iniciativy-trojmorja-zohrava-klucovu-ulohu/> (access: 9 July 2024).

³⁷ *Three Seas Virtual Summit, the Presidents' Virtual Panel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyINTOGBswk> (access: 9 July 2024).

³⁸ Tomáš Strážay, 'Agenda Setter of Agenda Follower?', p. 184.

economic development, as trade with the EU accounts for 80% of the total, and Germany is the most essential partner among others.³⁹

Such a strong desire to include the Three Seas Initiative in the European context may be partly a result of the weak involvement of the United States. Despite President Donald Trump's loud American announcement of interest in Central Europe in Warsaw in 2017, there have yet to be any tangible results. In November 2020, the US Congress unanimously adopted a resolution supporting the Three Seas Initiative in its efforts to increase energy independence and infrastructure connectivity, thereby strengthening the United States and European national Security.⁴⁰ However, we have not seen any concrete action during Joe Biden's presidency. First of all, the promise to commit American money to the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund still needs to be fulfilled. President Trump first promised \$1 billion for TSIIF, then reduced the amount to \$300 million, but even this still needs to be implemented by him and his successor. The lack of involvement of American funds has largely limited the success of the Three Seas Initiative as a regional project and the attitude of individual countries towards it. This also applies to the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. On the occasion of the upcoming 3SI summit in Warsaw, we will see what role the project will play in the new administration of President Trump.

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³⁹ Dominik Héjj, 'Czy bez dostępu do morza Węgry przyłączą się do Trójmorza?', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 73: 2, 2020, p. 113.

⁴⁰ *House of Representatives Resolution 672*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/672/text> (access: 10 July 2024).

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