

When the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was established 2015 not many experts perceived it as an important vehicle of strengthening the Central Europe's cooperation. It was a time of the Visegrad Group's (V4) triumph, which was able to block reforms of EU policies opening the community for inflow of migrants. As compared to this the 3SI aims seemed quite modest. The initiative since its beginning declared focus on development of the infrastructural connections (transport, energy, and digital) on the North-South axis of the Central Europe. The assumption was that lack of such connectivity constituted a risk that could be exploited by Russia especially in the area of gas networks. Furthermore, lack of proper transport infrastructure weakened the regional cooperation by hampering development of economic relations.

The region's weak connectivity is not a coincident, but an inheritance of the political processes from the past. Across the XIX century, so the age of the industrial revolution, which unleashed large programmes of infrastructure construction many countries of the region constituted peripheral parts of empires. Growing distrust and rivalry between the Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, which ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the World War I, did not create proper conditions for connecting the transborder areas. The logic of disconnectivity prevailed at that time.

Looking from this perspective the 3SI was a chance to realize goals not achieved by other regional formats. It is a rarely remembered fact that already the original Visegrad declaration signed yet between Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland stressed that their governments 'will pay attention to infrastructure development [...] mainly on the North-South direction and coordination of their energy and telecommunication systems development'.¹ In the 90s the

¹ <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/visegrad-declarations/deklapl> (access: 5 January 2025).

political context seemed favourable to realize the goal. Already in 1992, the V4 countries established the Central European Free Trade Agreement, which aimed at deepening of economic cooperation, after trade flows between them had collapsed as a result of transformation from socialism to market economy. Trade liberalization contributed to the reversal of the downward tendency as goods exchange started to dynamically increase. Therefore, the next countries of the region decided to join, namely Slovenia (1996), Romania (1997), and Croatia (2003). So basically, all the future 3SI participating states had tried to establish better conditions for economic cooperation already in the 90s before they entered the European Union. However, it was not enough to develop infrastructure connections as the countries lacked enough capital.

The access to the EU did not solve the problem of Central Europe's weak interconnectedness. The cohesion policy programmes supported significantly modernization of transnational and domestic transport corridors. Though the economic potential was identified only in the infrastructure construction in the region on the West-East axis as it was needed for transit of goods and energy resources between the EU and Russia or China. Central Europe was largely portrayed as a region of suppliers and assembling plants, which should rather focus on delivering components to manufacturing centres in Western Europe or realize ideas for products developed in Western Europe. Therefore, the infrastructure projects on North-South axis did not seem to be priority ones, although the trade flows between the countries of the region have been also dynamically growing. Even for suppliers of Western Europe some level of regional cooperation was needed, which was visible especially in the automobile sector.

The 3SI, initiated in 2015 between 12 EU states by Croatia and Poland's presidents, has been for more than 10 years an attempt to fill the identified infrastructural void in the region. It aims at deepening cooperation in Central Europe by supporting construction of transport, energy and digital connections. Its most recognisable characteristic are annual presidential summits, accompanied by business summits, which build ties between regional politicians and entrepreneurs. Since then, the 3SI has outgrown the region. Germany, the United States, and the European Commission have become strategic partners in the initiative, whereas Moldova and Ukraine have been granted the status of associated participating states. 2023, Greece has joined

the 3SI. Finally at the 2024 summit in Warsaw Spain and Turkey have become strategic partners and Albania and Montenegro joined the initiative as associate states. Although the initiative has a purely economic character, it turned out to have a crucial political impact, as it accelerated the energy diversification process in the region, which strengthened its resilience in the face of the growing aggressive policy of Russia and its weaponizing of gas deliveries to the EU in the last decade.

The celebration of the 10th 3SI summit is a good occasion to deliberate on the current balance of achievements of the initiative and its future. Taking stock of it, in this thematic issue researchers from different 3SI participating states are trying to assess the hitherto performance of the initiative, successes and failures, new challenges to be embraced by the format and individual states' position *vis-à-vis* the 3SI.

In the thematic number only one article focuses on the 3SI in the context of theoretical framework of international relations. Dr Tomasz Pawluszko made an attempt to analyse how this regional initiative fits into the theories of international integration and use political innovations developed in the EU to realize goals of strengthening security and overcoming peripherality of the region. In turn dr Tomáš Strážay focuses more on how changing geopolitical context influences the regional cooperation formats and how growing political divisions in the perception of security might affect the region's cohesion.

The largest block of papers focuses on trying to understand the functioning of the 3SI by analysing policies of individual participating states. It is especially interesting in the case of Baltic states for whom the format constitutes a perfect framework to influence regional policies to better connect to other EU states. In this context prof. Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek focuses on explaining the case studies of Lithuania, and dr Aleksandra Kusztal on an example of Lithuania, whereas prof. Elżbieta Lesiewicz, dr Agata Włodarska-Frykowska, and dr Barbara Jundo-Kaliszewska try to identify general tendencies in all three Baltic states.

Another interesting case studies is Greece. Although it is an EU member states since 1981 only the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to Schengen area this year let Greek citizens to be connected by land to the EU without passport controls and for long has been treated a country having good relationship with Russia. Two articles

are devoted to better understanding of the Greece motivation to join the 3SI as the youngest participating state. Prof. Karolina Gortych-Michalak focuses on analysing the self-identification of Greece with the initiative using mainly critical discourse analysis, whereas prof. Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski concentrates on broader examination of Greek motives for accession to the format.

On another end is article of prof. Piotr Bajda and prof. Konrad Walczuk, where both researchers try to analyse the opposite question, namely why the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia are not too active in the 3SI and what are main political and institutional constraints behind this position. In this context dr Krzysztof Dębiec attempts to broaden knowledge about the Slovak more critical approach identifying a problem of the less value-added of the initiative from the perspective of political elites in Slovakia.

There is also a block of articles looking for new areas of potential cooperation in the framework of 3SI. Dr Małgorzata Samojedny focuses on what can be the value-added for the format from the new global transport corridors namely developed in the recent years India-Middle East Corridor. In turn dr Joanna Popławska and dr Konrad Popławski concentrate on presenting one of the key developmental challenges, namely demography and how housing policy might be use on the regional level to mitigate it.

The thematic issue is supplemented by the review of dr Mihai Sebe of the collective report devoted to the 3SI 2023 summit in Bucharest indicating the most important achievements of the format from the perspective of Romania, being also one of the most active states in the initiative.

The articles published in this issue demonstrate the picture of the region under construction. It seems that the 3SI fills an important gap underlining the need to have physical and connectivity, and people-to-people linkages to better understand each other interests and expectations, and build up regional identity and agenda. From this perspective the first difficult step of forming a regional forum of regular political and business meetings and identifying the regional agenda has been accomplished. Nevertheless, these challenges will not be solved without institutionalizing of the cooperation and more regular working on solving them. This effort cannot be realized by the presidents of 3SI countries, here the governments with their executive powers need to step in. Another important problem that

might hamper the cooperation in the framework are divergences in the security perceptions. The continuation of the format will depend on if countries find agenda, which might be realized ignoring different views on role of Russia in the region. It seems that the 3SI is flexible enough to accommodate these differences contrary to the Visegrad Group, which seems to be less resilient due to higher level of political cooperation there.

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