

Slovakia and the Three Seas Initiative: In Search of Added Value

Although Slovakia is one of the founding countries of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), from the beginning it expressed numerous doubts about the added value of the initiative. This resulted in an often low level of representation at TSI summits and no contribution to the TSI Investment Fund. The motive for this approach is the fear that the project has a hidden geopolitical nature and therefore may negatively affect the priority relations with Berlin or participation in the 'core of European integration'. At the same time, limited number of officials forces the Bratislava administration to prioritize regional cooperation initiatives in terms of clear added value. The TSI, which is still a project in the making, with the fund having a budget that is negligible in the context of the declared investment needs, was not an attractive offer for Bratislava for a long time. Nevertheless, the European marginalization of Slovakia after the parliamentary elections in autumn 2023, related to the policy of Robert Fico's fourth government, as well as the decline in the importance of the Visegrád Group, may prove to be important factors increasing Bratislava's interest in the TSI project. This would probably have to be supported by changes in the structure of the initiative itself, making the TSI more closely embedded in the context of European funds.

K e y w o r d s: Slovakia, Three Seas Initiative, TSI, Visegrád Group, regional cooperation, Central and Eastern Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to present the position of Slovakia towards the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), of which the country is a founding member, but remains largely passive and distanced. In order to do so, main geopolitical considerations and long-term foreign policy goals of subsequent Bratislava administrations as well as Slovakia's position towards other regional cooperation groupings were presented. Against this background one can better see and understand the position of the TSI in the Slovakia's foreign policy architecture. The topic of Slovak engagement in the TSI has been presented by analysing selected dimensions of its actual and potential involvement: in the political sphere and in financial and transport issues, while concluding this part with a closer look at how the TSI features in the public debate in Slovakia. In the conclusions, the author also made an attempt to define conditions under which Bratislava could see the added value of the project, as indicated in the title of the study. The resulting hypothesis is that given the current geopolitical circumstances and practically frozen political cooperation in the V4, Slovakia might be willing to increase its involvement in the TSI, especially after several corrections to the format.

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The study has been based on a range of sources, both primary (such as interviews with Slovak political actors and experts or Slovakia's government platforms) and secondary ones (books, magazines, journals, articles). Relative scarcity of academic discussion on the subject, especially in the analysed country, can be partly explained by the fact it is a fairly new topic. The added value of this study lies not only in providing another glimpse at questions not presented academically on an extensive basis, but also in introducing sub-topics that were virtually absent and are result of the author's own research and analyses. These include e.g. relatively detailed considerations on transport infrastructure issues in Slovakia in the TSI context, as a crucial part of the connectivity phenomenon inherent to the idea of the TSI. The paper was written using several research methods, mainly comparative research (in order to determine similarities and differences of Slovakia's engagement in individual regional cooperation formats) or systems analysis (in looking at different aspects of Slovakia's involvement in the TSI).

SPECIFICITY OF SLOVAKIA'S GEOPOLITICS AND ITS LONG-TERM FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

THE BRIDGE AND THE HUB

Slovakia is a relatively young state, having become a separate, internationally recognised entity in 1993, after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. The first years of independence were marked by the international isolation of the country ruled by Vladimír Mečiar, a politician with authoritarian inclinations. Although he pushed through the idea of Slovakia being the 'a bridge between the East and the West', there was little that reflected this vision in reality.² His administration had increasing problems in negotiations on Euro-Atlantic integration, US State Secretary Madeleine Albright famously called the country 'black hole of Europe' in 1997,³ and there was a relatively common feeling among the elites of Slovakia specifically and of Central Europe in general that the country might be heading in the direction of Belarus, i.e. a country increasingly dependent on

² Alexander Duleba, 'Slovakia's Relations with Russia', *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis* 1, 2005, p. 325–40.

³ Mikuláš Dzurinda, *Slovakia, Still the 'Black Hole' of Europe*, politico.eu, 16.03.2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-black-hole-of-europe/> (access: 9 July 2024).

Russia, or at least towards Serbia or Ukraine, i.e. onto the sidelines of the Euro-Atlantic integration processes.

While this feeling was swiftly gone after the radical change of foreign and domestic policy direction following the 1998 parliamentary election, there are still widespread sentiments in the society that somehow refer to the 'bridge' concept. None of nine⁴ Central and Eastern European countries analysed in the new Globsec study features higher share of population showing belief that—as of 2024—Russia can be considered one of two key strategic partners (27%, though down from 47% in three years) or that the way of living in the Western societies can threaten their country (44%).⁵ At the same time it has (by far) the highest share of population believing that the US can be considered a security threat to their country (41%). Similarly, results of a study coordinated by the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAV) published in July 2024 show that as many as 39.5% of Slovaks are convinced their country should try to take a 'balanced position between Russia and the West'.⁶ That feeling is exploited by the fourth Robert Fico government, in power since autumn 2023, that likes to claim to be following the policy of 'four corners of the world'.⁷

With time, the 'bridge' concept transformed into a more practical idea of Slovakia being a transit hub of Europe, e.g. for energy resources. That goes especially for gas where the Slovakian transmission system operator, Eustream (controlled by private Czech capital), for years benefited from sending Russian gas further to the West. It was one of the primary reasons why subsequent Slovakian governments opposed the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The comfortable position ended with the energy crisis that followed the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and falling transit profits. Since then, the search for a new idea continues, with one of the hopes being

⁴ The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria.

⁵ *GLOBSEC Trends 2024: CEE—A Brave New Region?*, globsec.org, 2024, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2024-cee-brave-new-region> (access: 9 July 2024).

⁶ The figure is gradually falling from over 50% ten years ago. Cf. *Na Slovensku po parlamentných voľbách rastie prozápadná geopolitická orientácia*, SAV, 8.07.2024, https://www.sav.sk/?lang=sk&doc=services-news&source_no=20&news_no=12071, (access: 9 July 2024).

⁷ R. Fico: *Treba sa pozerat' na všetky štyri svetové strany, svet nemá iba západ (rozhovor)*, RTVS, 19.09.2024, <https://spravy.rtvs.sk/2023/09/r-fico-treba-sa-pozerat-na-vsetky-styri-svetove-strany-svet-nema-iba-zapad-rozhovor/>, (access: 9 July 2024).

linked with possible prospects of hydrogen corridor from Ukraine, through Slovakia, to Germany.⁸

In some respects, the Eastern policy of Slovakia made an important U-turn from the pragmatic cooperation with Russia to a country that helps Ukraine and limits energy dependence from Russia.⁹ Slovakia even managed to gain position as an important military hub supporting Ukraine. It sent military aid there, and still ranks 20th in the world when calculated overall (from 2022), and 7th relative to GDP.¹⁰ Despite the reluctance of the current Fico government to send military aid for free, the military support based on commercial contracts is still being provided, notably in terms of crucially important artillery ammunition that can reach around 150 thousand pieces in 2024. There are two facilities in eastern Slovakia (Michalovce and Moldava nad Bodvou) where Ukrainian military equipment is repaired (operated mainly by Germany). Humanitarian aid is being sent, as is electricity (more than 40 thousand MW since 2022 up until mid-2024), while both Slovakian and Ukrainian governments plan to carry out trans-border projects that improve the connection of railroads or electricity grids.¹¹ Slovakia wants to be active in the Ukraine reconstruction process, and hopes to get additional EU resources to stimulate investments in poorly developed eastern regions of Slovakia that border on Ukraine.

THE CORE OF THE EU

It is important to note that Slovakia's relatively small size in the EU context (it is currently 18th out of 27 member states in terms of population and 19th as regards territory) have prompted the country's elites to look for participation in bigger entities, so as to be able to be able to prosper economically and provide adequate security. That was one of the reasons why Slovaks chose to be part of Czechoslovakia (in 1918), and when the negotiations were held on the future of the country after 1989, they were reluctant to completely abandon the

⁸ Filip Derewenda, *European Commission Gives Green Light to Hydrogen Corridor between Ukraine and CEE*, ceenergynews.com, 6.12.2023, <https://ceenergynews.com/hydrogen/european-commission-gives-green-light-to-hydrogen-corridor-between-ukraine-and-cee/>, (access: 9 2024).

⁹ Juraj Marušiak, 'Eastern Policy of the Slovak Republic — the End of an Era', in: Peter Brežáni (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2021*, Bratislava 2022, pp. 124–39.

¹⁰ Data as of 5 December 2024 according to Ukraine Support Tracker of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

¹¹ Krzysztof Dębiec, *Fico Meets Shmyhal: Slovakia's Two-track Ukraine Policy*, OSW, 21.01.2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-01-26/fico-meets-shmyhal-slovakias-two-track-ukraine-policy>, (access: 9 July 2024).

common state. The Slovak team negotiating with Czechs suggested e.g. a form of confederation with a common defence policy and one currency (although two separate central banks) and considered future accession to the EU as a good moment to split definitely. It was not accepted by the Czechs whose PM Václav Klaus feared that Slovakian growing reservations and possible resentment to planned reforms might slow down the process of economic transformation that he considered crucial. It is however still a good illustration of the fear of being too small to function on one's own, which the isolation under Mečiar later on even strengthened.¹²

Since 1998, with the Mikuláš Dzurinda government in power, subsequent Slovakian ruling camps have fostered the process of Euro-Atlantic integration that resulted in the country being admitted to both NATO and the EU in 2004. In the case of NATO, Slovakia caught up with its Visegrád Group (V4) neighbours that joined the Alliance five years earlier, whereas in the case of the EU it managed to speed up the negotiations, so as to join together with them, although it started the talks with the European Commission (EC) almost two years later (and together with Romania and Bulgaria that finally joined three years later). The second Dzurinda government (2002–06), with a centre-right composition, made efforts to overtake neighbours in the European integration by having the Slovak koruna joined the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 2005. After some initial hesitation,¹³ that policy was sustained by the first Fico government, which took power in 2006 and led Slovakia to the Schengen area in 2007 (together with other V4 countries) and the Eurozone in 2009.

The conversion of Fico, at first mildly sceptical, meant that no major political force questioned the membership in the EU or the Eurozone (the common European currency is supported by a stable majority of around 80% of Slovaks). Fico even declared himself the proponent of Slovakia's participation in the 'core of the EU', so as to be able to participate in shaping the EU's policies and to be at the centre of the EU decision-making process.¹⁴ Although he changed his

¹² Krzysztof Żarna, 'Między Wschodem a Zachodem. Słowacja a Sojusz Północno-atlantyczny (1993–2004)', *Polityka i Społeczeństwo* 7, 2010, pp. 212–30.

¹³ Piotr Bajda, *Elity polityczne na Słowacji. Kręta droga do nowoczesnego państwa* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2010).

¹⁴ E.g. R. Fico: *Pre Slovensko neexistuje iná alternatíva ako byť súčasťou jadra EÚ*, Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 20.06.2017, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/r-fico-pre-slovensko-neexistuje-ina-alternativa-ako-byt-sucastou-jadra-eu/> (access: 9 July 2024).

rhetoric when in the opposition (2020–23) and started to emphasise the national sovereignty so as to address his changed electorate (with a higher proportion of anti-system voters), he did not resign from the tenets of his previous terms in the office. Just before the 2023 election he claimed that the EU is Slovakia's 'living space', and that the country 'must be at the highest form of [EU] integration'.¹⁵ His party Smer-Social Democracy, however, were unsuccessful in negotiating reversing the suspension in the European mainstream Party of European Socialists (PES), that was imposed following a coalition with a nationalist SNS party in 2023. Despite indications from representatives of Smer about the willingness to join an anti-establishment Patriots of Europe grouping (where at first they rejected the invitation), Fico opted against it. Such move would distance him and his party further from the European mainstream, and by refusing to the Patriots he kept his options open in Brussels. His nominee to the second von der Leyen European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, gained in turn an important post of a Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Interinstitutional Relations, and Transparency, and remains a middleman between Fico and Brussels.

SLOVAKIA IN REGIONAL COOPERATION

VISEGRÁD GROUP

Slovakia is part of numerous regional groupings that—however—have been considered clearly supplementary to the membership in the EU, and Bratislava administrations were long cautious in engaging in initiatives that risked undermining Slovakian position in the EU. Apart from the EU, being a regional integration organisation *sui generis*, Slovakia traditionally attributes primary importance to the V4. It is the only Central European regional cooperation format that has a permanent institution (other than a secretary, secretariat or presidency)—the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), with a headquarters in Bratislava (it is the only country that borders all other partners, and pays into the IVF budget the same amount as them, which in fact means most on proportional basis). The V4

¹⁵ Jozef Majchrák and Martin Hanus, *Robert Fico. Ak by členským štátom EÚ zobrali právo veta, nemáme tam čo robiť*, Postoj.sk, 14.09.2023, <https://www.postoj.sk/137777/stale-som-za-to-aby-sme-boli-v-jadre-eu-len-ta-sa-zmenila-na-vojnovu-masineriu> (access: 9 July 2024).

used to have paramount importance for Slovakia especially during late 1990s and early 2000s, helping overcome the country's isolation and later catch up in the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

Also, the current Fico government seems to be willing to reactivate the political level of cooperation, despite visible differences in key geostrategic issues among V4 states. The government platform of late 2023 states that 'effective and mutually beneficial cooperation within the V4 format is essential in promoting common interests and solving crisis situations', and that Bratislava 'will support all projects aimed at further deepening relations' between the four countries.¹⁶ While it is conscious of 'different views of the participants of the Visegrád format on current foreign events, especially on the war conflict in Ukraine', Slovakia would not like it to 'threaten the historically excellent mutual friendly relations and the strategic importance of this regional grouping in solving issues related to the European agenda'. Despite problems with smooth V4 coordination on the highest political level, the years of cooperation have created a network of contacts between directors or experts in ministries (at times even ministers keep regular contact, especially before EU Council meetings), think-tanks, and civil society, supported by the IVF's projects. There is still a lot of convergence on issues such as migration, agriculture or cohesion policy.

The previous term of office of Smer (2016–20), a party combining traditional left-wing demands with sovereignty rhetoric, was characterized by a combination of the demand of belonging to the EU 'core' with the use of the V4 to publicize topics potentially important to the domestic electorate. The first motive served both to attack the divided opposition, also in relation to the EU, and present it as incapable of representing the country in the EU, as well as to reassure EU partners, which received disturbing reports of abuses of power. After the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018, foreign pressure intensified, leading—together with a wave of protests—to the fall of Robert Fico's government and, at the same time, intensification of Fico's rhetoric. V4 was also an important platform for Smer to express opposition to refugee quotas and—where Fico was personally deeply involved—to promote the idea of counteracting the 'dual quality' of products in the EU. Ultimately, however, Fico—although he based his 2016 campaign in the context of the migration

¹⁶ *Programové vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023–2027 „Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie žiť“*, adopted by the National Council of the Slovak Republic on 21 November 2023.

crisis on the slogan ‘We will protect Slovakia’—was the only V4 prime minister who accepted a sufficient number of refugees to avoid a trial with the EC regarding the relocation mechanism before the Court of Justice of the EU.

SLAVKOV TRIANGLE

There are also other smaller regional groupings in which Slovakia participates, but of clearly secondary importance. They have occasionally gained in influence due to specific political or even personal configurations, or possibly the willingness to intensify regional cooperation in certain fields. Especially the former is true for the Slavkov Triangle (S3)—a grouping of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria set up in 2015 by social democrat prime ministers. Although it features year-long presidencies (similarly to V4) it lacks common permanent institutions, and—more importantly—clear convergence of views in key issues, perhaps except for migration. The countries are divided especially on energy, where Slovakia is among two states in the world with the highest share of nuclear energy in electricity generation (together with France) and the Czech Republic is also planning to develop its nuclear power plants, while Austria belongs to the two staunchest opponents (together with Luxemburg) of developing the nuclear energy in the EU.

Moreover, it groups member countries of NATO (the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and Austria—a country that is constitutionally permanently neutral and has repeatedly displayed positions sceptical of imposing sanctions on Russia and has maintained strong energy dependence on Russia. The share of Russian gas in Austria has even risen from 80% in the beginning of 2022 to 98% two years later (although against a general fall in the gas consumption), making it the EU country most dependent on Russian gas.¹⁷ That finally stopped in late 2024, when Gazprom ceased supplying gas to the country, and Austria’s OMV company announced termination of its long-term supply contract (set to last until 2040) with the Russian partner with immediate effect. There are also visible discrepancies on the crucial issues of the cohesion policy, where Austria traditionally favours cuts

¹⁷ Nikolaus Kurmayer, *Austria’s Dependence on Russian Gas Rises to 98%, Two Years after Ukraine War*, Euractiv.eu, 12.02.2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/austrias-dependence-on-russian-gas-rises-to-98-two-years-after-ukraine-war/> (access: 9 July 2024).

in the EU budget, whereas Czechs and Slovaks—as net payers—support more generous spending.

Still, the S3 became more active in the format of foreign ministers during the 2021–23 period, when centre-right governments in Slovakia and Czech Republic wanted to show their distance to Hungary and Poland, due to the disputes of the latter on the rule of law with the European Commission.

CENTRAL FIVE, BUCHAREST NINE AND CENTRAL EUROPEAN INITIATIVE

Another smaller regional grouping of lesser importance is Central Five, that consists of S3 countries, Slovenia and Hungary. It gained on importance during the Covid-19 pandemic as a tool of coordinating regional actions regarding e.g. border sanitary controls. It recently serves as an *ad hoc* forum for discussing migration issues and supporting the European integration of nearby Western Balkans.¹⁸ Slovakia is not particularly active there, although it hosted one meeting in May 2021, and announced the willingness to host another one, during the March 2023 meeting in Slovenia. Except for the year of its inception (2020), the meetings took place only once or twice a year, and were limited to foreign ministers, largely served as discussion forums.

The Bucharest Nine is a grouping strictly linked to the field of defence and security policy and serves as a tool for coordinating actions of NATO member states from Central and Eastern Europe. Its establishment in 2015 is closely linked with the Russian annexation of Crimea. Its importance grows with the challenge of Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war nearby since 2022, and is emphasised by existence of multiple formats, with heads of states representing countries at summits (Slovakia organised two of them, the last one in mid-2023), and regular meetings of ministers responsible for foreign policy (since 2016) and defence (since 2018).

The Central European Initiative (CEI) is the oldest of the regional initiatives in which Slovakia participates (it was initiated in 1989) and is part of it as one of two successor states of Czechoslovakia that acceded to the format in 1990. It groups 17 countries as different as Italy (playing the first fiddle since the inception of the grouping) and

¹⁸ Tomasz Żornaczuk and Veronika Józwiak, eds, *Regional Cooperation in Central Europe after Russia's Aggression against Ukraine* (Warsaw: PISM, 2024).

Belarus. Eight member states are not part of the EU—one of the main aims of the format is to assist them in their economic transformation, in fighting corruption and supporting civil society. Despite the fact that the CEI has its secretary general (always an Italian or Austrian) and Executive Secretariat (situated in the Italian port of Trieste since 1996), and yearly presidencies (Slovakia assumed it once, in 2005), the results of the group's functioning are modest. This can be evidenced by the fact that one of its founding and by then most active members, Austria, left the group in 2018.

THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE IN SLOVAK PERCEPTION

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Slovakia has been one of the twelve founding members of the Three Seas Initiative, but from the very beginning was far from being convinced about the added value of what was considered yet another regional initiative. Despite the presidential format of the Three Seas Summit, heads of state of Slovakia participated in only four out of nine such meetings taking place between 2016 and 2024 (including once, in 2020, in an online form), having symbolically missed the inaugural summit. In the remaining five cases the country was represented by deputy prime ministers, but none of them did so more than once, nor did he coordinate exactly the same area (digitalisation and investment, finance, investments and regional development, legislation and strategic planning, the environment). That made it more difficult to coordinate issues related to the engagement in the TSI, especially bearing in mind that in the period of the TSI summits respective presidents and governments either represented opposing political forces or, at best, different parties of roughly the same part of the political scene. The low importance of the TSI in politics of Slovakia is evidenced by the absence of this topic in both the government's platform and programmes of main political parties. The only political formation that had such mention—back in 2019 and in a negative context—was a small party Spolu.¹⁹

¹⁹ Piotr Bajda, *Stanowisko Republiki Słowackiej wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza w latach 2016–2024. Brak wizji i jakiegokolwiek pomysłu*, 3SI Research Center, 2024, <https://trojmorze.isppan.waw.pl/publikacje-w-ramach-centrum-badawczego-3si/stanowisko-republiki-slowackiej-wobec-inicjatywy-trojmorza-w-latach-2016-2024-brak-wizji-i-jakiegokolwiek-pomyslu/> (access: 13 December 2024).

As a relatively small country, Slovakia has limited number of experts who are able to follow particular topics or engagements, thus it has to choose between different forms of actions or at least prioritise them. Because Slovakia traditionally views all types of regional cooperation initiatives as secondary to the membership in the European Union, it looks for complementary elements in them. It does not want its participation in them to be perceived as an element of distancing itself from the 'core' of the European integration—it is also the case of its relation to the TSI.

Another problematic issue related with the TSI for large part of the Slovak ruling elites has been the perception of the initiative as a *de facto* geopolitical project under the aegis of Poland, the aim of which is to create some kind of counterweight to Germany. This raised concerns about the deterioration of relations with Germany, considered strategic (due to very strong trade and investment ties), or Slovakian position in the European Union. Thus, Bratislava did not want to create the impression of choosing Warsaw at the expense of Berlin, especially when Polish-German relations were far from their best. Slovakia also considers crucial to tighten ties with Paris. It shares with France high degree of dependence on nuclear energy, and they have a vested interest in maintaining their 'clean' status in the EU.

In the background of scepticism towards the initiative associated with Poland, there are also echoes of communist propaganda during the normalization period (especially in 1980s)—thus it is stronger in the older generations of Slovaks—and the persistent image of Poland in a significant part of Slovak (and Czech) society as backward and adventurous. One can draw certain analogy with the perception of Polish products or services which might subconsciously translate also to ideas coming from Poland. As the report commissioned by the Polish Tourist Organization found, products imported from Poland are often perceived in Slovakia as low quality, and Slovaks expect e.g. tourist services in Poland to be low standard when they make excursions to Poland.²⁰ On the one hand, it means that if Slovaks know some products (such as foodstuffs or cosmetics) are Polish, they do not want to buy them, but on the other hand, low expectations increase the chance of positive surprises when visiting Slovakia's northern neighbour. In the

²⁰ Wizerunek Polski i Polaków na Słowacji. Raport ARC Rynek i Opinia na zlecenie Polskiej Organizacji Turystycznej, Warszawa, 2021, <https://www.pot.gov.pl/attachments/article/1804/Raport%20-%20Wizerunek%20Polski%20i%20Polak%C3%B3w%20na%20S%C5%82owacji.pdf> (access: 10 July 2024).

TSI context it means that attracting Bratislava to the project is more likely when it is presented as regional initiative, possibly with some associated participation of Germany, France, and the US.

Additional distrust was caused by Poland's close relations with Hungary over the years, especially until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Meanwhile, the policy of Viktor Orbán's government since 2010 has caused tensions in Budapest's relations with countries having a significant Hungarian minority—for example, the mass granting of Hungarian citizenship, the purchase of real estate by entities related to Fidesz (the ruling party in Hungary), the participation of Hungarian officials in minority events without consulting the local or national authorities, or displaying the so-called Greater Hungary map (encompassing, among others, present-day Slovakia).

Another factor diminishing Bratislava's interest in certain regional cooperation formats, especially featuring Hungary and—to a lesser extent—Poland, in the past years has been the fact that they have become a subject of an internal policy debate in the country. The centre-right and liberal governments (2020–23) and presidents (2014–24) tried to distance themselves from Hungary and Poland, as they perceived such company potentially harmful for the position of Slovakia within the European Union. Defending Budapest and Warsaw in their disputes with the EC regarding the rule of law was all the more difficult that the Slovak centre-right proclaimed the healing of state institutions as its main goal when fighting for power. On the other hand, Robert Fico, when in the opposition, articulated his stance in favour of Poland and Hungary. He tried to link these disputes with problems of his own entourage that faced numerous allegations, chiefly on corruption basis. As a result, the distance of centre-right authorities in Bratislava towards activities in the V4 or TSI increased, to the extent they began to look for a regional alternative. It materialised in a way in the form of the Slavkov Triangle. However, unlike the V4 or TSI, no meetings of heads of state have been held. Since 2022, in the era of domination of energy issues and the Ukrainian-Russian war, Vienna's clearly negative attitude towards nuclear energy and the neutral status of the country turned out to be an increasing obstacle to strengthening relations within the S3 group.

FINANCIAL AND TRANSPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Slovakia's reservations towards the project are also expressed by the lack of participation in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (this

links Bratislava administration with the other TSI members from S3 as well as the TSI newcomer—Greece). Bratislava's greater involvement in the TSI, including joining its fund, is not helped by the ambiguities associated with it—representatives of the Office of the President and Ministry of Finance declared problems in getting in touch with the fund's contact point, and also raised the issues of: the fund's small budget in the context of the declared investment goals; high bureaucratic burden (even compared to EU funds); non-transparent process of allocating funds to specific projects; uncertainty regarding the implementation of any Slovak project even if the contribution is paid.²¹ The context for these doubts are the problems Slovakia regularly reports with the use of already allocated EU funds, which limits the ambition to fight for further funds, especially those with a greater administrative burden and involving additional costs.²²

As the TSI is primarily about building and connecting infrastructure in the three dimensions of connectivity (transport, energy and digital sphere), it has to be stated that especially when it comes to transport there are areas where Slovakia could potentially benefit from TSI or infrastructural EU funds. Slovakia is a highly industrialized country which must be closely connected with neighbouring countries, not least because of links in the automotive industry (Slovakia boasts the largest car production per capita in the world). Hence, there are many industrial parks and logistics centres here, although asymmetrically located, with a clear predominance of the western part of the country, where the industry is concentrated (e.g. including the largest industrial and logistics park in the country—in the Sereď commune). Logistics and industrial areas amount to approximately 3.3 million m²—i.e. 7.5 times less than in Poland, with the country's area being 6.4 times smaller.²³ That means there is still potential for more such facilities.

Slovakia has a network of 3,626 km of railway lines, of which just 44% are electrified, and thus require investments (as of the end of 2022 according to the national statistical office). When compared to

²¹ Conversations of the author with representatives of the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic during the study trip organised within The Three Seas Initiative Research Center project at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (18–22 April 2023).

²² Miroslava Pisklová and Timotej Kováčik, *Za dvadsať rokov sa Slovensko nenaučilo, ako čerpať eurofondy. Robíme tri zásadné chyby*, sme.sk, 17.05.2024, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23331602/za-dvadsat-rokov-sa-slovensko-nenaučilo-ako-cerpat-eurofondy-robime-tri-zasadne-chyby.html> (access: 10 July 2024).

²³ Cushman & Wakefield study showing the status at the end of 2021.

Poland, the railway network in Slovakia is slightly denser in general, but thinner if one takes into account the electrified lines only. The area of Poland is 6.4 times bigger than in Slovakia, but the length of rails in Poland is only five times bigger, while of the electrified rails as many as eight times.

There are 18,156 km of roads in Slovakia (as of the end of 2022), including 544.5 km of motorways and 316.5 km of expressways, giving a total of 861 km. Thus, the density of the motorway-expressway network in 2022 was 12% higher than in Poland (and slightly higher than in the Czech Republic). In the years 2012–22, 182 km of such roads were put into operation—even in absolute numbers this is more than in the neighbouring Czech Republic, which is 60% larger in area and twice as populous. At the same time, however, almost 13 times more kilometres of motorways and expressways were built in Poland during this time, even though Poland is only 6.4 times larger in area. That means there is visible scope for speeding up processes for the construction of such roads.

There are six international airports in Slovakia (Bratislava, Košice, Poprad, Žilina, Sliač and Piešťany)—they are small, however, and Slovaks often use airports in neighbouring countries (mainly Vienna, Krakow, Budapest, and Prague). 1.8 million travellers used the airport in the capital in 2023—the majority of them are regularly Austrians aiming for holiday distillations. During this time, the second largest Slovak airport—in Košice—had record 625 thousand passengers; it also plays an important role in contacts with Ukraine. Moreover, Slovakia has 172 km of navigable waterways that connect them with neighbours, also from the TSI.

The programme of the Robert Fico government called the state of transport infrastructure ‘catastrophic’ and pledged to develop the transport network to reflect international obligations, national strategic and regional development plans.²⁴ The prospect of significant investments related to the reconstruction of Ukraine encourages the government in Bratislava to pay more attention to the areas of eastern Slovakia with Ukrainian connections and to seek support for them from EU funds. A permanent determinant of Slovakia’s geopolitical strategies is the emphasis on its role as a transit country, which, however, is not accompanied by appropriate investments in road and railway infrastructure.

²⁴ *Programové vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023–2027.*

The government program lists three road infrastructure projects as priorities:

- D1 motorway—the main road route of the country crossing it from the west (Bratislava) to the east (ultimately to the border with Ukraine), in its main part running via Žilina and Prešov, i.e. much closer to the border with Poland than with Hungary;
- D3 motorway—from the vicinity of Žilina to the border with Poland;
- R4 expressway—Slovak section of the Via Carpatia road (the problematic section of the Slovak part of Via Carpatia runs from Prešov north to the border with Poland—approximately 60 km out of 136 km; the remaining part, from Prešov through Košice and south to the border with Hungary, is basically ready).

In the case of railway infrastructure, the priority of the Fico government's program is the modernization of the Žilina-Košice connection (to enable travel at a speed of 160 km/h), and, internationally, the connections of Bratislava with Vienna, Brno and Prague, as well as connecting Žilina with Ostrava. The condition of the railway infrastructure is generally highly unsatisfactory, and its symbol was an open letter that the major Czech railway operator České dráhy wrote together with the Association of Railway Operators of Slovakia (AROS) and sent in 2023 to the Railways of the Slovak Republic (ŽSR), the company that manages the Slovakian railway infrastructure. In particular, the following routes were mentioned as the most problematic: (running through the Czech-Slovak border) and Čadca-Žilina-Košice. A representative of Metrans, one of the market leaders in the intermodal transport, officially informed the Slovak media that the company, due to numerous sections where the average speed is 10–30 km/h, tries to avoid Slovakia when planning railway routes.

Currently, the only significant railway route connecting Slovakia and Ukraine runs from Košice through Čierna nad Tisou in south-eastern Slovakia to the Chop junction in Zakarpattia Oblast in western Ukraine, and further to Mukachevo. This route (in the opposite direction) was used to transport 10–15% of Ukrainian agricultural exports as part of the so-called solidarity corridors. In Čierna there is a transshipment terminal for cargo imported by broad-gauge railway (they are transferred here to tracks with a European layout). This terminal is the subject of ongoing and planned investments (mainly from the Connecting Europe Facility funding programme), primarily

with a view to the transit transport of Ukrainian grain. In the past, Slovakia had ambitions to develop a broad-gauge line, aiming to take over part of the freight transit from China, but these plans now become pointless in the situation of Ukraine's intention to change railways to the European gauge in its Western border areas. Until the end of 2024 Slovakia and Ukraine plan to launch a railway connection Kyiv–Košice (on wide tracks), and to modernise the Uzhhorod–Vyšné Nemecké border crossing, also in response to the increased traffic resulting from problems at the Polish–Ukrainian crossings.

There is a visible weakness of road and rail connections between Slovakia and its most populous neighbour Poland (with which it shares its second longest border of 547 km). For years it has been an aspect that has had a negative impact on the intensity of bilateral relations. The capitals of both countries have no air connection (there are, however, direct flights from Warsaw to Košice, Slovakia's second biggest city), and the rail connections from Poland run via the Czech Republic and take so long that they do not constitute attractive alternatives to contacts between both capital via Vienna airport. Fico's government is trying to further simplify construction procedures, which may give hope for accelerating (by 16–24 months) the implementation of plans for the D3 and R4 roads that are important for Poland (the optimistic date for their completion is 2030 in both cases). However, in the latter case, the prioritization of connections on the east-west axis, which connects the country's largest cities, has been a problem for other project for years. It has resulted in the north-south connections being less important from the point of view of the headquarters, especially in the poor and less industrialized eastern part of the country, which is distant from the capital.

Slovakia is a landlocked country and could be attracted to the TSI once it sees a clear opportunity for Slovakia-based companies to have a better access to ports in EU countries. Currently, in this context, the port of Koper is of great importance for companies operating in Slovakia (including notably Kia from the Hyundai Motor group) and is the main window for Slovak companies in connections with Asia. For the Slovenian port, Slovakia is the second most important market after the domestic one, accounting for 9% of transshipments in 2021. The ports in Hamburg, Rotterdam, Trieste, and Gdańsk also play important roles.

One of the issues that is linked with the connectivity topic that unites several TSI countries, and which strongly resonated in Slovakia,

deals with the rules for truckload carriers. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the liberalization of the rules of operation for Ukrainian truckload carriers on the EU market, Slovak carriers became politically active, demanding the withdrawal of the above-mentioned preferences. This was a non-negligible factor because—taking into account the scale of the country—Slovak entities have been among the important players in EU interstate transport in recent years, especially in bilateral and cross-trade transport. One of the carrier associations organized several blockades of the main border crossing with Ukraine (Vyšné Nemecké–Uzhhorod), and solidarity with protesting carriers from Poland was also emphasized. Robert Fico's government reacted positively to the arguments of domestic carriers. However, his actions ultimately came down to arguing in Brussels for restoring the *status quo ante* with no major success, and in the country—to *ad hoc* actions at the borders, in which Ukrainian trucks standing in queues were checked *en masse*.

THE PUBLIC DEBATE

The participation of the heads of state at summits was not the subject of a broader media debate in Slovakia, and sometimes there was even no mention of it in the official communication channels of the Presidential Palace. High representatives of the Office of the President emphasised it was not intentional,²⁵ and if so, one can assume it is a consequence of either the perception of the TSI as an initiative of little importance, or that the TSI is not a topic with which politicians can build support with parts of the electorate (as PM Fico does evocating V4 cooperation), and quite possibly both. Interestingly, the Three Seas Initiative—as of December 2024—does not even have an entry in the Slovak language version of Wikipedia, although it is presented in 28 languages, including those of smaller nations than Slovakia, such as Slovene, Lithuanian or Estonian.

The result of the low hopes associated with the TSI is that this topic is almost absent as a subject of public debate—both in the media, in the world of science and in think-tanks. For example, a 2021 competition announced by the Ministry of Foreign and

²⁵ Conversations of the author with representatives of the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic during the study trip organised within The Three Seas Initiative Research Center project at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (18–22 April 2023).

European Affairs inviting the submission of analyzes on the Three Seas Initiative remained unresolved due to no bidder reporting.²⁶ This translates into a lack of awareness of the existence of such an initiative among a wide group of society. There are some exceptions to this rule, however, as between 2022 and 2024 the debate around TSI very slowly intensified. It is evidenced by more dedicated articles in the mainstream media, such as *Denník N* daily²⁷ or *Trend* weekly.²⁸ There are also some first Slovak academic contributions, though they feature rather with publications related to summits²⁹ or are part of larger books devoted to the TSI published in Poland,³⁰ where TSI is covered by far most extensively. The topic of the TSI in Slovak academic journals is practically non-existent. Despite that, the TSI managed to feature in one of the leading Slovak disinformation media, *Zem a Vek*, that typically displays pro-Russian and anti-American content.³¹ Not surprisingly, the TSI is presented there as part of an American conspiracy in which 'Russophobic Poland' is playing a puppet role in yet another action aimed at dividing Slavs. This narrative, together with strong Russian influence in such media, might suggest that the TSI is a project considered potentially dangerous by the Kremlin, and fits into the consistent strategy of Russia, dating back as late as 1920s, to oppose all forms of alliances in Central and Eastern Europe without Russian participation.

CONCLUSIONS

Shortly before the 10th anniversary of the creation of the TSI and in the eve of the jubilee 10th summit in Warsaw in 2025, the search for the optimal formula of the initiative still goes on. This is particularly

²⁶ 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 Regional Cooperation in Different Approaches* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2024).

²⁷ Wojciech Przybylski, *Iniciatíva Trojmorja môže byť úspešná, no potrebuje lepšiu stratégiu*, dennikn.sk, 23.06.2023, <https://dennikn.sk/2904699/iniciativa-trojmorja-moze-byt-uspesna-no-potrebuje-lepsiu-strategiu/> (access: 10 July 2024).

²⁸ *Samit Trojmorja môže dať Slovensku nové investičné príležitosti*, trend.sk, 6.09.2023, <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/samit-trojmorja-moze-dat-slovensku-nove-investicne-prilezitosti/> (access: 10 July 2024).

²⁹ Lucia Mokrá, 'Slovakia: Strengthening Regional Position and Addressing New Challenges', in Andris Sprūds and Mārtiņš Vargulis, eds, *Three Seas Initiative Mapping National Perspectives* (Riga: LIIA, 2022), p. 157.

³⁰ Strážay, 'Agenda Setter of Agenda Follower?'

³¹ *Trojmorje je pasca*, zemavek.sk, 3.10.2022, <https://zemavek.sk/trojmorje-je-pasca/> (access: 10 July 2024).

visible in the case of financial issues, which—it seems—should be linked to EU funds. The rules of cooperation with the US also require refinement. There is a visible need for greater involvement of governments, as the president-government relationship is problematic in many countries of this format, and it is the government that is generally responsible for conducting foreign policy.

The European marginalization of Slovakia after the parliamentary elections in autumn 2023, related to the policy of Robert Fico's fourth government, as well as the decline in the importance of the Visegrád Group, may prove to be important factors increasing Bratislava's interest in the TSI project. Fico has domestic problems and his controversial changes to the criminal law have already been criticised by the European Commission (EC), the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and the European Parliament (EP).³² These institutions feared that these changes would jeopardise the appropriate spending of EU funds.

In a situation of freezing of the political dimension of the V4, the TSI—expanded to include a government component—could take over some of its attributes. Many countries in the region are also looking for a permanent format of multilateral cooperation with Poland, as the largest country in the region, with a key importance in the policy of deterring the Russian Federation. The TSI may also make it easier to attract the interest of the Donald Trump administration in Europe. On the other hand, US (and/or German) involvement in the TSI should also make (not only) Slovakia's bigger engagement in it more probable.³³

The TSI would be made more attractive to Slovakia (and possibly other relatively passive members, such as the Czech Republic and Austria) also if the project is streamlined to better adjust to the member states' needs, has lower administrative burden and more funds available. One way to do so would be to embed the TSI more closely in the context of European funds. The external conditions are rather conducive to this idea: after the 2024 EP elections the new EC took over in December 2024 and is now working on new financial

³² Krzysztof Dębiec, *Slovakia: Controversial Changes to the Criminal Law, and a Dispute with Brussels on the Horizon*, OSW, 12.02.2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-02-12/slovakia-controversial-changes-to-criminal-law-and-a-dispute> (access: 10 July 2024).

³³ Cf. Łukasz Lewkowicz, 'Niezaangażowany uczestnik? Słowacja wobec Inicjatywy Trójmorza', *Komentarze IEŚ* 857, 30.05.2023, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/niezaangazowany-uczestnik-slowacja-wobec-inicjatywy-trojmorza/> (access: 12 December 2024).

instruments. A pressure from almost half of EU member states being part of the TSI, and a real need to develop infrastructural project along the north-south axis make that goal realistic. Regardless of the formula of cooperation (be it TSI, EU, or ad hoc formats), north-south connection projects are a real need, in various dimensions, from road and rail, through energy, to digital—related primarily to cybersecurity.

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