

The Three Seas Initiative and the Theories of International Cooperation

The article presents an attempt to interpret the development of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) from the perspective of several political theories of international integration. The 3SI project has been commented on many times from a geopolitical and economic perspective, but it is worth noting that due to its integration into the framework of cooperation between EU countries, it fits into European integration processes. The article points out that in the 20th century, integration concepts in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) had the nature of geopolitical initiatives. The goals of these visions were (1) the security of the region *vis-à-vis* external powers and (2) finding a way to overcome long-term peripherality. In the 21st century, CEE countries joined the European Union and began to co-create continental integration institutions. The text presents a case study and tries to answer the question to what extent the CEE countries have used political innovations developed in the EU and (described by the theorists of European integration) to develop regional cooperation formats on the example of the Three Seas Initiative.

K e y w o r d s: Three Seas, integration, cooperation, competition, CEE region.

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THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE AND THE THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

INTRODUCTION

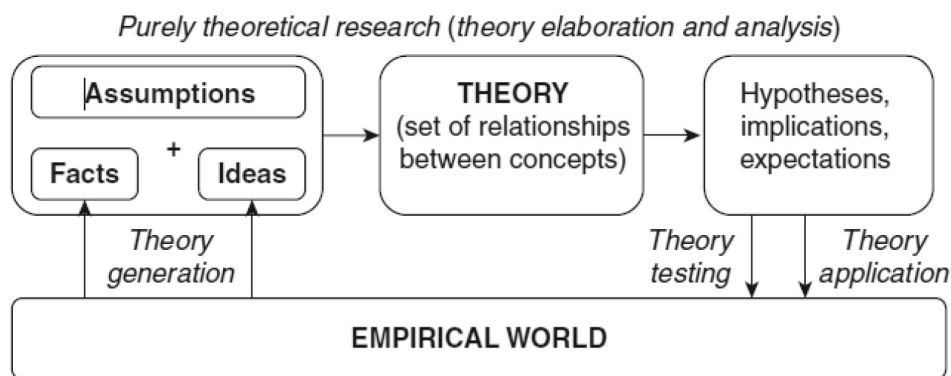
The subject of this text is to explain the role of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) from the perspective of international cooperation theories. In this study, I decided to use case-oriented theoretical analysis. The purpose of this operation is to evaluate 3SI from the perspective of several types of theories. The operation is a secondary analysis because it provides a summary of the general assumptions of the selected theories with respect to a specific case.¹ Most of theories were developed to describe historical processes of integration. They offer numerous explanations based on real events. Therefore, I try to identify the main theoretical proposals of various approaches and adapt their assumptions to reality of the 3SI development.

Three types of theories were selected. The first are theories of CEE integration from the first half of the 20th century. I chose them because they were formulated in the appropriate geopolitical context, and the 3SI concept itself is also currently being implemented with the support of politicians. The second type of theory refers to the concepts of state cooperation developed within the theory of international relations. These theories were developed during the Cold War and did not specifically concern the processes of political integration,

¹ Delphine Deschaux-Dutard, ed., *Research Methods in Defense Studies. A Multidisciplinary Overview* (New York–Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

but discussed the general causes of interstate cooperation. The 3SI initiative also resembles functional interstate cooperation rather than a separate level of European integration. The third group of theories are the classical concepts of European integration, which in the second half of the 20th century tried to explain the process of transition from intergovernmental cooperation to the creation of supranational structures. These theories will be useful for assessing the direction in which the 3SI project may go.

FIGURE 1
Theory development and the research process



Source: Toshkov, *Research Design in Political Science*, p. 29.

In this article, I will try to (1) provide the inductive generation of mentioned theories, (2) develop some theoretical propositions in order to (3) apply them to explain the 3SI case and potentially discover some new patterns in the empirical world.² The main research area is the cooperation in the Central and Eastern European region under the Three Seas Initiative project.

THE FIRST TYPE OF REFLECTION: PRE-THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Numerous political and economic crises in the CEE region aroused reflection among political elites, which focused on designing mechanisms for international cooperation. In the countries ruled by the Habsburg and Hohenzollern dynasties, the current CEE region

² Dimitar Toshkov, *Research Design in Political Science* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 28–30.

was considered a space of domination by the German-speaking element. At the beginning of the 20th century, the ideas of Miteuleuropa (Feliks zu Schwarzenberg, Joseph Partsch, Friedrich Naumann) and the United States of Greater Austria (Aurel Popovici) were hotly debated. Rudolf Kjellén saw this region as a buffer zone for a large pan-German empire. According to Halford J. Mackinder, the region was to consist of a belt of independent states that were to separate Germany and Russia and avert the threat to the British Empire. In the first half of the 20th century, the elites of the CEE countries proposed numerous federal concepts, such as Intermarium or the Little Entente (Józef Piłsudski, Tomáš Masaryk). During World War II, the ideas of a federation of Poland and Czechoslovakia were discussed (Milan Hodža, Władysław Sikorski). Similar concepts were developed in the South Slavic countries (Josip Broz Tito, Georgi Dimitrov).³

The initiators of these ideas believed that it was possible to bring about peace and development in CEE by arranging a major political change. Proposals for such changes included: (1) changing borders, (2) uniting states, (3) creating federations, (4) building alliances against the region's enemies, or (5) agreements to stop the expansion of former empires. These concepts were mainly political initiatives aimed at maintaining peace and independence from the will of great powers.

These ideas were ahead of their time, but at the time they had little chance of being implemented. Cooperation between the CEE countries was perceived as politically unattractive. Many countries had irreconcilable conflicts of interest, based on numerous ethnic and border disputes. The final outcome of World War II shattered the dreams of peaceful integration of the region. The region became a military prize and an economic periphery of the Soviet Union.⁴

THE SECOND TYPE OF REFLECTION: COOPERATION ACCORDING TO THEIR THEORIES

Theories of international relations during the Cold War were dominated by issues of struggle and competition, but several influential theories

³ Petar Kurečić, 'The Three Seas Initiative: Geographical Determinants, Geopolitical Foundations, and Prospective Challenges', *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik* 80: 1, 2018, pp. 99–124, <https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2018.80.01.05>; Konrad Świder, 'Europa Środkowa jako obszar projektowania geopolitycznego', *Studia Europejskie* 2, 2018, pp. 11–32.

⁴ Tomasz Pawłuszko, 'Peripherality of the CEE Region', in Ryszard Zięba, ed., *Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe. Contemporary Challenges* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), pp. 11–32, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16419-4_2.

of cooperation were also developed. The specificity of these theories is the fact that they were developed in the context of United States policy and therefore focus on the problem of power and security. This also means the little importance of constructivist and critical approaches that emerged in the last decades of the 20th century.

Karl Deutsch was one of the pioneers of research on political communication. However, Deutsch knew that people and states often cooperate and create communities based on similar interests and values. He also believed that the main reason for cooperation was the need to ensure the security of the country and its population.⁵ Deutsch divided security communities into two types. The first was an amalgamated community, which is created as a result of the unification of several states. This type of community could have been, for example, united Italy or Germany in the 19th century. The second type was a pluralistic community, which corresponds to the process of integration of several states, which, however, do not create a new transnational organization, but retain their independence and sovereignty. This type of community corresponds to alliances and international organizations.

Deutsch believed that the regional cooperation was the result of development of communication networks, which created new channels of communication between elites and societies of different countries. As a result of mutual knowledge, the number of transactions increased and the risk of fighting decreased. In 1957, Deutsch described the process of establishing a security community as follows: 'Security community is defined as a group of people that become integrated to the point that there is a real assurance that the members of that community will not fight each other physically, but will settle 'their disputes in some other way.'⁶

Deutsch defined many conditions necessary for the creation of a security community. These were: compatibility of values, similar way of life, expectations of economic integration, increased potential of cooperation participants, higher economic growth among cooperation participants, strong lines of social communication, processes of expanding political elites, opportunities for social advancement and multiplicity of scopes of communication and transactions.

⁵ Karl Deutsch, *Political Community at the International Level* (New York: Garden City, 1954); idem, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

Deutsch also defined the conditions for the occurrence of the opposite process, i.e. the disintegration of the security community. Such a process may take place when there are too many unfavorable social phenomena—in the perception of citizens—such as the lack of reforms, costly military obligations, economic stagnation, pauperization, or the emergence of radical political movements based on linguistic or ethnic diversity.

Deutsch's thought was continued after the end of the Cold War by Emmanuel Adler, who wrote also about epistemic communities. According to Adler, Deutsch failed to create his own school of research, but after the fall of the USSR, research on communities can develop thanks to the constructivist approach. In his 1998 work, Adler admits that security community refers to 'a transnational region comprised of sovereign states whose people maintain dependent expectations of peaceful change. Owing to their shared structure of meanings and identity they construct collective system arrangements.'⁷ The growing importance of transactions, organizations, and social learning leads to the creation of trust and a new layer of identity among the actors of the political process.⁸ Constructivists sometimes call this process 'international socialization'. The effect of the process is the construction of a regional community. Is 3SI such a community? This should be examined.

The next author who addressed the idea of interstate cooperation was Hedley Bull. Bull saw that despite anarchy and conflicting interests, cooperation among states still existed. His goal was to explain this situation and show how order is shaped in various human societies. The starting point was the idea of international order.⁹ Order is the sum of the rules that shape people's behavior patterns. The existence of order allows the implementation of basic social goals, which are: (1) preservation of life, (2) truth and (3) property. Societies develop various techniques for achieving the above goals. According to Bull, states act in a similar way.

According to Bull, the international society is created between countries with a common culture, language, similar ways of

⁷ Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 'A Framework for the Study of Security Communities', in Emanuel Adler and Michel Barnett, eds, *Security Communities* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 29–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511598661.002>.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 37–48.

⁹ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 122–155.

understanding the world, religion, and a common ethical, aesthetic and artistic tradition. All these resources improve communication and facilitate the formulation of common rules. In order to maintain cooperation in the international society, states should care for common institutions, respect for sovereignty, peace and ensuring the implementation of the goals of social life: limiting violence, honoring agreements, respecting the property of others.

Another influential theory of international cooperation is the theory of complex interdependence, outlined by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye jr.¹⁰ The authors drew attention to the key role of 'international transactions', which included flows of money, goods, people and information. The second important finding of Keohane and Nye is the description of countries' levels of resilience to crises. Short-term **sensitivity** describes a country's dependence on changes in another country. However, long-term **vulnerability** is the long-term ability to withstand costs imposed by external events.

The key achievement of the discussed authors is the explanation of the above-mentioned complex interdependence. Keohane and Nye assume that (1) societies are connected with each other by a network of communication channels, such as informal elite relationships, formal official contacts, and other business, social and cultural relationships. Therefore, (2) the agenda of interstate relations is always created by many issues that do not have a coherent hierarchy. This means that (3) military security is no longer the dominant issue and the boundaries between foreign and domestic affairs have become fluid. Military force is not used by governments against other states in the region where complex interdependence prevails. A much more effective strategy is to create and control connections with neighbors. States should create agendas and use those resources that are most effective in a given area.

The next classic author who wrote about the reasons for international cooperation was Stephen Krasner. According to Krasner, states cooperate for several reasons. The main one is selfish self-interest, the second reason is political power (in the service of the common good or particular interests), the next is the issue of standards and rules, the next is *usus* (regular patterns of behavior based on practice) or *habitus* (long-term practice). Shared knowledge is also important. For

¹⁰ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence. World Politics in Transition* (Boston, MA and London: Little & Brown, 1977).

these reasons, Krasner developed a theory of international regimes. International regimes are defined as the principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures on which actors' expectations converge in a given problem area. Regimes therefore consist of several resources, developed in cooperation between states. These are:

- principles (beliefs about facts, cause-and-effect mechanisms);
- norms (procedures defined in terms of rights and obligations);
- rules (specific guidelines for actions);
- decision-making procedures (dominant practices for making and implementing collective choices).¹¹

Krasner's concepts have become an inspiration for many constructivist researchers, as have Adler's works. They also influenced the concepts of the regional security complex, which I will discuss below. Krasner's important achievement is to indicate the elements necessary for building formal agreements between states, such as treaties and international strategies.

The last considered concept of international cooperation between countries, which is not a theory of economic integration, is the regional security complex theory, developed within the Copenhagen School. It was first formulated by Barry Buzan in 1983 and further developed in 2003.¹² The definition of a regional security complex refers to a set of states that remain interdependent in various sectors of national security. Quoting Buzan's original definition, this means: 'security complex is defined as a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.'¹³

According to Buzan, a regional security complex arises when (1) two or more states form a geographically coherent group, (2) the relations between these states create security interdependence, and (3) this pattern is persistent and deep. This means that although threats to most countries have historically come from their close surroundings, neighboring countries will not always form a security complex. Poland neighbors with Belarus, but the differences in the political systems and policies of both countries are so irreconcilable that they even

¹¹ Stephen Krasner, 'Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables', *International Organization* 36: 2, 1982, pp. 185–205.

¹² Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹³ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 12.

belong to hostile ‘camps’. Buzan based this concept on earlier work, especially that of Keohane and Nye. Like Krasner, Buzan combined a realist argument about the need for security with a liberal argument about the growing importance of economic interdependence.

The formation of a security complex may result from many reasons—fear of war, striving to stabilize the situation in the region by establishing rules, or creating a level of trust between states to eliminate the threat of the use of force in mutual relations. It would resemble a security community in Deutsch/Adler’s sense.

TABLE 1
Western cooperation according to second type theories of cooperation

Theory	Activities strengthening cooperation between countries
Theory of political community (K. Deutsch / E. Adler)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – reducing the large differences between societies – emphasizing the similarity of main values – supporting supporters of greater integration – building lines of communication between the elites and the rest of society – striving for openness among elites – low military burden – leading to the deactivation of radicals – supporting reforms introduced by partners
Theory of international society (H. Bull)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – supporting the principles of the community of states – care for the sovereignty and independence of members – efforts to maintain peace in Europe – no consent to violence – respecting agreements and treaties – protection of property rights and principles of equity
Complex interdependence theory (R. Keohane, J. Nye)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – development of elite communication networks – partners understand the goals of our activities – the state uses adequate instruments to deal with problems supporting international organizations – co-creating the region’s agenda
Theory of international regime (S. Krasner)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – states may easily find many reasons to cooperate (self-interest, growth of political power, common rules, habits and knowledge) – states are able to share principles, norms, rules and decision-making processes (‘products’ of cooperation) – creation of regimes strengthens future connections
The security complex theory (B. Buzan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – building cohesion of a group of states – strengthening linkages between states builds new fields of cooperation (infrastructure, trade, institutions) – maintaining a clear division between friends & enemies – not ignoring partners’ fears of war – not challenging the <i>status quo</i> in the region, so as not to return to thinking about the risk of using force

Source: own study.

Almost 30 elements important for state cooperation have been identified above. It should be emphasized that the key elements of state cooperation are: building a communication network of state elites, supporting economic development, building trust, focusing on common interests in security and economy, supporting the *status quo* in the region, supporting the cooperation of societies in order to increase the number of common interests.

None of the above-mentioned theories dealt closely with the processes of European integration. However, their findings may be helpful in analyzing the motives for cooperation between states at the initial stage of integration. All theories emphasize (1) the important role of political elites and (2) the ability to find common interests and (3) the ability to reach agreements. What distinguishes Cold War theories of cooperation from theories of European integration is the little interest in creating new international institutions. Cooperation is based on the intergovernmental level.

How can the above theories explain cooperation in the CEE region? First of all, they may indicate similarity of interests and a common vision of external threats. Regional elites did not always see these problems. Moreover, the CEE area in the 20th century was often subordinated to external powers.¹⁴

In the 1990s, the region's elites developed a network of cooperation and ensured institutional adjustment to the international community, such as the EU countries. In the past, cooperation projects in the region have been undermined by ethnic conflicts, border disputes and a lack of support from major powers. Nowadays, these problems have been overcome, and regional cooperation enjoys the support of both the EU and the patronage of the United States. The countries of the CEE region are also closely related to Germany. Moreover, Russia's growing exclusion from European affairs, following the aggression against Ukraine, also cements CEE countries around common goals, especially in the fields like energy and infrastructure. Much has also been done to perceive the CEE region as an economic and cultural entity.

To sum up, second group of theories both correctly describe the dependence of CEE countries on external powers and correctly explain the behavior of the countries in the region after the collapse of the USSR. The CEE region used the bandwagoning strategy by joining the

¹⁴ Zoltan Gal and Andrea Schmidt, 'Europe Divided? Can Warsaw Become the Regional Leader of the Central and Eastern European Region?', *Politeja* 51: 6, 2017, pp. 235–60.

Western international community. The accession of many countries to NATO resulted in behavior typical of a security community, and also created awareness among elites of the interdependence of states' interests, which is a feature of the emerging regional security complex.

THE THIRD TYPE OF REFLECTION: THEORIES OF POLITICAL INTEGRATION

Several decades of development of European studies have led to the presentation of many explanations of the causes of international cooperation. Their summary is presented in the graph below¹⁵.

Realism theories emphasize that states cooperate to achieve security and increase power. Economic development increases the power of modern states, which is why realists are increasingly willing to write about cooperation. Since the times of Immanuel Kant, liberals have emphasized the rationality of people in striving to avoid threats and support the harmonization of states' interests, which is achieved by agreeing on the preferences of voters and elites from many countries.¹⁶

Federalists and functionalists drew attention to the involvement of political specialists who were guided by the logic of effectiveness, not the logic of political gain. In their views, the development of European cooperation resulted from greater openness to experts, knowledge and new technologies.¹⁷ Functionalists and neofunctionalists have been promoting the concept of the 'spill-over effect'. The intergovernmental approach remains influential, focusing on traditional cooperation between governments that allow them to adopt agreements and treaties supporting selected areas of integration.¹⁸

The achievements of integration theories emphasize various benefits related to cooperation. Cooperation allows, among others: to build

¹⁵ This part of the text is based on the report: Tomasz Pawłuszko, 'Three Seas as a Region-Building Process', in *Three Seas. Building The Region* (Warsaw: Institute Of New Europe Report, 2023), p. 16–18.

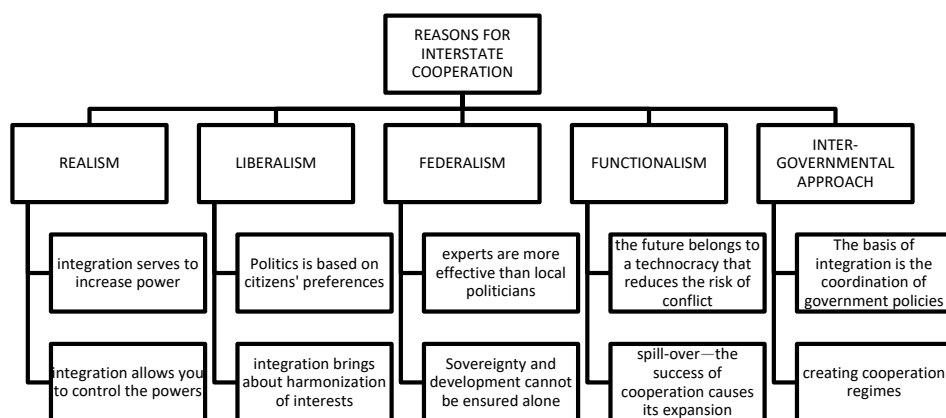
¹⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics', *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 513–53.

¹⁷ David Mitrany, 'The Prospect of European Integration: Federal or Functional', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 4: 2, 1965, pp. 119–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1965.tb01124.x>; idem, *The Functional Theory of Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975); Ernst B. Haas, 'International Integration: The European and the Universal Process', *International Organization* 15: 3, 1961, pp. 366–92.

¹⁸ Stanley Hoffmann, 'Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe', *Daedalus* 95: 3, 1966, pp. 862–915.

power, control superpowers and agree on interests, which enables building a community. Subsequently, the emergence of specialized institutions improves the management of complex economic problems and develops the communication networks of elites. The success of various projects leads to the expansion of the cooperation agenda. Perhaps such a scenario will also await the countries participating in the Three Seas Initiative.¹⁹

GRAPH 1
Theories of political integration – main assumptions



Source: Pawłuszko, 'Three Seas as a Region-Building Process', p. 17.

The announcements from the 3SI summits allow us to see that politicians support the political processes described by the theories of European integration from the 20th century. Small states can increase their weight and security by increasing their economic potential and harmonizing their interests.

Moreover, the involvement of new stakeholders, such as academics, industry, media and private business, indicates the growing importance of networks of social elites. Thanks to this, the cooperation of small states is broadening and they may gain more opportunities to influence the decision-making processes in the EU.²⁰

¹⁹ The Three Seas Initiative is not an international organization established under a treaty, but a looser format of cooperation, so it is difficult to talk about 'membership' in it. So I use the term 'participation'.

²⁰ *Three Seas Summit. Past Summits*, <https://3seas.eu/about/past-summits> (access: 25 June 2024). See more at: Pawłuszko, 'Three Seas as a Region-Building Process', pp. 17–19.

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How can third type theories explain the development of a project like the Three Seas Initiative? It is worth noting that, according to the findings of most theories, common economic interests led to increased cooperation among the elites of the region's countries.²¹ This period was treated in CEE as an introduction to the Western European integration structures.²² After accession to these structures, there was a second wave of cooperation, which was a reaction to Russia's aggressive policy. The Bucharest Nine and the Three Seas Initiative were then established.²³

How did the idea of Three Seas Initiative develop? After 2010, there was support in Poland for the development of cooperation in the CEE region as a proposal for a new direction of Polish foreign policy.²⁴ In 2014, the Atlantic Council published an important report in which it proposed extending the provisions of the Single European Act to new EU countries. The publication pointed to an opportunity for American business to support the development of infrastructure and energy in the CEE region. The publication was well received among Polish elites. In 2015, the new President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, mentioned the possibility of deeper cooperation between the countries of the region, and on the occasion of the UN General Assembly in New York, a meeting of the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Group was held. The meeting declared that the future initiative would be a tool to strengthen the EU, not an alternative to it. A year later, the first summit of the Three Seas Initiative was held in Dubrovnik, during which a declaration on closer economic cooperation was signed. The

²¹ Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, 'New Wave of Regional Cooperation in Central Europe as a Response to New Threats', *Yearbook of the Institute of Central and Eastern Europe* 18: 1, 2020, pp. 79–97; eadem and Piotr Bajda, 'Security Aspects of Regional Cooperation in Central Europe: Visegrád Group, Bucharest Nine, and The Three Seas Initiative', *Online Journal Modeling The New Europe* 37, 2021, pp. 4–23.

²² Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, 'Współpraca regionalna w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w polskiej polityce zagranicznej', *Myśl Ekonomiczna i Polityczna* 2, 2015, pp. 238–62; George Soroka and Tomasz Stepniewski, 'The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe* 17: 3, 2019, pp. 15–29.

²³ Maciej Mróz, 'Wielki projekt małych krajów. Od Międzymorza do Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski w dobie drugiego rządu Prawa i Sprawiedliwości', *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo* 1, 2017/2018, pp. 15–40.

²⁴ Waldemar Paruch wrote more about the 'Europe of the Carpathians' in a series of materials from the conferences' *Europa Karpat. Rzecz o współpracy*, Waldemar Paruch, ed. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2019). See also: Tomasz Pawłuszko, 'The Rise of Geopolitics in Poland and Eastern Europe: The Three Seas and The Bucharest Nine Initiatives', *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies* 1, 2021, pp. 5–26.

summit declaration confirms that 3SI was established as an informal platform for gaining political support.

The content of the 3SI declarations and agreements concern economic issues of an infrastructural nature, which is consistent with the contemporary concepts of connectivity, promoted after 2016 by, among others, Parag Khanna.²⁵ Khanna believes that the modern network civilization shows the functional nature of the communication infrastructure, which allows states to influence strategic flows on a supra-regional scale. States that develop appropriate energy, communication and technological connections will gain greater influence on the processes of international cooperation. The concepts indicated by the Atlantic Council and by Khanna are noticeable in the later stages of development of 3SI.

In 2017, at the 2nd Three Seas Summit in Warsaw, during which the US President was the honorary guest, the Three Seas Business Forum was established. Summit members declared that the goals of 3SI are consistent with the basic EU documents regarding the energy strategy, the digital single market and the road map to the single European transport area. In 2018, at the 3rd Three Seas Summit in Bucharest, a network of chambers of commerce was created, a list of priority projects in the field of transport, energy and telecommunications connecting the region was accepted, a letter of intent on the creation of the Three Seas Investment Fund was signed and the first 3SI Business Forum was organized. A year later, at the summit in Ljubljana, on the initiative of Poland and Romania, the Three Seas Investment Fund was established.²⁶

In 2020, at the Three Seas summit in Tallinn, the list of 48 projects from Bucharest was increased by 28 new ones (worth over EUR 22 billion), and the US Secretary of State promised to support investments in the Three Seas countries (especially in the energy sector) with an amount of up to USD 1 billion.²⁷ In 2021, the 3SI Summit in Sofia confirmed the mutual interest of 3SI and Germany. It was

²⁵ Parag Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization* (London: Random House, 2017).

²⁶ Marta Gębska, 'Wprowadzenie w problematykę Inicjatywy Trójmorza – geneza, obszary działania i szczyty', w Lech Drab, Marta Gębska, and Maciej Marszałek, eds, *Bezpieczeństwo w wymiarze geopolitycznym, militarnym i społeczno gospodarczym państw Inicjatywy Trójmorza. Współczesność i perspektywy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki Wojennej, 2022), pp. 17–40; Andrzej Wojtaszak, 'Inicjatywa Trójmorza a perspektywy rozwoju państw regionu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w drugiej dekadzie XXI wieku', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 73: 2, 2020, pp. 65–89, <https://doi.org/10.35757/SM.2020.73.2.06>.

²⁷ See Julita Wilczek and Andrzej Rudowski, *Fundusz Trójmorza. W stronę instytucjonalizacji Inicjatywy?* (Warsaw: Collegium Interethnicum, 2021).

also decided to gradually institutionalize the Initiative. In 2022, 3SI countries condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine. A symbolic act of support for Ukraine was inviting it as a special guest of the summit and a participating partner of 3SI. Ukraine was offered participation in regional infrastructure projects and support in post-conflict reconstruction. The 3SI Civil Society Forum was also initiated. In 2023, at the second summit in Bucharest, Greece joined 3SI, and Moldova became a participating partner. Moreover, at the request of Poland, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania, the association of entrepreneurs and the creation of the Three Seas Innovation Fund were also announced.

Cooperation, according to most theories, must not only improve the security of countries, but also increase their economic potential. In the case of the Three Seas Initiative, the main element of cooperation is the development of economic and infrastructure connections. At the 2018 Bucharest Summit, a list of key regional projects was published. The list then included 48 projects in the field of energy, digital and transport infrastructure. In 2024, after the Vilnius summit, the total number of projects under the Three Seas Initiative reached 143, giving an estimated investment value of EUR 111 billion. This means that the number of priority projects has almost tripled since 2018, when the first list was published.²⁸ The number of countries participating in the Initiative and the number of events and stakeholders interested in subsequent summits and local cooperation formats have also increased. The role of both experts and areas of cooperation (*spill-over*) is growing, which is also important in the context of Russia's aggressive policy (realism) and enjoys public support (liberalism, preferences).²⁹

THREE SEAS: EXPLAINING COOPERATION AND ITS PROSPECTS

The risks to the development of the Three Seas Initiative were initially rooted in the political history of the region.³⁰ Unlike previous eras,

²⁸ *Three Seas Progress Report*, <https://3seas.eu/about/progressreport> (access: 25 June 2024).

²⁹ Jakub Pieńkowski, Łukasz Ogrodnik, Kinga Dudzińska, Veronika Józwiak, and Tomasz Żornaczuk, 'Promotion of the Three Seas Initiative in the Member States and Among Observer States', *PISM Strategic File* 104: 12, 2021, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/promotion-of-the-three-seas-initiative-in-the-member-states-and-among-observer-states> (access: 26 June 2024).

³⁰ Paweł Kowal and Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: Geneza, cele, funkcjonowanie* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2019), s. 17–39; Łukasz Lewkowicz and Anna Szwed-Walczak, '(Nie)potrzebny format współpracy regionalnej?

political innovations designed within the EU enabled the region to be included in effective Western integration structures.³¹ As a result, the 3SI cooperation takes place within the EU.³²

As I have already noticed in other works, it should be emphasized that from the beginning of the 3SI format it was not a competitor to the EU.³³ Due to the long-term delay in the development of infrastructure and international connections, these issues became the core of the cooperation declared under the Three Seas Initiative. According to the theories of regional development, in the future, cooperation in 3SI may expand to include further stages.³⁴ At subsequent summits, the region's leaders gradually expanded the catalog of institutions and projects that can strengthen the ability to create connections (*connectivity*) between nations.

The resignation of politicians from playing antagonistic roles in favor of being patrons of non-political projects is something new in Central and Eastern Europe.³⁵ The above-mentioned organizations and formats of regional cooperation usually had an informal character of consultations with high-level politicians, but in no previous structure had so many grassroots initiatives been created.

WHAT PROMOTES COOPERATION BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES OF THE THREE SEAS REGION?

Comparative perspective allows us to see that the Three Seas Initiative project does not repeat political mistakes from the past. On the contrary, there are several elements of the success of cooperation within the

Inicjatywa Trójomorza w dyskursie publicznym państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej', *Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowej* 11, 2022.

³¹ I have based the arguments from this part of text on my research report, prepared for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see: Pawłuszko, 'Three Seas as a Region-Building Process', pp. 8–22.

³² See Marek Górka, 'The Three Seas Initiative as a Political Challenge for the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe', *Politics in Central Europe* 14: 3, 2018, pp. 55–73; Paweł Ukielski, 'Inicjatywa Trójomorza w polskiej polityce zagranicznej', *Studia Europejskie* 2, 2018, pp. 45–58.

³³ Pawłuszko, 'Three Seas as a Region-Building Process'; Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, 'Inicjatywa Trójomorza w świetle teorii realizmu. Polityczne aspekty nowej formy współpracy dwunastu państw', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 72: 1, 2019, pp. 131–55, <https://doi.org/10.35757/SM.2019.72.1.07>.

³⁴ David Koranyi and Ian Brzezinski (et al.), *Completing Europe. From The North-South Corridor To Energy, Transportation, And Telecommunications Union* (Washington: Atlantic Council and Central Europe Energy Partners, 2014); *The Road Ahead. CEE Transport Infrastructure Dynamics* (Washington, Atlantic Council – PwC Report, 2017).

³⁵ Paweł Ukielski, 'Mapa Trójomorza. Przegląd punktów wspólnych i rozbieżności w polityce 12 państw regionu', *Raport Centrum Analiz Klubu Jagiellońskiego* 3, 2016.

3SI format. This project is relatively durable and expands into new areas that are not politically controversial. It should be noted that contemporary elites have managed to avoid returning to the geopolitical rhetoric of the past. The CEE region promotes itself as a region of cooperation and economic success, and each political leader tries to play a part in this. In addition, the 3SI project has been successfully integrated into the structures of the EU, and the economies of the CEE region are developing faster on average than the countries of the older EU-15. The political leaders of the region speak a similar language and have a similar attitude towards external centres of Western politics, such as Berlin, Brussels, Paris, and Washington. The region also has a similar attitude towards Russia’s aggressive policy (although after 2022 Hungary and Slovakia have significantly worsened their relations with Ukraine). It is also crucial that 3SI is a project that gradually expands a non-political network of stakeholders. From this perspective, 3SI can in the future animate common interests and create proposals for systemic solutions for the EU.³⁶

TABLE 2
Successes and risks of the Three Seas Initiative

Successes of cooperation in the 3SI format	Risks of cooperation in the 3SI format
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Relative durability of the format– Avoiding past controversies– Finding an area of common interests– Promotion of the region’s economic successes– Expansion of the 3SI thematic agenda– Maintaining the economic profile of 3SI– US and EU support– Successful integration of 3SI into EU plans– Actual economic growth of the region– A relatively consistent attitude of the region towards Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Poland’s domination in the 3SI format– The format is presidential, and policy is led by prime ministers– Little impact on current legislation– Lack of permanent political institutions, e.g. consultations– Little importance of state diplomacy– Susceptibility to sentimental geopolitical thinking– No state has a wider offer than any other– Slow project implementation– Depopulation and debt in the region

Source: own study. See also: Pawłuszko, ‘Three Seas as a Region-Building Process’, pp. 18–19.

The problem for the 3SI format is the political dominance of Poland, which is a much larger country than the others. At the same time,

³⁶ Anna Llanos-Antczak and Zdzisław Śliwa, ‘Evolution of Regional Cooperation Frameworks in Eastern Europe (1990–2021). The Role of Poland as a Regional Actor’, *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* 1, 2022, pp. 5–25, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2022.1.1>.

Poland does not offer its neighbours such benefits as cooperation with external powers. Another problem is the fact that 3SI has not become an intensive forum for cooperation between governments and remains rather a presidential format. This means that its influence on the legislation of the countries of the region is and will be inconsiderable. In recent years, there has been a trend of extensive consultations at various levels of government, but it is still rather rickety. The Russian-Ukrainian war has led to an increase in the importance of infrastructure linkages between the 3SI countries. Infrastructure plays a key role in ensuring communications, trade, energy, military support, and access to other public services.

Meanwhile, most public policies responsible for infrastructure are of a governmental nature. None of the analyzed cooperation theories predicted that cooperation could be the result of cooperation between heads of state and mainly non-governmental stakeholders. Therefore, I assume that the prospects for the development of 3SI will grow only if the involvement of governments increases.

The change of government in Warsaw (in 2023) has not eliminated the importance of the 3SI project. Donald Tusk's government has spoken out in favor of maintaining the 3SI format. In addition, the new Polish government decided to tighten relations with the Western powers, because in the face of the Russia-Ukraine war, the CEE countries will not be able to cope with all the challenges in the economic and defense fields. The 3SI project remained on the political agenda of the region, but it was no longer a priority. Another problem is the relatively weak offer of cooperation from the participating states. It seems that the remedy for this is to supplement the development of infrastructure with industries of the future, which has already become a topic of talks between regional officials.

The above observations allow us to state the usefulness of the second type of theory of international cooperation. While the first pre-theories have lost their political *d'être* (changing borders and creating new states are not realistic), the second group of theories may explain cooperation through the pursuit of security and increasing relative power. The third type of theories can explain the process of 3SI becoming part of broader integration structures and the growing role of non-political stakeholders of international projects.

CONCLUSIONS

The article presents three waves of development of the international cooperation theories and relates them to political projects developed in the CEE region. The first wave included integration projects and initiatives from the first half of the 20th century. The second wave included theories of state cooperation developed during the Cold War in the area of International Relations. The third part concerns the processes of European cooperation and integration, confronted with the post-Cold War reality. What are the conclusions of the study?

TABLE 3
The Three Seas Initiative and theories of international cooperation

Theories	Three Seas Initiative
The first type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The countries of the region have a similar level of development and see similar historical traditions. – The countries of the region recognize common economic and security interests. – The countries of the region do not want to be dominated by Russia and strive to expand the fields of cooperation. – The countries of the region do not intend to create federations or other structures duplicating the competences of the EU and NATO. – Cooperation is initiated and communicated by the political leaders of the Initiative countries.
The second type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The region's political leaders construct visions of the community based on the development of connections between countries. – The countries of the region form a small 'community' within the NATO alliance and the EU. – The countries of the region declare their attachment to common norms and political ideas. – Comprehensive interdependence between countries is growing (trade turnover, investments, joint projects). – The threat from Russia is communicated as an incentive for deeper cooperation (regional security complex).
The third type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – According to realism, the development of cooperation increases the strength of states and strengthens their security—hence the expansion of cooperation. – According to liberalism, state elites adapt to voters' preferences. Voters declare their desire for international cooperation (strong support for the EU, NATO, etc.). – According to federalism, non-political cooperation of elites: experts, media, business, universities, armies, etc. is important for integration. 3SI increases the participation of stakeholders from various groups. – According to functionalism, cooperation extends to subsequent areas of activity. We observe this through an increase in trade turnover in 3SI, an increase in the number of areas of cooperation, an increase in the number of 3SI participants and an increase in the value of projects in the region. – According to the intergovernmental approach, the 3SI agenda should be developed by the executive authorities, which is already happening.

Source: own study.

The table above shows that the 3SI project meets many of the cooperation assumptions outlined in the presented theories. A great incentive for cooperation between the countries of the region is their participation in the broader integration process of the EU. Old theories pointed to the fact that for cooperation to occur, either common threats or common interests are needed. Theories from the first half of the 20th century did not suggest establishing new international organizations such as the EU. Researchers from that time knew only older 'integration' solutions, such as empires, confederations, personal unions, alliances, coalitions, or treaties.

More recent theories of integration have advanced our knowledge by substantiating the claims that the development of cooperation among states can progress through increasing interdependence. Subsequently, the development of political institutions that managed the complexity of European integration was a stage that added another chapter to the explanation of international cooperation.

The 3SI project was established relatively late, when most CEE countries had previously joined the EU. Therefore, the contemporary 3SI project has the character of a functional 'subsystem of political cooperation' within the EU. This is also why political leaders of the CEE region do not need any additional incentive for the rapid institutionalization of the 3SI project. The EU is the institution that provides countries with access to the common market. The founders of the 3SI project clearly noted that the new initiative is an intra-EU movement and groups only EU members. Additional political cooperation around the expansion of the infrastructure of CEE countries can therefore be easily explained by standard theories of political cooperation, and we do not need to rely on additional economic explanations.

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